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DIARY OF A SKULL

By

Randall Howard Watson

B.A. Sarah Lawrence College, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1986

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June 26, 1986

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Diary Of A Skull

poems by Randall Watson

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For all my family.

"Beauty dies. That is the source
of creation." - Louise Glück

"these things speak the clear promise
of heaven." - Dennis Johnson

I

Bone Meal

I ride in oldsmobiles driven
through shopping malls at night,
their headlights lit up
climbing the walls
like stars. The security guard
asleep beside an ashtray has
thin lips, his deep
artificially induced tan hangs
like a shadow on his face,
blue and green lamps arch
above him as he sleeps, he dreams
he is trapped in a small
casket of fluorescent light.

I smoke cigarettes
in gas stations abandoned
by black haired immigrants
wearing blue shirts
with this guy I know who
might be dying of cancer.
He takes me shopping
at Pandora's Box,
buys a shirt that says
Sunoco in red
for eighty cents,
telling the attractive cashier
people's lives are like libraries built
without calculating the weight of books.
Once out on the street

he points out light trapped
in the rear windows of repossessed
Volkswagens he says race
through Bayonne to the stars,
light he compares
to the delicate pieces of bone
that make the hand.
At 4th and 14th
he runs out into the street
like a train arriving
at the station too soon.
When he veers off into the crowds
with the anger and abandon
of a man who has just lost
custody of his only child, he turns
one last time to motion goodbye
and disappears into a place
where there is no time left
to fill his life.

Meeting The Air Like Strangers

In this wind people scatter like paper
crushed by hand then
thrown from a speeding blue car.
Black weathervanes spin
like quarters tossed from the sky,
the phone line's dark ribbon bends
in air, automobiles rise
impossibly over the earth.
We watch it all from here.
The dancer in the wrestler's oiled arms
begins to weep. The waitress
counts her change. The fifty
three year old check-out girl
at Albertson's asks
her boss for a raise, then
gets ready to go home.
The people we never think of
gather in small rooms where the cold
performs its magic in their hands.
Their bodies meet the air like strangers,
their mouths open for the wind.

Outside The Ortiz Funeral Home

Gathered on the sidewalk
a brown flock

of birds. You
can hear

the thin
beaks peck

at the pale
stiletto shapes

of steeples,
the shrill cries

perched on the backs
of black coats

arranged
in tight patterns
of prayer

on the shoulders
of the unforgiven.

North Of Democrat Point

Nick Romeo, a guy I like
and who used to play
third base for the village tavern,
runs a rib and macaroni salad take-out joint
½ a block from the Brightwaters Butcher Shop
where I work.

One cool morning he and his wife
walk to work together
and when the brown cuff of his shirt
touches her blue sleeve
a pattern of color is formed
that displays their affection for each other
in a way quite different from my own idea
of it. I met them once at a bar
on the bayside of the island
and we laid down on our backs in the tall,
wet beach-grass, stayed there for an hour.
The moon split the waves like
a ship's beam. The distant
hum of a small outboard engine
softened the night like rain.
When they left I watched my hands
trace my shadow in sand.

Two gulls pecked at a red circle of earth.

North of Democrat Point

I could see the eye of buoy 12
open and shut and open and shut again and again
but the shadow of a boat
running with its lights down
crossed in between me and that heartbeat,
and for a moment I was utterly
deliciously alone.

In A Room As Locked As The Heart

In houses gray as barracks
where death rests by the fire in a shoebox,
a cheap casket wurd tight like a jaw,
men and women murmuring dirty words
embrace in an old oblivion,
their bare, bone-stolen bodies
broken by the weight of thought.
Here night is solace and gift.
Two teenagers, one boy, one girl,
hung by the neck from steel wires,
strung ten feet above the ground,
sway in light breezes with scarves,
opal sheets and tapestries of every kind,
silent and groping for the green earth.
An old man in a priest's tattered frock
crosses the street, his face
marked by the failed expression of his life.
Bitch and shiv are new words for an old land.
In a room as locked as the heart
the nine-year-old son of an alcoholic
waits for his father to come home.

Knee Deep In The Wreck Of The Sea

Caught, procrastinate in sleep, he does not develop
or contain his dream until he is lost
in the obscure shape and length of its body,
his forearms full of roses straining
to hold light, his fingers
wedged in the shadow and flash of flight.
Medieval taverns rise, stone by stone,
into place around the thatch-topped
huts of the wind, then vast
amounts of sand seen from the sky
and cities, in the habits of glass leaning,
curling up from the earth
like flowers or wings. He sees
his mother sweeping the floor of a grey house
he has never lived in, dust gathering
in the slow decades
of her feet. He sees beyond
the swollen pontoons and shattered columns
of his life, knee deep in the wreck of the sea,
east or west of the moon, to where light
shrouded with aspen and spruce
trickles on a far-off hill,
where the image of his father's body
still clings to the splinters of a tree;
redwood patios surrounding the place
of his death. Light in a closet
at the top of a stairwell comes on,
and the young man's thoughts climb
back into their body, fixed and defined
by its height and the weight
of its hair. Everything returns to him
in the particulars of his confusion:
the dark hangar deck,
fields like scattered paper flack,
the bleak, limited shadows of his shoes.

Film Treatment

It's about this rich kid, naturally,
whose parents fight.
He's clean and lonely, has large,
wide eyes, black hair, a pale Italian face.
He's amazingly good looking. There's the obvious
reach out and touch someone scene—
an innocent young German girl most likely
who puts him off. Then the runaway stuff,
he gives it up to the old guy who takes him in,
sucking the bastard's cock for dimes,
putting it out on the street
for nickel bags of smack.
There's a scene in a shooting gallery
in an abandoned building over on Avenue A
where he jacks it up into his thigh
his eyelids and lips burning
a bright blue. In his condition
there's nothing he won't do.
We put him back out on the street,
give him a gun,
point him towards a hardware store
and he's off. When he stumbles through the door
gun in hand, the proprietor
levels a shotgun at his chest. We dim the lights
and the audience shrieks. The kid is lost.
You can hear the shotgun blast, see the mess
it makes. The audience screams.
They love it.
They know.
We've got them now.

Margaret

Ten days after the day
my father straddled the barrel
of a 55 Chevrolet
with blue wings
the house sold
to a man who drove up in a car
the exact same year, model and color
as my father's, only
with grey interior,
buckets up front
instead of the cheaper
modest, red and tan statement
my father preferred. My mother kept
my sister behind her
and the unspoken knowledge between them
allowed her the necessary departures
resulting from his death.
She spent more time
in the various apartments
she had fled to as a child
and her complacency grew white
as an unwritten obituary.

(Stanza Break)

Then the whole world changed.
In a way, it resembled
the profane and mysterious limericks
my mother began to sing
adapting a selection of old American
Bandstand favorites to the crude poems
of her failure and her pain.
The car we travelled in
travelled through distances of light
and she found them in the middle
of her being, where she confused
the indistinct broadcasts of her heart
with the radio's bleak dial.
The only station she had been trained to receive
was my father's eye
and now her body was static
and dead air.

She looked for work
where she could find it
and hired who she could find
to sit with her son as she prayed
he would escape the umbrella of his father's sin.
It was not cruel. She feared
for his life as he reached toward the date
of his father's death.
She remembered a wake
embalmed by light.
Time after time
she moved her family to another town.

(Stanza Break)

When she waited tables
in a small diner off route 25
the vacuous conversations of her patrons
reminded her of home.
The 65 hours a week of work,
a life burned in her back,
burned for her children. She gave
herself up to the coincidence
that focused her existence
and knew that it would not lift from her body
till she died. Near the end
she waited patiently
on the impatient lines of people
wanting death. Now her children
remember her in their world
and her name, Margaret, is alive.

Legion Hall

Tonight the brittle air is laced with smoke
that comes from houses burning by the lake
where passive strangers' faces feed the fire
that brings my daughter's image back to me,
her body black as rotten wheat, her hair
scorched stiff. What I recall is this:
she went out dancing polkas with her friends
at Legion Hall. They say a quiet drunkard lit
the fire and barred the doors with garbage cans.
They heard them screaming from the street.
They brought the bodies out in stretchers made of sheets.

Avenue A

At six AM
the inhabitants of alphabet city droop
like weeds in the heat
of their occupations, carpenters
with faces like brick stash
empty beer cans
in the walls of the offices
they build, return to work.

Always, on mornings like this,
I wake up, feel sick light
like heavy armor take
the eye cold
to a brown haired woman's
imperfect body as
she passes by the thick
churchyard lawn
I slept on last night
like a horse.

To my right a
graceful black man plies /
to the applause of cars, and an old
woman holding an unlit cigarette
in her left hand shouts
in a language
I can understand.

(Stanza Break)

In this light her face explains the mystery
of speech, her wet hands work
the pickets of the churchyard fence.
At the edge of her body the whole world
is as illegal as a Polish dockworker's
desire for meat, and my thoughts move
to the source of illegality, memory
turns like a sick dog, I am
accompanied by the odors
of trombones and the incessant holidays
of tears engaged in the celebrations
of specific desires: music, a need
for bread, physical love. A certain clarity
covers me like a shawl or a cloud of smoke
and I recognize that moment of life
when my heart first opened
to light in the confused addiction
of her narration, and I remember why
it closed, how the world sunk
into my father's arms like an injection
of barbiturates, how I was born
under the sign of his death,
with the eyes of an addict nodding
out on the front seat
of a stolen car.

It Was How

It was how his heart was white as the field was covered
with snow, where the peaks of his sleeping were birches
coated with ice and the strict outlines of his dreams
were struck and prodded with sticks and he was pinned
in the shadow of that slow geometry, his body
splayed like wire, his ears trained for thick ovations
of ice. It was how he lay with his back on the ground
eye timed to the passing flack,
cirrus clouds like steel pins
steaming in air; how he stood
in the windows of his body
naked and smooth in starlight
where the hot emblems of his anger crossed the sky
in slick formations of color and sound
beating like the wings of geese,
and it was how the alarm of his belly
spread to his heart,
how the siren of his illness
pierced his skull
and rooted in the contours of his brain,
how the stubs of his arms tore at his face
and his tongue flew out of his body
his words lost in the act of this migration
abandoned and empty
as old cars frayed with light,
as uncalculated and hard
as trees.

An Act Of Mourning

The face I knew wasn't yours.
You met us at the airport every year,
your hair cut too short to comb,
your face the face of a man
that wasn't you, face
like a chart, face
surgeons follow when they work,
the resurrected face of a man
with freight trains for teeth,
his steel broken face held together by wire,
his copper eyes the headlights of a ruined car.
You met us at the airport every year.
On nights when white clouds lit the sky
you stood out drunk on the clack and stagger of stars,
crooning like a bird at the constellations of spring.
When storms a hundred miles away
splintered in the eye like spears of light
you said it was God's body come
to reclaim the earth.
I remember one particular night when you said
if you had to die you'd rather drown
in a small pond filled with copper fish.
You said that you'd even prayed for it,
prayed for it twice.
You never got your wish.
Three years later and two hours after the open casket
confirmed your death, my third cousin

Mary Ann Raskin, took me out back
of Wilkerson's Funeral Home
to a plaster statue of Jesus Christ
holding a bird bath
where she took off her shirt
and taught me the meaning of my body,
while I, going along with her,
thought it was some kind of ritual,
an act of mourning for the dead.

New World

In this world you are dumb.
Bird and hoof will beat the air.
Soon the body's alarm will strike
with the force of seven heads
and you will live in fear
of the one thing you must know:

In the dream you cannot move within
what comes beast is you.

Men First Worship Stones

Men first worship stones.
They do not sleep or wink.
They do not scream at you.
They do not rush around
making fools of themselves.

If you pick them up they will not bleed
or sweat all over you.
They will not smell bad.
They will not eat you.

If you watch for them
they will disguise themselves.
They are always there,
one part earth, another sky;
the thrill and color of motion
close to the heart.

What a wonder to be so small,
so young,
to fit in the pocket of a child....

They do not dream.
Not one jumps up or cheers.
If you find them a thousand feet tall
they will not challenge you to a foot race.
They do not hate or punish anyone.
They are atheists. They do not worship
even themselves.

Poem

When girls with green hair pray on the dormitory steps
of all male universities,

when the holidays that prescribe for the dead
celebrate the year round,

when the room filled crisp with light
enters the asylum's eye,

the world will live out
the end of its opulence,

we will sift through the bone of our forebearers
like cannibals searching the acrid earth for word.

C Sharp
for Captain Vere

Christ came kicking horses in my dream by the sea,
where the charred ruins of a farm, steep with light,
smoldered on the bleak hill, burnt spars
scattered like trees, clouds slit open
like Christ's eyes watching the innocent sleep,
searching the homes in the valley below for signs of life,
his body, full-figured, unscarred,
rising through smoke like a flame.

Easter

Out back Missus
Riley, unconfused, plants
peas in the rain, slips a finger
into the earth's rich umbilicus.

A metal milk box rests
on the steps behind her.
Glad bags of grass
cut under the nail-star
sit in the street like squat hats.

She calls the night-sky tree,
the stars fruit the souls
of sleeping children,
says she can see
what lives and gives life
best at night.

She spends her hours
counting the years it takes
to file each thought
in the safe place of her heart,
watches the wild grape
turn to seed, waits
before she plants
for the wind that signals rain.

Portrait Of A Man With A Stone

Inside the stone
there are fruit, almonds,
and rhubarb. A woman sips
burgundy from a light blue
egg shell. Her hummingbird eyes
are green; flutter in tight circles
around the purple room.
Her hands and feet are tiny
and breathe slowly. Her lips
are white. She is pressing
her hands together
and look! How silver she sits!
How sure!

Riddle

Who falls
and makes no sound
when she lands? What mad wolf
will rush headfirst for her throat
of air?

Who walks
offshore at night?
What innumerable
blue eyes open as she shuffles
away?

Who drifts
on the ridges
of water on this earth?
What could I ever hope for
more than you?

Ceremony

"During trance the Tungus
 shamaness is believed
 to understand the language
 of all nature." - Mircea Eliade

On the first night she asks for jaguar and bat
 and rubs her body with gum and the blood of a goat
 killed by her own hand.

On the second night she asks for the bones
 of sacrificed animals wrapped in straw
 for a bell
 horsesticks silk wine
 red and yellow ribbons
 blue and white ribbons
 wooden cups
 tea

On the third night
 she asks for a horse and a bull and a knife
 a striped or colored stone blue-spotted night
 mist the blue sky east west
 she throws the pieces of her heart
 into fire and air.

She asks for a branch to hold a bird
 in the middle of the sky

for the hide of a horse
 for leaves
 for hair

for the chain of arrows leading to the center of the world
 where she finds them all.

The Insistent Patterns Of Imperatives

The woman I'm talking to you about
is here, sitting
in the kitchen and smoking
a cigarette with a filter
papered in bright gold.
In the living room
the radio's on,
the dark green
backdrop of an oiled
parasol gracefully decorated
with bridges and porcelain birds
casts green shadows onto the floor;
stolen traffic signs arranged
in the insistent patterns of imperatives
flicker and grow dull. You should know
that three days have passed
since her father's death, the hardroot
lodged in the throat
of her mother's voice,
and two nights have held her since
instead of me. The piece
of glass that plunges into the heart
leaves a trail of light her eyes
can sometimes stare at for hours.
When the phone rings on the morning
of the fourth day and the voice
on the other end
is as exhausted as her own

the shape that coils inside
on the back of her skull
turns white hot and attends her
like wire....
she can feel the terror
of two worlds working her body
into the horrible beauty
of a moment she can never share.
Now the days and nights will feed
at her breasts and she will
suckle them as if
they were her own.

Poem To A Future Wife

When I think of you
looming like the low rafters of a church—
halos haunt me,
the light blue introductions
of your feet.

In This Vision

In this vision
she is so beautiful
if she raised an arm,
an eyebrow light and bristled as fur,
the dark hallways of appliances
would start to roar, airport escalators
crowded with women in pantsuits
would break out in cheer,
their small American flags fluttering
like flyswatters or paper fans.
We make love by a puzzle of the sea
glued to her bedroom wall.
When her pale, silk nightgown
opens, shedding light
like a new moon, her breasts,
naked as eyes aroused from sleep,
alert with desire triggered in dream,
cast soft shadows onto my hips. Years pass.
In the end of the story
we live silent, awed,
blinded by the barricades of light
our bodies make as we age.

Poem To A Girl Named Laura

You carry the calm within you:
light wind crossing white cliffs;
here where the aspen's swollen clatter stands,
startled flocks of roses on your lips.

Lucy In Blue

She lives in the tax free penthouse apartment
of an international corporation
where the photographic profiles of ambitious men
in gray and red smoking jackets seem to wait
for memorandums to come out
of a hero's name. The mahogany
paw of a reupholstered chair
that has been in someone's family for generations
claws at the floor, the sleek
humming of an updated computer
circles, chalk white in air,
like a bird. At night
she rises through the unbroken
machinery of sleep to walk
eighth avenue, her body like milk
in the midtown light, her fists
balled up like frozen poinsettias
abandoned on the front steps
of low rent apartments in the Bronx.
After six drinks in a sleazy bar
her misplaced heart beats
in the ashes of a shop
that has burned down, her face perforates
with sweat, her eyes glow
like the insistent embers of a whore's
incorporated hair, and her runaway body,
taking its first turn of the night with a man
who cocks the dawn on his wrist,
makes the world loud.

The Anger Of Insects

Long after the hours of searching are done,
lost in the opaque precision of her limbs,
he hears the anger of insects pitch
in the hollow center of her bone.

With one flash of his arm he could shatter her world
but it would not heal him.
There is a crack in his skull that rain will not fill.

He wanders the acres of her body like an incision,
spends his life in the doorlight that uncurls before him
like the dark blue procession of a chain.

The Inquisition

What are you doing there now
How did you get those
Those are my arms, my shoulders
That's my backbone, my teeth, my fingernails, my hair
Do you want them
Will you take them too?

Whatever it is that you are saying, please stop.
Whatever it is that you are humming in your chair
As you stare at me, please stop
It makes you mad
It is making you crazy inside.
If I give you my back, my hair
My fingernails, my shoulders, my arms, my teeth
What will I do, tell me
What will I do?

South Of The Brain

This is where the bones of a woman
who has left you
can be sung
in octaves that reach
for the prehistoric shadow
of your face.

This is where the crow sings,
if you could call it song,
perched in the leafless crown
of a white birch
scarred by fire.

This is where a bird's
adoration of sky,
its access to the heart of flight,
defines the world—

the moment
when the parasite in the horse's throat
begins to breed,
flesh where the worm drills
straight for the heart.

Poem
for Laura

Her letters came so
surprisingly
soon I held her
there among
the white sheets
the unruly
written word we
had shared only
for a few hours
once at Marshall
Field in an
illegal
embrace we
never felt
we had cheated
anyone
but ourselves
waiting so
long alone
and I also
remembering
well how she fit
beside me
and how I
noticed her
eyes were meek
anemones but
unlike the fish
the light did swim
in and was
entertained.

Little Pile Of Cocaine, So Pure

A couple of years ago I met this little blonde girl
with blue eyes and blue eyeliner
in a small tavern over on sixth street.
She wore bluejeans and a blue shirt and white
boat sneakers with a blue stripe that encircled each foot
like a water mark. We drove back to my sister's house in her car
and when we got there she poured out
a little pile of cocaine so pure
the tiny rocks sparkled like hot blue stars
that fit in the hand. Then she kissed me
and said she wanted to make love right then and there
and so we did
and we made a sweet job of it.
I went inside to get a blue pen
and I brought my television back out with me
and put it in the back of her car.
I don't know why.
I said I would call
but I never did.
I still carry the number around in a cigar box I painted blue
three days after my father died.

A Gift Without Landscapes

Once, when you looked up at the moon from the black
thimble shaped butte we slept on
you said it looked like a nutshell or a warm seed
planted in air, that if you could swallow it
it would blossom inside of you like a city
or a small explosion in the heart.
You said the whole world was as quiet
as the eyes of an old woman
waiting to die, that what you could hold
close to your face with either hand
was as gentle as the beast our bodies formed
when we kissed, soft as water or air.
When the moon fell we counted each breath
following the sky down, and you called
on all light's madness inside us to dance.
Fast shadows plunged into the earth.
Small colors covered the new ground.
The gift you gave without landscapes
fit in my eye like a star.

5 Years After The War: 6 Metaphors In Search Of Desire

When I passed windows an irresistable
urge compelled me
to enter them.
I lunged at women smoking
in the pale yellow
booths of hotel bars. I sat
on benches and the various lengths
of cigarettes. Naked statues
scattered in the park concertedly
confused me.
I felt sick.

It took five years
to forget -
and that's a lie.
On free weekends I inhabited
the chairs of beauty parlors
and made lists of all the magazines.
I looked for myself
in the fantasies of couples
who wandered aisles packed
with underwear and lace. At night
I counted diamonds formed
by the store front's steel grills
and multiplied them by a woman's hands.

This is the truth.
What I've come to know
now, alone,
is one image flexed
in glass, and the other
beyond it: the condition of windows,
the terrified conversations that continue
isolated in the heart.

What Silence Follows

Perhaps a storefront, a green awning
or the BMW parked in front of you,
perhaps the recurring silhouette of your face
or what silence follows gracefully,
maybe a Dodge Dart driven by a woman in a hair net,
a man with a heart condition,
a guy with nothing to lose,
perhaps this is what moves me,
maybe the wind pulls at the earth's muddy root,
maybe a young girl rakes her front lawn clear of leaves,
maybe starlight falls on our unacustomed ears
like slow bits of applause,
maybe my heart fills with people who cannot speak
and the first word lost in that strange place is you.

Love Poem: Arizona: 1974

We cut poles in a burn on the southern slope of a butte
rising out of the trees like a bruised thumb,
the basalt tower's blade gleaming purple and black where light
and the sound of our voices made it smooth,
rainwater running over the cool stone.
You found a rock and said it was made
out of a woman's tears
and when you held it up to the sun
I could see herds of blue horses
saddled with clouds
their yellow hooves like light.
We bought a small plot
of land at six thousand feet
putting a house up
where the whole earth spun
and we crawled into our skin
watching the world rise.
Stars crossing the sky's palm
whittled two red stones
out of our hearts.
Wind trotted the ridgelight
into our eyes.
On the southern slope
trees stood like spears thrust
in ash. We held
the flame of our bodies
in our hands.