JUMPING OFF PLACE

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Date
JUMPING OFF PLACE

A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

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Fairbanks, Alaska

August 2001
Abstract

*Jumping Off Place* is about eating of the tree of knowledge, which often has brutal and painful consequences. Childhood and adolescence play significant roles, as this is where emotional growth begins. Within family and societal constructs, physical and psychological thresholds are crossed and inner landscapes are suggested in the process.

Three sections define a beginning, middle, and end to the journey, yet it is a cyclical story. The poems' speakers eventually make choices that confront the world's mutability; speakers progress as they comprehend, adjust, decide, and finally move forward through the barrier of risk to autonomy, but do not emerge unscathed.

In the sense of Aristotelian poetic theory, the characters in these poems are plot: action, reaction, and interaction create metaphor. Although the poems are predominantly narrative, lyric and formal impulses and close attention to sound encourage the development of ideas and musicality of verse.
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All serious daring starts from within.

---Eudora Welty
1909-2001

For my family,
who gave me all.
Temptation of a Cowgirl

In June when school let out, the corn, bare
green, already stood ankle high
to red barns that leaned like old men
at their favorite bar counter,
planks washed down
wood veins showing through, fronting

a crayon blue sky, opaque, no dot of white.
Everything flushed pinkish-green: leaves,
fields, farmers’ faces mottled by afternoon light.
The black road curled like burnt paper,
with school bus yellow lines freshly drawn, marking
no passing. I couldn’t be Tom Sawyer, so I’d pretend

my red bike was a roan, a pony like in the Westerns,
faithful companion. I’d ride along the edge
of the pavement, smooth and sticky,
smelling of tar, to the Old Black Bridge,
which arched over train tracks, to watch
the freights, feel the rumble in my knees

and hips when trains were just beneath.
I’d count cars: *Norfolk & Western, Boston & Maine,*
*Northern Pacific. Pennsylvania* and *B & O I knew*
from my Monopoly game. I’d wave my hat at the caboose,
straddling my bicycle’s saddle until hazy tracks led me
to think I should go. My mother always warned

stay away from the tracks, back in ’53
a family sat in their Buick,
stalled frozen to the sight of rust-colored steel,
the brakes screaming. Volunteers found
the baby’s body sandwiched between door
panels, the mother’s hand, not a scratch

on her manicure, holding her child’s still
bootied foot. The rest of her lay mixed up
with glass. The father gripped the wheel
in his chest, forever unready for his own
Pompeii. Struck returning from Sunday
at the baths, Sunday at the in-laws, the same.
Sometimes I’d go to the place of their crossing, put pennies down, scuff about, waiting for whistles, trains’ moan of loneliness. Warm breezes rounded me, full of late lilacs, lily-of-the-valley, rising black irises, shadows behind dying daffodils, their scents straw-like and secretive. Once a train stopped before me, the grind pinching my ears. A boxcar opened, sunlight tight in one oblong. I could get on. I could nestle my bicycle in the weeds, climb up rusted rings right at my reach and just ride.
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we,  
For such as we are made of, such we be.  
---Twelfth Night

As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,  
They kill us for their sport.  
---King Lear
Eyes, Words, Sense

I swim backward in my life, in the way of salmon.
Grandmother called them *feesh*.

Mother did not have an engagement ring, but she had a jeweler's eye.
Trees hang themselves on clouds.

A woman I did not know named her second son after me.
I was once chased by a swan owned by a boy with mud between his toes.

My sister's child began as the flu.
Black bubbles or eggs, it depends on the whale.

I can never eat the squiggly part of the chicken, or the shell.
Father taught us to close doors gently and to leave rooms in the dark.

The point of air is: feathers resist.
Granddaddy had a belly like a pregnancy, it rose up when he dozed.

I hold no moons in my fingers.
Snow falls lightheartedly down.

Trees don't count their own rings.
We had a dog named Moose in our red house.

Gray is the negotiator between black and white.
Without a nose I would die.

Yesterday I thought pearls were like people.
I think it today.
Christmas Eve, 1969

My mother and I sit with the motor off
in front of Gruelich's Market.
She smokes and I see my breath
and pretend I have a cigarette too.
If I slouch down I can see the big cow
that overwhelms the roof;
Gruelich is a butcher, but the cow
is the dairy kind, Jan Mars told me
one day in school. She leaned over
and whispered as though it were some secret
that no one else should know.
My mother and I are here
to buy eggnog, but she doesn't
get out of the car. Instead she lights another
Benson & Hedges and tells me she would kill
my father with a knife if
it weren't for her girls, she would
stab him and push his wop body into one
of those goddamned holes
he's always digging in the yard.
I shake because it's cold in the car.
I try to think of the dollhouse I've asked for,
the one that comes with kitchen utensils
smaller than my fingernails.
My mother finally turns
the ignition. We never get the eggnog,
she never gets out of the car.
On the way home she says
she'll divorce him, that's what she'll do.
As we enter the kitchen, Laura yells
come look, Daddy's stringing lights on the tree.
I slowly take off my coat, surprised to feel
the dog's wet nose at my palm,
and watch my mother reach
for the bottle, her
coat and gloves still on.
Caught

It has fallen from my mother’s hydrangea
to the flagstone walk, near
my bare toes. I step
back at first, then lie
on the smooth stones, the grays,
burgundies, slate blues warm, yet
the cement is cool, pebbly
where I rest my chin. I’m so close
I can almost feel the wings
touch my nose, wings that waver
like eyelids, even the pattern resembles eyes,
orange and black designs
on what seems like fur.

My sister skips by, turns
Shh I whisper look it’s a Monarch,
my breath ruffling the butterfly.
No, it’s not Gayle replies. It’s a Cecropia moth.
Daddy says they’re rampant this year.
She chants my stupid sister
plays with mo-oths while dancing
around me, kicking her toes
like a ballerina.

I hold the moth in my cupped hand,
geet a Chock-Full-of-Nuts can, fill it with grass,
a jar lid of water, add a stick
for the moth to rest on, snap down the lid.
Across the street the Corcorans
are starting a whiffleball game.
Jerry and Jimmy wave, holler over
for me to play. C’mon! We’ll let you
pitch.

Shadows are long when I head home,
grass stained, sweaty, proud
of my home run hit in the seventh, the line
drive I caught in the fifth. I see
the can where I left it. I’d forgotten
to punch holes in the top. I peel the lip back,
it smells bad inside, hot metal
and wilted grass. The moth is not dead, but it has beaten its wings to tatters. I dump it out, watch it make an attempt to fly. I laugh at how it looks like a broken plane sputtering down the runway.

I put this thing, what’s left, in the portulaca bed, pulverize it with a stick, jam it into the dirt, then kick hard at the wing pieces, still eyes, ragged patches now embedded in the sour grass.
At the last moment, uneasiness made her speak out
against the plan. The others held
cigarettes high, and brave smoke eddied
around their heads, but their siren voices gave
it all away. She watched them parade
newly minted women’s bodies
as she listened to girls talk grown-up lies.

The girl thought of her mother, who would worry handkerchiefs
into spikes, who would sit with cold coffee,
rub the cup’s chipped rim, and smoke carelessly,
blind to the ashes scattered in front of her.
She would pray for a shrill end to the wait.
She’d have forgotten to roll her hair,
to stroke Pink Passion on her lips, then blot twice
with a saved tissue from her purse, to change
out of her rose print duster into clothes
she called street. The kitchen would smell small,
of beer spilled and congealed grease,
while rotted grapes in the red-rimmed bowl
would be buried by fruit flies.

The girl spoke up, she would tell. She wanted to go
home, not to Florida. If there was nothing
to run from, why run away? She thought
she had them, they all moved close
to hear her. Where did they get the rope? Hands
squeezed her. More hands
slapped her. Others tied
the noose. She heard the whirred
toss and the cheers as the rope went
from her neck to the fat tree
limb, like an umbilical cord.
She felt the jolt, felt
her feet swing out, heard her
sneaker’s small thud,
smelled her body drip
fear down her legs. She tried
to reach up, to stop the choke. Gnats stirred
in her eyes like sunspots she could not blink away. Mixed in with the hum that rushed in her head, she heard her mother’s breathy twang tell the story again:

*When I went into the hospital to have you,*
*I made your dad bring my piller from home.*
*It was so old, the feathers flattened down, always had to be plumped up. Dad wallopéd that piller twice and the whole thing tore open.*
*There was goose feathers everywhere!*
*We didn’t want anyone to see, so he ran around like a crazy man, grabbing at the feathers.*
*He put them in the bin just in time before a nurse swung open the door. She took one look at those feathers and said Why honey did you cut your hair? We figured it was good luck to laugh while a baby came because you turned out so perfect.*

They took her down, dragged her to weeds and covered her body with pine needles that smelled like summer camp at dusk. She thought she heard her friend say *she’s still alive,* and moved her eyes, tried to move her mouth to tell them it was close, but they had brought her down in time. She heard their voices again, now like faraway flies. She looked up in time to see the flat gray rock on its way to her face.
When Lorelei was three, you just couldn’t get her to part with that ratty hunk of baby blanket. Kendall kept saying he’d yank it from her one of these days, she was too big a girl to be sucking on those fingers and carrying that piece of filth around all over. First sunny day when it wasn’t so cold to freeze, I opened Lorelei’s fingers while she slept and slipped what was left of her blanket out from under her. The one bit of satin edge smelled like her spit. Sometimes she sucked on the corner and sometimes she’d just *pat pat pat* her face with it. I figured if I washed the thing maybe Kendall wouldn’t get so mad about it all the time, and maybe Lorelei would forget. Well, wouldn’t you know when she woke up from her mid-morning nap, that child pulled on her own boots, managed her own coat, and went out and stood under that little piece of cover hanging from the clothesline. It’s not really a line, it’s one of those squares that sort of looks like an umbrella skeleton, you know, without the cloth on it. There she stood in the mud with patches of hard, dirty snow all around her, sucking on those same two fingers and tapping the corner she could reach against her cheek. For the longest time she was out there, hanging on to that threadbare blanket. The sun was so bright, but straight up it made almost no shadow, except for the stripes across Lorelei’s face that made her look like she was in a cage.
Bridgton Lake

"Vacation Fun! It's Bridgton Lake for Vacations!"
---State of Maine publicity brochure, circa 1960

Our father's head broke through the cold lake's cap, and we girls on the beach cheered when the wood boat reared its start, making the slack line jerk taut as it pulled him in its zippered wake. Around and around he slogged by us, never rising enough to stand on water.

We grew tired of watching, turned to our lumpy castles and moats, the reed grasses tickling our summer arms, our sunsuit bottoms sodden and gritty. We looked up in time to see our father hoist himself into the rented boat, then lean to retrieve the skis.

Mother rose from her fringed blanket, where she left deep impressions and a glass tilted in the sand. She fixed her cigarette against the leech suctioned to my sister's trembling leg, then draped herself back across the plaid.

Suddenly he stood above us, shook his wet hair until we squealed. His swim trunks gripped his groin and thighs, small drops clung to the acne blisters on his chest. As we bent down to work our collapsed tunnels, his shadow reached farther than we could see.
Hanging

Hap’s picture was in the paper, only they called him Herbert underneath it. You couldn’t really make out who he was under the shadows of all those pines. We hung onto branches because there was no way over without them. We climbed that high iron fence at the graveyard on Forts Ferry Road in the middle of the day, on a dare. Me and him and Conrad, Raddy for short, we weren’t up to no good, tipping what headstones we could and marking up the rest. We got spooked when Raddy yelled out car, and took off like a flock of scared birds heading for the fence. Hap slipped somehow and couldn’t make it over to the other side. He just hung there, one of them iron spikes sticking right up through the center of his jaw, you know that soft spot under your chin. It went all the way into his nose. That’s what the paper said. Me and Raddy, we were running hard because of that car, and didn’t care to look back.
Panteón Santa Paula, Guanajuato, Mexico, 1916

These men could be waiting
for a haircut and shave,
in long linen drapes, all ready for the sole
barber in this small town to make his cuts.
They could be lined up for confession
in the nave of a church,
esophageal archways crossing above,
light playing depth tricks
on the still breathing plaster. They could be
players, heads hanging,
meditative before the big game.

Shrouded yet, they hang on pegs nailed to walls,
poor corpses, whose relatives could not pay
a grave tax to keep them
below. Dug up and hung in two tidy rows,
they face the other, their heads bowed
as if Some Great One were passing
through the rib of this crypt, as if
they know they’ve been chosen
at last, forced finally to the team,
as shamed as uncoordinated boys
whose feet never quite touch the floor.
Gotha, Florida, in the season of orange blossoms, the scent hung in pockets you could walk into and just breathe pure sweet. I thought heavenly, but others said sickening, a little goes a long way. There wasn’t much citrus left that far north in eighty-four. Over in Windermere, Old Man Chase had sold off his miles of groves for golf courses and houses in big developments with walls all around, corrals I called them. Gotha had some orange trees yet, a five-acre patch just by the post office. You had to go down Buena Vista Road through a tunnel of live oaks to get there. In seventy-two they were still stringing up “colored boys” in that old line of thick oaks. Men even wearing those white sheets right out in the open like that. Limbs reached across the road like fat arms, and there was some kind of moss hanging from them. It felt like a fairy tale to be on that stretch of road. Even on a sunny day, it was dark under there. The moss, it’s really a parasite killing the trees.
At the Greenhouse

---for Rita

The proprietor, a Nordic six-foot blond
crouches to tend a wilting rosemary plant.

In scruffy jeans, a torn magenta top
and backless sandals,

she flashes dirt-embedded nails, rises
when a flock of nuns appears
to select flowers for their resurrection
fashion show. The hyacinth and freesia

look good, their scents heady, but she thrusts
lavender orchids and pale lilies up
to their chins, "Smell these, sisters,
they’d be perfect for your pageant."

The sisters, heads wimpled, dressed not
in black and white, but tones

of earth and dove, look
as if they have emerged from soil,

with clay-like faces and nondescript noses
centered between narrow eyes.

They inhale politely and confer,
settling on red tulips

instead, their pendulous seeds
buried stones.
Red Lives in a Blue House

There is this story of a girl and her momma:
Once, on the girl's birthday she stood
at the foot of her momma's bed,
and said *I am bleeding, so heavy
I have soaked myself.
I can't seem for it to stop.*

Without looking from her book
the momma took a hearty sip
from her drink, and set the tumbler down
in its skatey pool on the bedside table.
She then drew in on her fat cigarette,
exhaled smoke through her nose
as she said *open your present.*

Wrapped tight in floral paper, the box
that lay across her momma's legs held
a dress from a mail order catalog. Blue plaid
with buttons all the way to the hem
and a white scalloped-edged Peter Pan collar.

Once the girl wore this dress
later that summer, she noticed
a round of old blood, like a scuffed hopscotch stone
marking one of the plaid crosses.
The girl touched the dead blood, rough
to her live finger.
Tisha's World

I was her aide on Sundays. She lived in her lover's hideaway in the Catskills, his gift to her when he departed that last season, when her cane was no longer enough. My age, thirty-eight, but her body in the bath reminded me of my grandmother's large square hips, droopy belly, fine ridge of shoulders slumped. Tisha's fingers had joints enlarged like tractor bolts, her elbows were their own dowager-like humps. She had only recently grown expert at directing the sponge.

She showed me a photo of her taken by a friend. Tisha leans on one hip, that foot planted, the other shoe tip down to cement like a ballerina. She wears a short tweed skirt, dark tights, a bolero jacket, beret. I think impish --- she looks at thirty-four like a French schoolgirl. She holds a shopping bag and is caught laughing. Her hair, a thick black curtain drawn Cleopatra-style around her head is the shade of the deepest shadow with just a hint of light. Its luster surprised me.

I can see her picking up her pills between her thumb and forefinger, one at a time as if she were wearing mittens, still see the routine, how she wanted her feet tucked into the covers just so, how many times she made me redo her nest until I got it right, how the batik cloth had to be draped this way on the window to close off the daylight. I didn't want her life to enter me like an illness, but there was nothing to do while she slept except look at her objects, the twisted antique iron lamp, gnarled at the base, with an ivy leaf scarf draped over the tattered shade, the African mask that stung one white wall, its face a permanent scowl, anger or disappointment, I couldn't tell, the Brassaii photograph of glittery Paris at night, wet cobblestones and lamps lined up like couples at a dance, before the band or after the music has stopped. I'd look at her objects and wonder. I think she knew I liked this close-up of another, I could scrutinize, study her, if she noticed, use concern as my excuse, the routine, her medication cycle, her daily timing documenting her life, I could easily claim, "I want to do it exactly right," and she'd want to believe me.
She had to be center, a porch light in a foggy night.

Once she bought a burgundy push-up bra from the Victoria's Secret catalog. I helped her into it, tucking her slim breasts into each cup, careful not to push too hard. She strained, still bent like an elbow in front of the mirror, said I should get one too, it would do wonders for my flat chest.

She had been a photographer in New York. At first I took her direction in the darkroom, but not after she knew I thought it was fun. She photographed me once, her camera set on its permanent tripod, then as she showed me the prints the next week, made a point to tell me how Ellie was so beautiful and Lila so photogenic, her friends. I could walk out of her house, latch the heavy pine door behind me, drive away, my cheekbones a blur, like in the pictures. I could quit her.

Something about the brightness now reminds me of her, those days I'd drive deep into the Catskills, down narrow roads crossing creek after creek. She had me burn her trash outside in a metal barrel that sat surrounded by swirls of snow. I took my time, warming my hands over the flames, watching my breath shoot out then fade in all that brightness. The sun lit up the outside world in a way that demanded attention. Everything came to life, blue creases in the snow, the shapes of leaves, even the ashes in their patterns of escape.

Days like these, I think of her, the sun intense, yearning, yellow matched line for line by blue. Cold, so cold trees creak, boots crunch, tires square, everything feels on the verge of breaking.
Some Things Broken

My mother reclines with her foot propped on pillows, her crutches lying at her feet like patient dogs. Her cast itches she says. She smokes and surveys the yard and patio—*that delphinium at the fence needs to be re-tied, see how it's leaning? Check the clematis while you're at it.*
*And tonight you'd better water the impatiens.*
She points with her drooping ash, then takes a long sip of her drink. The ice tinkles like the many small chimes that wa...
small as a ladies’ watch face.
It is a paper urn,
the browns, tans, and whites swirl
around the cylinder like pottery, but
my touch splits the center, and I see
the eggs like milky seeds, each
in a separate paper cradle
that is like a fruit halved.
I set the nest back where it first fell
and wait. When the wasp returns,
she hovers at the vacant spot, flies off,
then comes again. And again, twice more
until she discovers her fallen nest.
She suspends herself above it, stays fixed
even after I move what is left
under the red impatiens’ deep canopy.
Birches at Copper River

Lean trunks V apart, papery, sinewy. Frost is here in the light, the way the birch leaves seem chilled even topped by full sun. Under this canopy of jagged edges breaking and making shadows, like polite applause or a smattering of conversation in a darkened theater, we sit, our words like the serrated leafy breath above, blurred by distance. In the way of birches, you and I still touch at the base.

The way here was harsh, an old rail line adapted to road by ripped up ties and spread stones. To this we grew accustomed. This knowledge darts between us, in the way of cinematic flashes, a dappled sun striking our faces. We don't yet feel the sting of these lashes, but we wince all the same.
What a Body Knows

I.

Mid-July, when you shoved me to the ground out beside your truck, then closed the door with the heaviness of your hip, I thought of my father, who expressed his love with a roar or a large hand, or wooden spoons from the kitchen drawer, sometimes belts with big buckles, until my sisters and I hid them in the tips of his Sunday shoes. Mother always seemed to wonder why her supply of spoons had dwindled, as she would stand over the open drawer and rummage through spatulas, barbeque forks, dozens of dull knives; even the glass cocktail stirrers with horse heads that I loved would emerge, but no wooden spoons. The grocery list had them written every other week in her precise grammar school penmanship.

The summer the refrigerator gave out and Sears came to deliver the new one, Daddy found seventeen, seventeen, he counted, wooden spoons. Mother mused that the space between the fridge and dishwasher had always been kind of wide, but her voice trailed off, she seemed confused.

When you held me beside your truck, I could smell your fear, feel it locked around me, but I couldn't find your anger. Had you buried it so deep that like a dog searching for an old bone in the yard, you had lost track of its scent. Somewhere in the heat, my past and yours collided.

Afterward, I remembered another July day, in 1966, you'd think I'd remember the exact date, when my father nearly made his family smaller. I noticed the tiles were swirls of milky blue
and red the color of dried blood, like a bowling ball when I wore the kitchen floor on my face.

II.

I was nearly eight, my sister, four, we cooked sand under the sun in a doll-sized frying pan, my favorite for its perfect reality. Mother had put us in sun suits and tied the straps into bows, so we wouldn't need Daddy's help to go to the bathroom. We weren't to disturb him while she was at work. She showed me the jelly jar and bread, and told me to make lunch sometime around one, when the clock hands looked like a $V$, of course I could remember. "Be extra careful with the milk," my mother said, "it's new and you don't want to spill it." Off she went down the flagstone walk that her father had put in, her pocketbook slung over her arm, hitting her hip in soft pats as she made her way to the car.

Daddy was roofing the house alone because he said he could do it, he didn't need any help. His father had been a quarryman and a builder. My sister and I watched him for awhile, and at first in the easiness of the early morning sun, he seemed happy up there. He waved to us and called out that we had a mountain goat for a father, and lifted the heavy flats of shingles over his head like Atlas. He scrambled around up there and the sun got hotter, the tar, stickier. In the blaze of late afternoon,

Laura suddenly jumped off her swing grabbed my frying pan said it was hers, her turn to cook dinner, and I howled all seven years' worth, in protest of this injustice, then threw
sand at her legs as she ran. Her wails brought him down the ladder, his youngest calf bleating in need, blubbering, "She threw sand at me, Daddy."
That's when I met the kitchen floor, when he dragged me inside, out of her view, and closed his fists. They were slippery, smelled of tar and work. At first I didn't know what had hit me, maybe it felt like a train, or a wall I had hit on my bike, but those don't happen again and again and again, do they?
I crawled under the table for refuge when he got tired, where I remained until mother came home. I remember hearing her ask, "Where are the girls?"
as I watched their feet tango and dimly heard the clink of ice in a glass, then the shouts, too loud, the sobs, and when I uncovered my ears, the bedroom door latch more gently than I ever heard shut.
Four Older Brothers

Forty-five years after, one brother began having dreams, he saw things, heavy black cloth, a nun’s profile through a cracked door, the stripe of light that fell across his brother’s untied shoe. Every night he heard the smack of bone to bone, the thud, saw a small hand where the shoe had been. Not much padding in knuckles or a temple. Everyone said it was meningitis come on too sudden to diagnose it, so the youngest boy was buried in the Catholic cemetery, a marker over his head chiseled Youngtree van Horne, 1935-1943.

Allegedly, the sheriff, hospital, and diocese were all in cahoots in the cover up. It was the forties, for God’s sake, the church’s reputation was at stake. Who would ever know? They were orphans, half-breeds at that.

It took a few years of talk and remembering. The brothers reunited, spent their life savings to have the body exhumed, and whatever else it took to prove the cause of death. That’s all they knew. It wasn’t much surprise when no body lay under their boy’s stone, but after weeks of digging, a child’s bones came up many yards away, in a peripheral unmarked grave. There would be no way of telling without DNA testing, so they sent his skeleton to a place in Kansas, to make certain of no bias. That’s all anyone knew.
Soon enough reporters gave up. The van Horne brothers refused to speak of it, not another word. First the story was there in black and white, then it plain disappeared like a broken habit.

They’re all dead now, you know.
Daddy sits at the table, raises one arm and scratches in there with his fork. He orders my sister to pour more coffee, reads ads out loud from *K-Mart* and *Sears* as he creases the flyers to oblongs. His t-shirt clings oily from sleeping and car work, his black nails curl like animal claws. Our dog Penny sprawls in one patch of sunlight near his feet. Feeling safe, Sammy slinks in, ears up, but haunches set low for escape. Daddy goads, “Gump the kitty,” pokes at the dog, who engulfs the cat’s head in her jaws, soaking it with slobber, while the phone rings off and on.

* * *

In school, because of the Cold War, we’re taught drills to duck and cover whenever we hear the alarm. Mrs. Wamsley, our teacher, instructs “Cross your arms over your faces” to protect against flying glass. Thirty chairs scrape as we crawl under our desks, crouch down with our backs to broad windows to wait for the signal *all clear*. Since we live in Schenectady, home of G.E., we’d be the first to be bombed. She always says this when we’re back in our seats, then directs our attention to fractions or Saturn or *Swiss Family Robinson*. She claps her hands twice, smoothes her dress and hair, and when her arms rise, dark stains appear but nobody snickers or looks too hard.

* * *

Daddy sits at the table and pounds about Hitler, working class donkeys and Ford. My sisters and I quietly play with our trolls, watching *Road Runner* on TV. The telephone rings, and the dog finds the cat, who flattens his ears, hunkering as if he’s forgotten his legs. Daddy laughs, “Look at that, the phone
and she goes for the cat!” He works for the Telephone Company and says he’s just one of the donkeys that the politicians own. Gayle pinches me, whispers through teeth, “He’s your stupid cat, and he peed.” She sneers at the wet spot glistening on the linoleum that she will be forced to clean.
The Lines Drawn

He pointed his slender finger to a line
in a poem when she met him at the bookstore,
told her to read. He cradled his newborn, kept his cheek
next to the feathery head. When he spoke,
she first thought he had a weak mouth,
thought his soft speech was a way
to minimize flaw, opposite the way some men with droopy
shoulders wear suit jackets shaped like anvils
that barely fit through doorways
to maximize what isn’t there. The next time
they stood outside, alone, in moist evening air,
he read to her, and as she watched
his lips move over his teeth to shape words
geometrically,
she almost could not bear to look,
hers fingers wanted to touch
those forms. It was painful leaning against brick,
her hands immobilized between her back
and impossibility.

She thinks
of him when, alone, she eats crème brulée, too sweet,
too rich. She sits upright and remembers her mother
who said don’t bend down to the spoon,
bring it up to your mouth. But that’s a lie.
She wants to remember mother saying that
so her own posture will hold her
with direction, distant from
vanilla and ginger with three chocolate fans tilted
open like gates placed for seduction.

At first she thought he was so other worldly,
when she tried to imagine
sex, all she could think of
were his lips nuzzling her neck
in a 19th century way, as he intermittently
whispered things like you ignite me, my darling
and your hair is the flame that burns my soul.

Now she thinks of DeNiro, who says
if he could do it all over again, he’d make more love.
God, Bobby.
She exhales with eyes closed.

She pictures where his thighs might curve under loose jeans, the way his waist urges his hips to move, and all she can think of is the unfolding, the rising as easy as planetary motion and she knows she'd let her hair down so he could swim its channels. She thinks if we could map the human heart, it would be marked by single strands of every lover's hair.

Someone once told her she could be breathing oxygen molecules that George Washington breathed. She might prefer Carrie Nation's. What of them together? Once she exhaled them, they'd have her stamp on their O's. When she is in his company, she envies the molecules, hers and his, joined in oxygenated embrace, passing through one another, then released like stones skipped across an undulating lake, barely touching the sunlit peaks before they dart down to deep pockets, alone.

She will drive to a place far and frozen to keep herself enclosed, as still as a tipped moon. She will tell him this without words before she goes: All you may know is my yearning. It will be palpable, a hot car hood under a cool thigh.
Gestalt of Big Bend

Our trek to Texas took us through the night. At dawn it seemed that yesterday had turned to open roads that welcomed desert scrub and stone formations stacked between the lines.

We looked for Greybands coiled in rock cuts, as nervous lizards scurried out of view. I held your gun and shot some brown bottles arranged across the sand, missing only one.

We covered ground that we had hardly touched, canyon rims that would hold the moon a pearl, below enormous precipice of sky, above the river’s wide and pressing surge.

Sun low, we slept like snakes, our lengths unfurled, and held ourselves like this for just an hour, or so it seemed until the moon rose up aloof to land. The Rio Grande pushed on alone, the way loose water always does. We let the darkness pull our unplanned course and left the state of Texas barely known to us. Then prairie flattened right on cue, swept away the land where we had been, grass bent complacent under changing wind and travels turned to memory’s closed domain. With new sun we’d found this familiar state, its border brought a wall of thickness down. Words turned arid, went sparse, then closed. I leaned against the door to pretend sleep. Your eyes kept to the task of driving home.

Now something feels like Texas every time I breathe, that desert is inside me, part of my terrain. The pulse of red earth pounds those canyons between us still so close.
RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

---Robert Frost
Album I

1. Once in bed, my older sister demanded

that I draw pictures on her back
until she guessed
the scene, then I could stop.
It took many attempts. I erased
with my palm, smoothed old
finger lines and drew hard
the outline of a house.
My reward: she
let me rub her breasts. But I wondered
more about her new dark
bristle below, and fell
asleep with my hands
holding the light
hair on my head.

2. Once, after supper, my mother

gooped me up as I walked by
to clear, held me
hard to her breast. Her
nose breath, dirty
with cigarettes, crossed
my face. I squirmed
to be released, my elbow fat
with sauce from her plate. She held
me tighter and laughed,
“What’s the matter, don’t you
want some love
from your old mother?”
I turned, “You smell,” and felt
her bones disappear, saw
her eyes drop down
like knees scraped to cement.
3. Once I was left alone to feed my brother

green and orange slop from several
squat jars. He cried
wide tears when he heard
the pop of lids, cried and wouldn’t
open up.
Even after snot
gathered, crowded the corral
of his small nose
I spooned load after load
in his reluctant mouth, while
he could do nothing
but swallow
or choke.

4. Once I spun my little sister

around, around by one arm
in the yard. We laughed and laughed
until we heard the snap. Maple
trees blurred bloody overhead,
but I couldn’t stop
the laughing, the more
her face blotched teary
the more the leaves sang
to me. My laughter didn’t close
its dark door until our father
slammed it with his fist.

5. Once I kissed my father

on the face, the way
I’d kiss a lover. Barely
a teen, I stole upon him sleeping
in the open. His rough hands
lay across his chest, splintered
wide boats, rising and falling to the tide
of his breathing. I saw
the blackheads in his creases, crumbs
clinging in his ears, smelled
his oily odor, stared
at the small bulge
below his waistband, had to
know the animal
where I came from.
My mother named my first gerbil Rasputin. One day he bit my finger, expected due to his nature. His teeth stabbed my flesh at the joint, and when I tried to shake him free, he clamped down all the more. How surprised I was to see a gerbil fly, but to hear his body thump against the pale wall seemed just. I hadn’t drowned him or poisoned him, after all. He tried to burrow his trauma away when he crawled into the corner to die. I watched, then buried him under the pines, not near the bones of the cats. The dirt, wet and wormy stuck to my fingers, and I smelled a sourness seep from my freckled skin.

Later I read a biography of the Romanovs, who had very beautiful children, skin like freshly poured cream with cheeks the color of berries, not a pock in sight. The hand-colored photos showed that all the daughters gleamed in red gems and teardrop pearls, but even such jewels later sewn into their corsets couldn’t save them from the Bolsheviks. Bullets may have bounced, but the bayonets found their marks. Hand stitched laces and leggings soaked red when entrails were forced outside bodies. I wondered if Olga’s satin arms lay near Tatiana’s delicate lobes. If Marie’s plump fingers clotted Anastasia’s jolly mouth. Or Alexei the bleeder, if his breath bubbled in his own blood.

In school I had seen a photograph of them, stilled days before their deaths. Those sad serious eyes never wavered, so I memorized their expressions, mimicked

The Sorrow of Flesh and Blood
the tilt of their heads, curled
my fingers and held my breath
as though I were in the picture.

The same year, when I was eight, I’d come in
from playing on the iced-over walk,
my lips and cheeks made numb
by their press to dark ice. I had lain
mouth to ice until I could
no longer stand the sting. I liked the way
my lips felt distorted---

was my face swollen---
I went to watch my mouth move
in the plate glass mirror,
but my breath fogged a small oval
where my mouth should have been, and my eyes
met eyes instead. In the green circles
I saw me, a stranger familiar,
like in a moving picture. I heard
my own voice say

you will die someday

and it was as though I had touched
an odd hand in the dark
or turned over a photo,
thinking I’d see the people’s backs.
Jean Fuller's father tried to grab
my ankle one day in their car.
We were on our way
to Curry Freeze, I sat right
behind him and the next thing I knew his hand
groped along the side of the seat, down
near the floor. At first I thought he
dropped something, his sunglasses,
but he didn't say anything about the loss, he
spoke to Jean and her mother as if nothing
were happening. So I moved my leg
closer to the stretching fingers. His tips grazed
the top of my tennis sock, hit
flesh and I slid my leg out of reach,
watched the fingers spread, exploring
the air behind the seat, a wad of inchworms at the end
of a branch. I pushed my foot back
to let only a breath
between his skin and mine.

When we turned the corner, Mr. Fuller cleared
his throat, went up to scratch
in his collar with that hand
and asked what kind
of ice cream we girls would have,
that his favorite was butter pecan,
but he might get strawberry today for a change.

I got a butter pecan cone and spit
out all of the pecans, like watermelon seeds.
Mrs. Fuller smiled with her mouth
closed, and remarked that I was quite talented,
did my family do that at home?
What's in a Name

My father named the water bug that swam in our pool Evinrude. When their mother was squashed by a car, my mother named the baby squirrels we bottle raised Jasper, Casper, and Bartholomew. Every troll I owned was Trudy, which got numeric and complicated as my collection grew. My older sister gave names to her nipples when her breast buds first came up. She let me touch them fast one night, then re-buttoned her pajama top, flopped over as she threatened, "if you ever tell..." I have forgotten now what she called the nubs and the feel of her skin to my eight-year-old fingers.

After my sister and me there's a dead one. It went away in one cold flush of water and blood. We didn't call it anything, but heard my mother cry for a long time and no mention of it again. Like whispers passed, distorted around my Brownie troop ring, our Operator game ended when the secret reached the last ear.
After Killing the Bee

For weeks I worry. Inside
and out, I wear my shoes. I look down,
measure every step. I stay away
from the honeysuckle and hydrangea,
even the iris beds that the bees
do not frequent. When I am asked
to go out at dusk to take in The Knick News,
I protest. I have the nerve to whine.
I won’t say why.

I am sure a bee army
is mobilizing, that the bees are forming one
mammoth, shrub-sized bee,
that they converge each night
humming their war songs. I imagine
the huge stinger, a hypodermic the length of a yardstick,
full of bee venom,
and after the bees’ victory when I swell to death right
in front of my parents, that they stand
helpless, like Cliff Rowe’s mother
who watched his brain enlarge from meningitis
and didn’t even know it
until too late.

When the shrubs move, I scream
and slam the storm door in front of me.
Still waiting for his paper, my father remains
oddly calm: is it necessary to slam the door is all
he asks, but I do not respond. I vow to run
so fast from doorway to lawn that I will not feel
my feet touch ground. I do this
every night. I never tell
anyone.
The bees and me, it’s our secret.
A Matter of Months, 1968

---for Donna

We made a room for her
when she came at sixteen
to our house, early spring.
She wore a gauzy dress
that ballooned from the wind,
I thought; her face was wet

and pink, and she carried
a cage with two hamsters.
To this my father sniffed
there would be more, as he
looked up at his eyebrows.
I wondered to myself:
how would fat hamsters get

through, between the wire?
I vowed to watch the cage
and did, crouched every night
while my cousin worked blue yarn
around slender needles,
made knots into rows, and rows
fabric. When the clicking
stopped, she would unravel

what she had just begun.
All spring I heard things whispered---
due date, for one. I thought
how dumb to shush about books.
What the agency says
was on everyone's tongues.
They bit down when I was near,
their words snapped fast, taken
like photos in bright sun.

After my cousin left, my mother kept
the door to her sewing room closed.
I went in once when no one
was home. It was different beyond the quiet.
No more creak of the hamster's wheel,
my mother’s patterns spread
on the day bed, Donna’s yarn gone,
but she had left something behind,
I could just tell.
Flat as a Board

After summer vacation, Melody Marchessani bounced back with breasts and a waist and the girls stared, forming small herds, heads bent low, nostrils nervous, our long legs ready to gallop. The boys, who usually pinched at our training bra straps from behind, taunting *why doncha get something to put in there*, looked down at their feet as if they stood at a funeral, their faces perpetually red, their hands discovering new pockets to crawl into. Then Faith Baumgartner brought in yarmulkes she stole from a box in her father's synagogue basement and sold them for a dollar apiece. It seemed the whole seventh grade had converted.

When the cry, "Kathy James STUFFS" echoed from the girls' locker room, rolling out into the hallways, we found our way back to breasts. Danny Felts, the first boy to snap back sang low at me across the lunchroom table, "You're a carpenter's dream," which I thought an odd compliment as I pictured Jesus with a pin-up tacked to plaster. She had my face and Melody's breasts and wore an orange string bikini. Jesus lay on his single cot in a whitewashed room with thick textured walls, no screen on the window to keep out the bugs, the poster his only decoration. He wore gym shorts and white socks, it was hot, cupped his hands to the back of his head, not smiling in that serene Jesus way but more like *The Mona Lisa.*
How Taking Too Many Liberties Led Me to Jesus

When I was nine, I stole coins
from my grandmother’s house,
lifted from the tin in her spare room.
The lid crunched like a closing car door,
but she was deaf in one ear
and had a bad colon, she told us often,
which kept her occupied. I wanted her dimes,
flyer dimes, with a woman’s head and wings,
female Mercury, not Roosevelt’s jowls.

At home I pulled staples from the carpet
stair runner and sucked the two metals,
which made my tongue pinch
with a sparkly shock,
a sensation that inspired flying,
walking through walls
or shrinking my body as my head grew
then reversing the process
when it felt too big to move.

Two days before Christmas,
Grandmother asked did I have something
to tell her, as she held up my sandwich bag
of dimes, a handful of her ladies.
I longed for staples and dimes to hide
under my tongue while the lecture ballooned
over Oh, Come All Ye Faithful.
Finally dismissed, my tears and I squeezed
behind my father’s Naugahyde recliner

where I chewed the dog’s Milk Bone in place
of warm cookies cooling in the kitchen, and reached
for The Children’s Illustrated Bible,
which was better than Consumer Reports.
My mother snarled, “You should read that,” when she strode by
to turn the record, but her words didn’t sting any more
than the far stars overhead
as I walked the road to Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph,
my face dry, my sandals dust free.
June in Akumal

As the light faded out over the inlet, the girl grew tired of adult matters and leaned back against her father’s shoulder to sleep. She was a towhead with bruises on her knees and glasses as thick as her father’s palms. Her arms and legs were long and tanned. I thought of her body on a bicycle a few days before. She was having trouble keeping the thing steady on those sandy roads. I was close enough to see the lines of sweat at her temples and the damp spot on her shirt that centered between breasts yet-to-be. Her skin glistened with the exertion. How she concentrated. That last night as I watched her draped on her father, there was certainty in the angle of her chin and the way her hair splayed across his chest. Too soon he rose and brought her to her bed. I stood in the doorway and saw her nestle in, making low whimpering sounds, then throw her arms above her head. I wondered what she smelled like. The night had grown starry and still, and I could feel the sand between my toes no matter how hard I tried to brush it off.
Maneuvers with Lips

Warren Seaburg, twelve, a near albino whose Beatle haircut and watery coloring make him resemble a muppet, whose eyes the color of scuffed sidewalks bulge above a nose with distinct planes, like Pinocchio’s, rides his banana seat bike over one Saturday, surprising me, right before school begins.

I take him down the road to the only farm field left, rustling head high with ripe corn, then on to the fire pit dug by teens in nearby woods, which smell of earthworms and musky tin, the way the land sweats when hidden from sun.

I have ideas: we could pull legs off mosquitoes, move fallen tree limbs to the pit. Even start a fire. We do all three. After, we sit pink and perspiring under leafy sunlight that makes our faces look like my grandmother’s wallpaper, our damp skin rubbing at elbows. Warren’s face nears mine, I smell his slightly metallic breath. I know what’s coming. First kiss. I hear the words from popular songs and remember my sister who’s told me they put their tongues in your mouth and my bike is beneath me like a horse I whistled for.

Alone in my room, I hug my knees and wait for Sammy who always slinks around the doorway and springs to my bed so I can cry in his fur. No cat. But I have Sleepy to console me, a red bear with paws held as though under arrest, his rubber face fixed in a permanent yawn. His half-closed eyes have painted cow-lashes, with creamy blue lids, like my sister’s pot-o-eyeshadow, his tongue protrudes from his oval shaped lips. I meet Sleepy’s open mouth. My tongue tries to wrestle his, but he offers no resistance.

I’ve found a new purpose, which replaces lying on my back pretending I can walk on the ceiling. I never think of a particular boy, or even the gender. Practice
will prepare me for the unexpected, since I have now been conscripted into this army. I vow I will learn to shoot my new weapon.

When I see Warren in the halls at school, I slouch down though I cannot escape his milky eyes and lopsided smile. He is a shadow, lurking, the dim memory of an awkward tooth pulled.
Hot and Cold

One December day in the seventh grade,
I fell in love with Vince Orcutt,
his myopic dark eyes, his bottom
lip that I had thought drooped stupidly
suddenly invited me like a senior
asking me to the prom.

Three times that month we rolled around
on the bed in Jean Fuller’s basement, in the dim room
her parents had prepared
for Del and Hill, hidden below
the family’s life, partitioned off
by a folding screen and bookcases made of cement
blocks and rough boards, lined
with paperback novels and old shells,
for privacy Jean had said.
Delcene, the oldest, was bringing her lover
Hillary home for Christmas.

Vince and I traced the lines
on the orange Indian print spread, marked
by dark stars with blurred edges,
kissed and pressed ourselves into each other
while Jean fingered the spines
of books and kept watch for her mother,
who would creak down
the cellar steps, and flip
the light on near the washer, calling out
that it was time for Jean to do her homework.

The last time I stopped
before we had to and pushed him
away. I told him I couldn’t stand his touch. He watched
me straighten my blouse, and tuck
it in, never asking what was the matter,
just watching, his eyes the only part
of him moving. He sat up, smoothed
the wrinkled spread, his hair,
and walked to the stairs. At the top
I heard him chat with Mrs. Fuller, “The girls
are on their way up. I think
you’ve got a bulb out down there,  
it’s hard to get your bearings,”  
he said, his voice cracking on the word “hard.”

When I saw him again, he drove a fish truck  
in my parents’ neighborhood. He stopped  
and grinned, asking if we wanted  
any fish today, the summer sun wavering on his face  
through the maple at the corner of our yard.  
I nearly said it then, that I was sorry…  
but he chattered on that he was married  
with kids, the whole kit and caboodle,  
he shrugged, smiling. He asked about me  
and I shook my head. The way he looked at me,  
it meant *Yeah, that’s too bad*  
*but I’m not surprised.* I stood facing him  
as he drove away, his hand out the window  
tapping the roof twice,  
his eyes focused to the road ahead.
Two Snoods at Eleven and Nine

Ann, the eldest, never satisfied,
grimaces to the hand held mirror
and pats the one rough place, a ripple.
Do you want it done over, I ask her back;
she nods no as always, sighs,
pops a slew of bobby pins to her lips
and skulks off to her mother’s
bathroom, to the bigger mirror.
Late evening when I help her uncoil it all,
as usual, I count too many thin pins
hiding in her hair.

Lisa doesn’t much care how tightly
I pull back her darkly golden curls.
She wiggles in her chair,
swings her foot, ready to jump up
after only the first few clasps.
Sit still, I tell her, you know you must
have your hair secured before class.
A few loose strands
would get a girl chastised.

Still at home, after they show
steps and stretches, then swirl in circles
around me, they make me feel
their sweaty necks
and check for escaped tendrils.
I see the dark spots under their arms,
smell their heat rise up, the scent
not quite suppressed by one leotard
the color of cooing mourning doves,
the other, a mewing newborn’s
wash of bright blood.

Once we get to the dusty studio,
I stay for the lesson, sitting,
the way I’ve been instructed.
I watch each girl spread one leg
to the barre, knit snoods sway down in unison,
their faces flush and shine above
my sallow one in that wall
completely mirrored, which looks both forward and back, a pupil looking into itself.
If you wish to attain the absolute, you must dare to take the risk, to abandon even those things which cannot be forgotten: the people who are precious to you, and those whom you might have loved.

---Zabo Chabiland
Girl Talk

I.

When we were eight, Jean Fuller told me about the hood and little penis that all girls have. Afraid to look, I kept envisioning a car with some enlarged rice grain under it. In high school everyone called the guys from Altamont or East Berne hoods, the Bardols, that was the gang. Rick Snyder and Donny Pendleton headed the pack. I went out once with Rick. My mother said he was so nice and clean-cut. He told me to hold his dick while he peed. We went all the way to this boarded up farmhouse in the hills above Altamont, sat in his car. He drank a six and peed a lot.

Jean at sixteen told me she drove up the Adirondack Northway with only her learner’s permit, pulled over to have sex with some 38-year-old Hawaiian guy who motioned for her to get off at the next rest stop. She went on that year to start a longtime affair with Rory Russell’s father. Rory wore the shirts with the little alligator to school, cringed when I picked at one, said it was cute, could he cut it off for me.

Years later I was a paid caller for The Cerebral Palsy Telethon, got Rory on the line. He remembered me, told me all about the new boat he had just bought, the big house he lived in, his vacation property up at Bolton Landing, his very expensive dog, the breed so rare no one in the States had heard of it. So I lied and said I had. He didn’t want to donate this year.
because things were a bit tight.
I always wondered
if he knew about Jean and his father,
her sleeping with the guy and seeing his kid
every day at school, their family
intact: mother, father, son, daughter. Picnics
at Thatcher Park, vacations at Lake George
every July, Christmas photos of all
the stuff Rory and his sister got
spread around them like trophies.

II.

Many times when I would call Jean
her mother would say she was in the shower
or outside playing with her dog Tiger
or doing her homework. It was okay
when Liz called --- she had a steady boyfriend,
lived right across the street ---
they saw her every day. Mrs. Fuller
was afraid Jean would turn out
to be lesbian like her older sister, Delcene
because Jean was big-boned,
athletic, hung out on the sports teams, was liked
by all of the gym teachers, especially
Miss Flynn, who shared a house
in the neighborhood with a woman.

At my house, the only time we ever talked
about girl parts
was when my male cousins came to stay.
We got baths together. I remember
my mother telling us that boys have penises
but girls don’t. She didn’t say
what girls did have, referring to THAT
part of our anatomy as “down there.”
So I had a down there. I was twenty
before I said the words vagina or clitoris
out loud.
III.

We three used to ride to French’s Hollow to swim, Jean, Liz and I. French’s, the lower part of Watervliet Reservoir, drinking supply for the tri-cities, Albany, Schenectady, Troy. We’d hide our bikes in bushes, then scale the wide pipe, too slippery to walk upright on, as if we were on a gymnastics horse. We had rust stains between our legs, up our behinds like saddles by the time we got to the swimming hole. It was that or bushwhack through tangled underbrush and woods thick with mosquitoes.

At the rope swing once, we snickered together at a guy’s penis poking out of his cut-offs when he climbed the muddy embankment. He had moved his top leg higher to get a better foothold and there it was, white and fat like a worm with its head pushed into a mushroom cap. Embarrassed, he made comments about Jean’s BA-ZOOMS, which under wet fabric shaped like swollen eggplants. Not too many girls hung out at the rope swing, the rope was frayed at the end, too short to reach the bank, so you had to jump off the mud cliff to catch it. The guys acted nonchalant, but never drank or took a bong hit before doing the swing. There was always that one- or two-second squeeze in your chest --- I’m going to miss, oh God I’ve got it --- and there you’d be, out between places for just an instant.
IV.

I took this frosh from UMASS to the clearing by the swimming hole, my graduation night. I was slipping my panties back on when I saw the finger jutting up from the dirt, like a crocus. It was really a thumb, smaller than mine. My parents never asked what I was doing up there. My father would look at me over the edge of his newspaper, my mother kept saying the horror of it all when we found out the thumb was attached to the body of a nine-year-old girl, raped and dumped in the weeds. Jean asked though, you and Mark, did you do it?
Some of us ate paste. The milky kind
that came with its own stick for dipping. Sweet
and floury, like we used to make at home
the Saturday near Halloween for papier-mâché masks
and costume parts. Mrs. Ghezzo
would shriek, “Don’t eat the paste, we need it
for the school year. You’ve all had your lunches!”
Issued rubber cement, we’d roll it into balls
throwing them across the table at each other’s foreheads
just to see how far
they’d bounce. Jan Mars won the distance
competition when her lopsided ball rebounded all the way
to the paper cutter.
We weren’t even trying
to gross each other out the day
Lin Sharron cut
the tip off her finger with an exacto knife.
The wad of flesh wobbled on her paper,
surrounded by blood that seeped like spilled paint.
Above it Lin’s face hung, white
as our unmarked pages.
No one fainted or screamed or even spoke,
the room just got small, and slow, and full
of eyes while Mrs. Ghezzo swam over,
scooping up Lin and her pinkie tip, ordering
Tom DeRensis, “Get some ice,”
as she wound her embroidered hanky
to stop the bleeding. We watched

the ambulance skid up, our stomachs coiled,
our hands shoved in pockets
or crossed under our arms. The whispers circled
our gathering...Did you hear? Doug Bordell stole
his father’s Impala...drove all the way to Ohio...
captured at a gas station just outside Akron...

his pen protector full
of blue ballpoints, red plaid overnight case packed
with clean briefs and white socks rolled
into misshapen balls. Doug wore
the glasses Katie Gregory had purposely stepped on, his only pair, with pale blue kitty-cat frames; he had pieced them together with black electrical tape.
First Car

---Upstate New York

Early summer, the Maslanka brothers take me and Mary Kim for a drive beyond the Collar City Bridge, to a secret place full of rubble that overlooks Troy.

Under our feet damp with dew the powdery, aged scent of lily-of-the-valley mixes with new clover. We explore overgrown foundations of barn, root cellar, house, surprised by the chimney remains still stacked high like a steeple.

When dusk takes hold, faint stars emerge like eyes opening after a long sleep. We find some old jars, run after lightning bugs, around us like hovering stars,

ushering them into glass capped by our palms. We bring them to T.R.'s Pontiac, ice green and gray with door panels the color of an old bicycle. The car is so full of low sparks, it looks like a distant village. We dance slow circles, close together, some of the bodies' juices smeared on our bare arms. Donnie licks my shoulder, then sticks his tongue out for us to see

the eerie green, soft on his lips and inside his mouth. We swirl around the car, diving in, closing doors fast to keep the fireflies from getting out. The game is to spot them on our faces, and kiss with that bitter taste on our lips.

On the way home, T.R. screams over a mountain road that dips and undulates like a roller coaster track. He kills the headlights at the crest
of the first big drop. Skeleton heads, we shriek

getting what’s left of the fireflies
in our mouths, even our teeth, the quick pulse
of green already fading
on our adolescent skins. We hit the dark
airborne, before the wheels touch tar,
seats littered with firefly remains, live
stars not far from the car we fly in.
1950 Plymouth

I bought my first car in twilight
from two old farmers in Sanford, Florida,
who bent under the cracked black hood,
a Jurassic jaw that seemed to engulf both
bodies from the waist up, both in grimy
green overalls and cow-caked boots.
The split windshield resembled eyes, the tires
balloonish haunches. Blue smoke circled
the dull yellow field, flattening
the scene to a poster from the past.
They tinkered. I waited,
cash damp in one hand,
and when the car started, I called my Plymouth
*Knute*, after Norwegian
Knute Rockne, the car, like the man,
big, bald, and persistent.

I traveled time’s circled thread
in Knute, forward to adulthood, back
to the days of bobby soxers,
poodle skirts, and undying respect for Ike.
New to Florida, I slept in the back seat for a week,
ever needing to bend my knees
and thought of my mother,
who dated her older brother’s friends,
whose bare thighs under her skirt
would have known smooth seats, hands used
to footballs but new to steering wheels,
whose face would glow bright pink
remembering the boys’ fledgling beards
as her early breasts carried
their mauve secrets
from back seat to well-lighted house.
The Fighting Irish, After the Four Horsemen

Cowboys on horses emerge
from mist, a gray wall of past, silhouettes
firm with chaps, hats, and coiled rope, they loop
across the Cattle Pen at the Flint Hills’
southern point just outside El Dorado.

Knute Rockne died somewhere right
near Bazaar, in the Flint Hills of Kansas,
his plane fumbled to the outstretched green,
which received him, nonetheless,
beneath its sweetness. I like to think of him

below a land that rolls
as if layered with women’s
bodies, which rise up, slow
thighs, hips over shoulders, dozens
and dozens of green slathered breasts,
a green that hums nearly blue, so rich if it were red,
it would be blood.

I imagine him here suffocating yet
smiling as he nudges shoulders
with the players, and muses,
his fingers testing the flesh
of this new position, finally reaching
to shake the winning team’s hands.
Evidence of Flight

"It is safest to travel in the middle."
---Ovid

"Mirror and image!"
---Thomas Mann

Take Icarus, who just kept going
the distance of unheeded warnings
between his youth and enlightenment.
He saw himself in the fire.
At first, it must have blinded him,
then risk melted to rapture
like bodies swirling to fluid lines.
The vision had him,
held him to its shimmering breast,
he became his own tears
in the ocean’s embrace.
Like lover’s hair on the pillowslip,
bent feathers marked the spot.

Take Gustave, dead in Venice,
whose sun brought yearning to his shadow,
whose sea could not be crossed.
His perfect gaze was blemished
by the Sirocco of Eros’s exhaled wish,
which eddied about him at last.
His posture wore the emblem, besotted,
but how he flew when he slumped!
What a state he reached,
what unrequited bliss.
He had loved so well with his eyes,
Aschenbach, his Tadzio,
whose hair held the final summer light.
Ice Carnival Week

---For Rolf

Breath clouds by night shape floral patterns, magnified white rosettes. Chainsaws burr against stacked blocks, ice flanks crack, the thin scrap pieces stand, lean in circled like old headstones or ragged teeth. Flatlander, he carves flames, rings into ice, a visitor alone here, but not at home. He wears his wife and children inside, a vest instead of a cloak. Sometimes the glorious weight of them rises and tugs at his eyes, pulling him into himself. His mouth, however, is never sad, a mustached lip cavorts above perfect teeth, like the ribbon of aurora we saw together. His hands steam. March born, he is a fish, which skims when wet, falls hard when frozen. I the cat hold him loosely between my claws and teeth. We only have time for these details. In this climate after he’s gone, what he carved will remain substantial for a time, blue tones deep underneath suns that try to take what is frozen to water, thus dousing all but the most complex of fires.
To Hear It Said

How do I tell you
that you open something
in me. My whole
childhood suns itself like a pleased lizard
emerging from the blue rocks
of my adult body.

All you have to do is whistle
in my stairwell,
look at me
with the stupidity of nakedness,
say my name
like you mean it.
The Courage It Takes

Your four names
wash around my tongue
long after you’ve gone

    Rudolfus Theodorus Wilhelmus Doderlein de Win.
Hapsburg descended, you said
by asking town officials you could
be a baron, or was it a duke.
These simple words slipped beyond
the fingers of my memory,
but I remember the names of your sons

    Thimon Niels Jostan

and the way you went for me
outside the ring of parental love,
and left them swimming
alone for one sunlit moment,
even if as you turned your back
you still imagined them safe.
I Don’t Know Her Name

So what of the woman he chose
before me, who sleeps alone, scant
nightdress, perhaps,
soft on crisp sheets,
while he lies
with me, my bed cotton batting, set
on the floor, which he jokes is to keep
at bay the little men who live
under all children’s beds,
since these men would be squashed
here.

So what if he’s a Frieslander
who crossed water to end
up rubbing elbows with love,
the kind that enters you like a needle,
a pinch of pain and shock, then
the smooth flow of everything
in the right direction
weighing down the veins.

So what of the wicker we call
a cradle, curling to it first
each night to cram our closeness
as if the force would hold us
together after he returns
to a life I can’t
even picture.

So what if he’s gone and I
think of swimming. In childhood I am so eager
to go back in, I wrench on my cold wet suit
knowing my body
or the water will warm it,
whichever has the chance to work first.
Only Through Proximity

My friend says love is tension
and there's a huge wedge
of Dutch nail cheese, caraway seed
and clove speckled, taking
up a shelf of its own in my refrigerator,
one of your many gifts
to me. I'd say love
is tragic and I drink 6 a.m.
coffee alone, where we sat only
one hour ago. I think about the way
the cheese is like a body
in the fetal position, so much
that I can see the lines
that would carve this figure
out, and the curve of the back
facing me. What I already miss:
the way you'd lightly stroke
my ear, the same way you said
your youngest son strokes yours
because he's chosen you now.
Bishop Holds van Loon in Place

"The world would continue to run its even course through the uncharted heavens."

---Hendrik Willem van Loon

I keep van Loon’s *Geography* between
Elizabeth’s poetry and prose,
I suspect she may have smiled
faintly, like a well creased chart
had she known not her geography
but his was wrapped by a map
disguised as dust protection.

What are maps if not this?
They lure us with the spectrum
of movement, lead wild ones to nonlinear places,
offer mountains to climb, or think
about climbing, which requires
less equipment. Novitiates and chaired
veterans do it all the time.

Who has not held
a map to touch the small blue veins
of longing, feel the buttery yellows that smell
of bread kitchens, taste the tart green
clovers growing in the back yards
of memory. Who has not traced
the ocean as it embraces

and releases land lovers,
or rubbed fingers over whispered names,
to feel them pulse through
pastel sheets. They encourage
our urges, however briefly. Maps
are the sneeze that eschews our dust,
like Bishop’s breath in words.
Conversations with O'Keeffe

One: *Pelvis IV*

The moon through this bone
hole is private,
an eye with no iris,
the tip of a clitoris,
a shaved horizon holding
the scream of an egg
released. As shy
as a rubbed bone,
the moon has no
I, so we
claim it.

Two: *Sky Above Clouds I*

A bumbling herd
of woolly amoebas,
spots on our panties
on a good day, they
are plucked petals
vying for a place in heaven,
and misinformed moons,
the oceans' *enfants terribles*,
always to return.
The stepping stones
to a smoky precipice,
taste buds on God's tongue,
cries out in the cold,
they dare to travel to hearts
in a wide blue vein. They are
evidence of flight,
your gift every time
Georgia.
Three: *Blue Line*

Music here
like the aurora,
a ghostly organic arc,
waves us
behind its fluttering curtain.

We bend to the music, then
rise, shrouded women
upright like twin phalluses.
At the base,
Rorschach’s faded blots.

Don’t be surprised
by the labia
you recognize as pale
or whispers at the joint
where we meet.
Cabin Fever, Minus Thirty

Surrounded by midnight snow and low flowering
of cold last night, we gathered,
at first made heavy
by beer, bitter against our lips,
warmer than the air outside,
which rolled in fast and surrounded us in vapor-
clouds like sudden thoughts
each time the door cracked open
and a parka pushed through. Smokers
on the porch lasted half
a cigarette before the lure
of numbness sliced unknowable and quick
as a wire severing a head. It’s one thing to feel
cold, another not to feel
nose tip or fingers, as if they no longer
belong to the body that claims them. After
the refrigerator had offered up the last of its row
of bottles, a lightness took hold
and we read
aloud poems we loved, liquefied
their round mouth sounds, felt our knees twitch
and hearts lurch as if plunged in the newness of
grief. We were not ingesting others’
words, they came from us as if we swallowed
in reverse, unashamed of our tears. We loved
these words and like insects, bore them in their multiples.
Until the room breathed
too full. We slept as if cocooned
by a womb of blankets, denim, and skin, one
pile, our sections secure
as siblings, confident in our comfort
as if our eyes closed knowing the quiet line
of orange light under
the door of our childhood bedrooms, where behind,
we knew, our parents sat up reading
and we could still hear the low
timbre of their voices
but no longer
the words.

Tonight, alone, I hear the heat
speak in modulated tones,
the refrigerator gurgle its occasional yawn. I think
of three rooms to which I have been
exposed: Cold. Womb. Poem.
And I know one always
makes me crazy wanting
to slosh around the rim of its belly
and drop back in.
1. *Once after several phone calls, my older sister*

expects me in her Florida, 
the time defined. I’ve driven days 
to see her. Knock. No answer. I knock again. 
This time the door unlatches, a small slice 
of light opens to her kitchen. Layered 
on a groaning vinyl chair, 
she and her new lover wrap 
their tongues, grope exposed skin. *Hello,* I call 
*I’m here,* but they don’t break, 
and I shuffle my bags—*hello* 
again. I wait, the light strip wider, now 
harsh against my night traveled face. 
I edge my cases through, keep my eyes 
low on the baggage before me, 
as their tongues continue to writhe. I wait 
but I don’t want to know the contents 
of their small dark caves.

2. *Once after another of my mother’s vodka soaked days*

I slap her face. *You will acknowledge me* my fingers state, leaving me 
on her cheek in long red lines, 
which blossom like bottlebrush 
in spring. She leans in, with eyes gone 
to cement back in the cold, breathes 
into my nose, stands hard 
against my tirade. I see her close 
herself more, there are no cracks, 
no incremental moves, it’s as fluid 
as the last shove of birth, 
but she does not let it go. She wraps 
herself up like a gift bought 
for someone she does not know.
3. Once after Thanksgiving dinner

during our mother’s drunken rant, I pull
my brother to my chest, he stands
arms loose like an ibis
in drought. Hug me
back! I cry. But he lets
go all the more, as though his skin holds
nothing, not even his blood.
The wings on his shoulders
droop, the tips touch down
to ground, as if he’s building
power for a thrust up, the kind
he’ll never let me see.

4. Once my younger sister calls to tell

me she is pregnant, with her first, but I don’t
let those words come. I jump
on the sound of the ring. I suspect
they’ve been trying, know her voice at hello. I know
why you’re calling, I tell her,
I bet you want a girl, but I’m sure
it’ll be a boy. You sound like it’s a boy. I hear
a muffled explosion at her end,
the pieces of debris gather wild
yet ordered, blocking any exit,
the tunnel close.

5. Once after my mother leaves him, my father

reclines in his brown crushed-velvet chair,
eats fruit cocktail from the rough-edged can
with a long iced tea spoon, the TV flicker loose,
resting upon his groin. You’ve got to see
this he chuckles, a commercial
for soap---faces up close
tell the story: sons who won’t stay
cleansed, yet their stains wash out
with TIDE in a vignette by Madison Avenue.
I watch him smirk, wishing it could be
true, as he remembers the dirt
of his childhood, hand-washed shirts,
hand-slaughtered chickens,
a father’s knuckles scraping cheekbones,
the blood impossible to remove.
At the Hockey Rink

A Japanese family sits one bleacher below us, their pile of coats beside them rising to shape another body. The man turns his head to watch his grandson’s play on the ice. Skate blades gouge its surface as the boy flashes around the curve, hits the boards, and I see the man’s gray temples frame his melted face, the skin swirled like dropped ice cream. I think Hiroshima. He’s the age. His messy neck disappears into his collar, the tie tight to hold flesh in. I imagine him as a baby, a boy growing inside his smeared skin. I know his chest is hairless, mottled, and I go to the trim waist, down to that place where the original wrinkle hangs. That too, I think, yet next to him his daughter’s skin is seamless. Her braid drops down her back, weighty as brocade, a tidy miracle of hair, finger-joined, dimensions hidden then revealed behind her eyes. Her son is padded, helmeted, cupped, teeth and all his delicate skin protected against the injury of sport masked as good natured war. Not the one that happens to you, the one you volunteer for. Of course nothing says the man was burned by fallout. It could have been a match flung wrong.
Inebriated Birds

From a distance yellow warblers
seem swollen leaves
strewn belly up around the tree’s dark trunk.
Beneath the chill
wind’s stroke, their downy feathers tremble,
but they do not feel this. Drunk
on fermented berries, the lot dropped
after the feast, drunk
without the chance to raise their cups,
to make friendships that last
the night, without convivial back slapping
or arguments of politics and teams,
without philippics about mothers-in-law,
and not even one barstool to occupy
while waiting for the tavern door to part
like moist lips, then swing wide
offering a she, perfumed, groomed,
her plumage gleaming
like fish skins in coppery streams,
her slick outline
softened under liquid eyes.

These birds lie tight,
fell by the choice of berries.
When they wake in twilight, cold,
stunned, I think they will shake
their snowy feathers
and remember their bartender.
Distance Between Ears

When I leave the small rice paper lamp
on, the whitish glimmer hums
a low but steady song, like a slow
cricket at the window ledge chirring papery wings
as softly as blinking lashes. Mine now
are in repose but still aware of the light. Sometimes in sleep
my thoughts become moths
crowding to the edge of my skull, I know
they find a way to eavesdrop
by eye, traveling for instance
to a restaurant, behind French doors
paneled by shirred eggshell linen, and dotted
with 19th century children.

The doors open to pasture land, and wind,
invisible maitre d’, strokes tablecloths
with a gentle but perfectionist hand, smoothing wrinkles,
a quick wrist flick
brushing a forgotten crumb. The children,
dark haired daughters, really, barely
tabletop high, wear all white
but black boots, which grip their ankles
like possessed hands
reaching out from under beds. The girls
do not seem to mind
that madmen have intentions on them.
The boot buttons pretend to know
nothing, as the girls squat
on glossy lawns between tables
and play, heads bent down
to something small
below grass stalks, or held secretly under
their pinafores. Yet others float around
as if with blades on ice, their hair tendrils halos
in the silken sun. When a patron comes,
everything goes on as it was,
the seating done, food appears then is gone.
People fade like the turning of a page.

The girls don’t mind I witness
this scene, I in my delicate yet
frothy wings. Who's to say
if they do not dream
me, and where will I go,
to the dreams of others
I suppose, when they wake. I know
my lying body waits
for such fluttering. Poised in sleep
I see my hand reach
as if to catch myself
from falling too far in the chasm
of dream.
Or perhaps simply to turn
off the light.
It’s the Land that Limits Their Movement

---The Yucatán Peninsula

---for Steve Betcher

It’s the middle of off-season when I hit Mexico. Heat rises like something organic from dirt roads, and I feel my rubber sandals melt if I stand too long in one place.

Steve and I go snorkeling between the coral, in ripping tides, with the wreck of the Matanceros in mind, looking for glass beads and oxidized coins. When we dump our buckets on the beach, we spot the enormous roach-like shell of a loggerhead, still trying to move forward, unable to back up, her shell cracked from the July sun.

We round up some fellow scavengers and it becomes an episode of Wild Kingdom with three brawny guys in skimpy suits and me, wetting her down, trying to leverage this she-turtle out of her trap.

We cut our hands on her shell and one surfer guy notices how cut up she is, how ragged her edges. He shakes his head, he doesn’t think she’ll make it, but we have to get her out there to keep riding those waves.

So when we do get her free carrying her to calm water, and she swims in logy circles in the inlet, we point to the sea, wave our arms
like we are drowning,
and yell, as if she could know
our directions.
Can't Back Up

For my thirty-third, I rode Coney Island's *Cyclone* thirty-three times in a row. That old woodie was more imposing than any persistent guy, him I could say fuck you to & not hang on for the ride of my life or see God in jerking flashes in front of me, beckoning, or wear my spleen on my ear or feel my hip bone worn to a fragment, loose inside its leg hold. Nine was the magic number. I got into the groove after eight, those first few runs scrambling up fear with surprise turns and film-like flashes between wood slats that only let me see from the bowels of the beast. After eight, I threw my hands up and reached for whatever was above, the face of madness my new mask. *She's crazy* I heard boys behind me whisper when my story got out, but they breathed envy, wishing they could be grown up for just an afternoon.

It had been afternoon when Tom, Vin, and I drove down to Paragon Park to ride the old woodie there. At sixteen it was my first coaster and I was scared. Not the pre-date shivers, will he put his tongue in my mouth, or fingers in my panties? Is that all he'll do? Not even scared like the time a pimply punk hit on me on Boylston Street. I almost couldn't name or face this monster of a coaster that creaked and groaned and whipped everyone around like an unnatural disaster. That climb, every inch audible, every notch accounted for, then the top pause. We aboard could only see the straight down slope followed by the rip curve and no one knew anything but that minute.
We lived it. Nine times. Park record
belonged to Judy Garland, forty-two
times without getting off. The old guy taking
tickets said he remembered she seemed as if she had already
ridden before she got on.

I got on The Cyclone, my Cyclone, was held
captive by choice. I paid my eighty bucks
to the crooked front man who said he’d give me
a discount for riding so much,
and he pocketed the money without looking up.
One guy running the ride found a wallet, grinned
a smudgy Well, lookey here, as he held up
his find like a trophy, then stuffed it
down his pants, watching me
follow his hand and getting that
I’d-do-you look in the smirk of his eye, fixed
on me. I was alone
but the beast had made me brave, so I didn’t look
away, and this oily guy with black
teeth dropped his head and shuffled off
to seek out someone else’s life.

I was living someone else’s life
after half a day of being tossed
around on that overgrown latticework.
When the Hispanic guy wearing a Ninja Turtle
suit started tailing me,
calling out raunchy requests in broken English
and grammatically poor Spanish,
I told him I didn’t do
turtle so he’d better take his tail
somewhere else and get out of my way because my brains
were doing tumbling runs. I guess
I sounded nuts, he backed off, wobbling
as though he’d been let out of a trap.

I felt as though I’d been let out of a trap
when I stumbled down the loading ramp at Coney. I had
to keep moving, as though I had
no place to go back to, driven
by the one direction
I thought I once knew.