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THE DOUBLED EYE

by

Emily Ransdell

B.A. Indiana University 1977

presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of  
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1982

approved by *Richard H. O*  
Chairman, Board of Examiners

*TC Murray*  
Dean, Graduate School

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I would like to thank the editors of the following magazines where these poems first appeared.

CUTBANK

NAZUNAH

POETRY NORTHWEST

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## ENTERING THE OLD BODY

Each time he enters  
the old body it is like this.  
Fifteen years old again, doubled  
over, he peels back another layer  
of grief. Blood lunges through  
his temples and he slinks away  
from the house, the lit windows  
that claw across the lawn to snag  
him back. He thinks my father  
is dead but the dry vomit  
inside him will not come.

I watch three beads of sweat  
roll from his hairline  
but there is no reason  
to dab them away. He is not in  
that body, Nightmares have  
claimed it like a flood.

Each time he enters the old body  
I let him go. A law  
is written on the air:  
it will be lonely and take  
more than years.



## THE DOUBLED EYE

On the lake, your boat's metal oars  
flash like two mirrors held to the sun,  
two mirrors in which the eye can find  
no origin or end. It stared into the furthest  
image and still sees itself squinting back.

Your father stands to cast a red and yellow  
lure. The lake smoothes and the clear  
gaze of his reflection meets yours. You look  
toward the shoreline to point yourself away.

Everything else leans in, the sapling  
limbs at the edge, the perfect curve  
of the loon. It plunges into the water,  
into the scarlet circle of iris that whispers  
to you come here.

On water, all messages steady and clear.  
Both of your faces slump toward the horizon,  
which is closer than you like it, and rings  
back the dull ripple of waves nudging the bow.

Except for the scenery this could be  
long ago, when your father was ill and you stayed  
at the lake the whole summer because he needed  
rest. Your mother moved through the cabin  
like a snake and all you remember her saying  
was hush. Each day you sat in a rowboat  
praying to the red bobber: sink.

Now your father draws deep on the green aroma

of cottonwood and fir. Whether or not  
there is anything to say to him, you know  
this one thing is true. The dark spaces  
are swirling closed beneath you. Fish  
are rising toward the glint of your lures.

## AFTER THE WINTER, ITS GRAY ODOR

Here is the first crocus  
opening miles away in your yard,  
here is the wind that ripples over it.  
Everything else is waiting,  
the dill and lovage, the first  
shoots of tansy beneath the ground.  
After the winter, its gray odor  
of sickness, I want to snip them  
for pudding and a tonic of boiled tea.

But nothing happens.  
The roots of groomed shrubs  
are silent. What color  
were their berries and leaves?

From here, your sons  
moved outward, toward the world  
and you could not coax them back.  
You planted hundreds of bulbs  
that autumn, mapped each spot  
like a buried treasure on a board  
nailed above the sink. In the center  
you put a sundial whose shadow never moves.

Tonight when I saw you, the stillness  
was different, not the work of drugs  
nor the routine of dusk, nurses  
on their hushed round to close  
the windows and lower the shades.  
It was the crocus and the sundial,  
the calm horizon from which snow  
has finally been charmed away.

How extraordinary

that you are dying,  
that the earth turns back  
to its flowers and trees.  
I walk through your garden among  
the painted signs: fennel, anise,  
sweet cicely. Each marks the spot  
where an herb will be.

## WINTER PERSPECTIVE

We have eaten another meal  
and I dry the dishes  
with a yellow towel. I dry  
slowly and with great  
care. I turn an old bowl  
in my hands as though it was new  
or strange.

Nothing is beautiful,  
no cardinals to skitter for breadcrumbs,  
no children in bright hats to pass  
the window on sleds. When this stops  
we will find frozen mice  
in the oat bins.

The quiet of winter clamps  
down like a glass dome, as though  
all this sat on a desk somewhere,  
a paperweight some child turns  
and turns so it always snows.

He sees it only from the outside:  
white snow on the roof  
of a red house.  
Inside, there is never  
any sound.

## ANNIVERSARY

You come down, not  
with a bunch of mountain  
crocus in your hand, but with their live  
memory held out to me like a gift,  
the velvet of their petals still caught  
between your finger and thumb.

Such a small gesture, your hand curled  
to hold the air as it had held the crocus,  
telling me unbelievably soft. But it was  
not always that way. Once we needed words  
to say a thing like that.

I have saved a picture of us  
in which we have words for everything.  
Blue suit, white dress, this  
we thought, will say it all.

But we had not learned the danger  
of language, that precipice glinting  
in the light between your body and mine.  
Do we open our arms in the morning  
or let them drop limp at our sides? When  
do we stop and listen for the voice  
just under the temples, the one that  
sometimes cries touch me, other  
times stay away.

## BLIZZARD

I cannot find a point  
to focus on.

The horizon has lost its edge,  
the river has dulled.

Its bottom is gone and the movements  
of fish have disappeared.

Snow bends me like a branch. It turns  
under my eyelids like ground glass,  
glass between my teeth, your voice  
at the back of my skull chiseling

the words you have been gone

a long time. I tilt my throat open  
but what comes out is the single  
howl you cannot hear from a safe  
warm house, from marriage's deaf tongue  
and thighs.

## FINDING OUR WAY

As though they were exquisite  
chocolates or rare lilies, you offer me  
dresses; organdy, crepe de chine  
and voile. You take me to a room  
tiled with mirrors and light where the edge  
of my vision reels. This is the dream  
I want over and over, the shimmer  
of silken bodies, this perfume  
of color and sway.

Awake, I stare at the ceiling  
and catalog our necessities:  
the cupboard of pears and tomatoes,  
the seeds, the kettle of bones.  
Beside me, you go on sleeping,  
your face plain, your mouth slack.  
What is the difference between faith  
and survival anyway? Sleep  
is the fork in the river,  
the split path, the blind guess  
that gets us home.



## MOTHER'S DAY POEM

In the myth  
of our family you  
were always grateful,  
as though I had appeared  
on your doorstep like a gift  
wrapped in pink foil.

But tonight, out of the dark  
theater where I watched a film  
on the lives of rare  
birds, the real moment  
lifted its graceful  
and long-neglected eye.  
I heard a child's voice,  
thrilled, triumphant with wonder.  
To the swooping image  
of a condor on the screen,  
she cried birdie! birdie!

Something I had not yet named  
beat in my body. It spun  
back like a magnet, back inside  
where I slept against the murmur  
of your body, the hum  
of your flesh. You stood  
under the heavy limbs of a tree.  
When you reached, both our  
hearts leaped: peach.

Then there were other words:  
cool as you let

your awkward body down  
into the bathwater that  
hot day; good when my father  
rubbed loose the fear  
lodged in the firey spokes  
of your back. Yes to the clear  
vibration of your voice as you  
held your throat open past  
the muggy night and sang.

PATTI

This was no made-up story  
or pretend, Patti had brothers, had seen  
their front-sides naked. Among us  
she was always the one who whispered  
this is what they do.

Late sun shot through my room  
like a spotlight onto her bare  
chest as she showed me  
how to turn the flat buttons  
of my nipples hard. Hers were copper  
colored, like two pasted-on pennies.

She had snuck over to my house  
with her brother's records and a ratty  
Playboy she found strapped  
to his bedsprings. From him  
she had learned forbidden words  
and all he asked in return  
was to watch her touch herself.

When she said that two whole fingers  
would fit inside, I felt  
my heart lurch up to choke me.  
Patti was one year  
older and the rest of my life hung  
on each word she said.

## THE DISPOSAL OF DOLLS

At a clearing made by fishermen  
on a still lake, someone has left a circle  
of fire-blackened stones.  
They are faceless and calm  
and might have been here a long time.  
They never let on.

No grown-ups are here yet. It is still  
winter though birds have been fooled  
and sing as though it is spring.  
Children hear them and come.

They bring us, yellow-haired and broken,  
dangly and crack-jawed under their arms.  
They are bored with our flaccid bodies,  
with the constant need to put sticks  
in our backs to prop us up.  
When we slump, they think we are dead.

By the cartload they bring us,  
dumped and bent, no respect  
for our taffeta dresses, our sailor suits  
and safari shirts. To children  
we are all the same.

When they have gone it is wonderfully  
silent. Finally we hear beargrass  
and starweed breathe.  
We are happy.  
All light converges through a pinhole  
in one glass eye. The first head  
blackens and smokes.

## ROCKING MICHAEL TO SLEEP

As if loosening that brace  
could relax you, or stroking  
the fine blond hairs on your folded  
leg, I hold you and we rock.  
But your body coils away  
from sleep's heartbeat, it shrieks  
and jerks. The live wire in that  
bad leg connects. I try pretending  
you are my own son, offering the ease  
of love to your ear. But love is a small  
bone lodged sideways in my throat  
as you pee through your trouser leg  
and mine. Michael, this is my last  
try. Let sleep in. I promise  
only the good animals will find you,  
only monkeys and bright birds.  
I swear they won't hurt you. They'll  
head straight under your breastbone  
and quiet all the ghosts there.  
They'll beat all the enemies away.

## BROTHER IS SICK: THE VOICE OF SOOSIE

Mother is quiet, her head  
bent to him. He stirs  
and turns from her breast.  
She wedges his lips apart with a rubber  
nipple he lets drop to the floor.  
He opens his mouth to one  
cry, shrill then dull, sweeping  
up the walls like the odor of fish.  
It slices through the roof and is  
frozen forever on the air.

Mother looks at me  
and the meadow is green:  
she sees the flashing bellies  
of birds in her eyes. She dreams  
of cotton for a thin skirt,  
red, and cut wide to bloom  
like a Christmas Rose when I twirl.

I dream too.  
Of a blouse open at my throat,  
of snow creeping back up the mountain  
to sleep at the snowmaker's door.  
Mother says the ice will get smaller  
and smaller. It will be like watching  
a boat head slowly away.

## JAMES GETS LOST

Out in the middle of nowhere  
a man is running. He is happy  
pushing up the steady grade. When he reaches  
our car he grins. He looks at us  
through the green tinted glass  
and in his eyes is the trust  
of a small animal, the pride  
of a good boy. He doesn't know  
he is heading into darkness,  
that it will shove at his lungs  
and bang like a fist at the back  
of his throat. Over and over  
his mouth shapes its only word  
like an urgent story: James.

I cannot tell him that this  
is what lost is,  
that no matter where  
he is going, he will be  
right here. Because we speak  
two separate languages it is safe  
to say come home. It is almost  
dark. You will grow tired  
and the forest's belly will soon  
whisper sleep. But listen,  
it is dangerous to sleep. The forest  
is full of axmen in the shapes of trees.

## AFTER ASHLEY'S BIRTH

For a time I thought  
how ugly it must be, like the color  
pictures I kept looking at  
in Life Magazine: the huge bulb  
of forehead, sockets and openings  
half-formed.

Then, I stopped looking  
at pictures. I brought in a switch  
of forsythea and coaxed it into bloom.  
That long month, the size of my body  
unreal, I moved in a small circle  
around house and husband, around  
the yellow bloom.

Everything is different now.  
Split open. The sharpened edge  
of details beating the air.  
We moved for so long in the same body,  
same skin, same hands and shoes.  
Now my heartbeats have lost rhythm,  
each one falls away and lopes  
into my belly alone.

This is how the body works, heart  
and lung, heavy like lead sinkers on a line.  
The line drifts aimlessly, past color  
and light, past the secret crevice  
where pearls lodge and grow.  
It catches along the ridge  
of the backbone and holds.



## FIFTY-FOUR PIES

My neighbor pulls his slow  
body uptown each day  
just to stand among his knot  
of friends. They look at  
cars and women, at the electronic  
time and temperature sign.  
When he sees his reflection,  
one-armed, in the plate glass,  
it isn't him. But what if it is?  
He can still light a cigarette in the wind.

His wife stays home.  
She looks at recipes and pictures  
of dishes rimmed with curled-up  
parsley, slices of orange tucked alongside.  
When the Molly caved, she baked  
54 pies, one for each man's wife.  
When she was done, the sweltering heat  
broke open inside her, she sat down  
in her kitchen at ate the last one alone.

Sometimes she misses the feel  
of those days, the buzz of the copper  
mines stretching miles beneath  
the streets, the flattened cries  
of shift whistles that turned each day.  
She misses the wives, even the fear  
that sucked them together when the disaster  
horn blew, closing in like a boulder  
no one could blast away.  
But her husband comes home every  
night now. They eat their supper  
and play the T.V. and with his one hand  
he rubs her back.

When she gets sleepy,  
she prays for safety, not his anymore,  
but other people's: the pope, who was  
shot at, or the president,  
or the bloat-tummied colored babies  
she sees in ads.

Then she asks him to undo the chain  
at her neck. Its one gem  
is copper, an orange jewel sealed  
in glass. All the wives had them,  
for luck. He flips open the clasp,  
lets it slide down her chest  
and into her hand.

## SUMMER'S LURE

In the throb of August,  
the throb of a house asleep,  
something woke me as I tossed  
in my damp nightdress, something  
called from the garden, get up.

So hot. Even in the dark  
bees worked, single-minded, heading  
for the lip of each open bloom.  
I called what are you?  
Bees kept rubbing through the ferny  
leaves and blue petals, heat  
beat up from the grasses and weeds.

From the darkness, I heard the grunt  
of a man splitting pin oak,  
the hard ring of his ax. Air rustled  
from the stump he rested on, rippled  
from the vacant space of his body like grain  
in a storm. Who are you?

The heat answered come sit here  
beside me. I'm tired. I sat down  
beside the chopping log, smoothing chips  
into the shapes of bread and cake.  
My hands came away sweet  
with the good perfume of wood.  
I heard a nuthatch clatter high  
above me and held my breath.

A breeze nudged the tomato vines.  
It was the odor of sticks and dry hay,  
the first tinge of red in leaves.

I leaned toward the space  
beside me. It said lucky girl.  
Go on, go on.

## A MESSAGE FOR RITA COOK

I waited for my turn  
at the telephone game,  
for the moment when Rita Cook's  
breath would slide like a nugget  
of jade down my neck.  
The table shimmering, bright  
candies and punch, the trees  
hung with red balloons. Each breath  
I took whirled in my head like  
the girls in their pretty skirts.

At the end of the game,  
the mixed-up message announced,  
Rita Cook's laughter changed  
the air. She clutched herself  
through her organdy dress, crying  
how funny, o how funny.

No children, I cannot stand  
the quiet in my yard. I go inside  
to whisper through my house as though  
to an imaginary friend. I remember  
when Rita Cook's father would finish  
the church service and come play  
Drop the Hanky in his preaching robe. He  
galloped around us, the handkerchief  
like a hot potatoe in his hand. He was  
a huge bird flapping his black, black wings.

Then he caught her, swept her up  
in that great magician's cape: poof!  
Rita Cook was gone.

Tonight, not a flutter of air.  
I sit on the back step where the memory  
of a long-dead woman shells peas  
and snaps beans. The weight of her  
heart drums on the touch-me-nots  
like hard rain.

This is my house now, I tell her,  
go away. Go to the place  
where Rita Cook is. Whisper  
this message in her ear.

## AT THE LIVING MUSEUM

An ancient princess, her skeleton  
slung with gold beads, a single ruby  
to close her third eye. For the next  
life, flutes and spoons.

I enter a room where boys sit  
at a low table scratching stones  
with miniature tools. They chip and chip  
but no shell appears, no print  
of a delicate leaf. I move  
on through the museum and all  
the doorways squeeze down on me,  
all the glass and iron grates ~~hiss~~ do not touch.

Blood ticks through my legs  
like a metronome and I remember one moment  
as a girl. It was dark and cool and the open  
eye of stars pinned me flat to the sand.  
I was trapped, my father and mother kept calling  
but the wind carried all our cries the wrong way.

I walk past a case of stone fish eyes, centuries old,  
and the clay bowl a fisherman's wife would drop  
one in each morning ~~until the boat returned~~.  
One day my worst fear will really happen,  
I will stay out in a beach too long, or in snow  
or awful wind. Father and mother will find me  
but too late; I will be propped against a log  
like a dry gourd. They will braid me together  
with gold threads.

Father, mother, it is true that I will die. But you,  
you will move on to another shape. Perhaps  
stone fish eyes like these. They say a painted  
fish eye calms any hand that holds it, looks up

from any bowl or palm to say everything  
will soon be fine.



## STORIES

From the cold woodshop where we had run  
for safety, I watched the hillside  
glow orange from flames. The babies  
played with shavings on the floor.  
My mouth said don't eat that, while  
in the distance our house burned.

In this country where wheat hisses in the fields  
everything holds its breath and waits.  
William McCoulough, slammed off his tractor  
by a treelimb, fell into the bush hog blades.  
The women swooped down over William's family  
like kind white doves. Now they open  
their good wings for us.

They clean us and feed us, bed us  
down in a warm place away from the rubble  
and the smell. I lay my head on someone's  
old pillow. Rose sachet. Fragrance  
of cedar. I close my eyes  
to the flames and see a silver  
thimble, my best cup. I keep thinking  
of foolish things, The lemon geranium,  
all that sheet music.

Put this story along with William McCoulough, along  
with the calf's neck wrenched by a cyclone through  
the crook of a tree. Put this along with the whispered  
list of things found at harvest: hair and bones  
and scraps of a red shirt rotting.  
Be sure to say how fast the flames lurched  
across the roof.

In the next bedroom, a woman reads  
to my daughters. It is not me,

though it scarcely matters. I have my own  
story. To the simple darkness here, I say:

See the hedgerows and the furrows  
and the deep squares of green.  
At the center of each is a tidy barnlot  
and a white house. And in each white house  
is a bed. That's where we are.  
Blackbirds watch while we sleep. When they fly,  
no one is there to see the brief  
red of their wings.