

KRISTALLNACHT:

A COLLECTION

OF POEMS

By

JUDITH ANN ABRAMS

Bachelor of Arts

Wesleyan University

Middletown, Connecticut

1976

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 1981

Thesis
1981
A161k
cop. 2



KRISTALLNACHT:

A COLLECTION

OF POEMS

Thesis Approved:

Gordon Weaver

Thesis Adviser

[Signature]

[Signature]

Norman N. Durham

Dean of Graduate College

PREFACE

The poetry which appears in this collection represents a compilation of work which I have mainly written over the last three or four years. My increased interest in the Jewish heritage and in the history of the holocaust has helped shape the collection, giving it a focus and some thematic unity.

I would like to thank the following organizations for printing or recognizing my poetry: the Cimarron Review for printing my poem "A Hospital Room" in its fiftieth anniversary issue and for reprinting it in the anthology Best of the Cimarron Review; the American Academy of Poets for awarding first prize to "A Hospital Room" in its 1979 competition; the Oklahoma English Quarterly for printing "Girl Before Hunting Season," and "The Mountain"; the Oklahoma Collegiate Poetry Contest for recognizing "Crippled by Minescongo Woods."

I am finally most indebted to a number of people. I have been blessed with a thesis committee whose members have been diversified, challenging, and talented, patient enough to reread drafts on an evening's notice. I'd like to thank Dr. Peter Rollins for his encouragement and direction and for his sound advice that I consider most carefully the effect of the holocaust history on this collection

of poems. My special thanks to Dr. Terry Hummer who has been an inspiring teacher and a gentle but effective critic, giving most generously of his time. His careful attention to my poetry and his talent and skill as an editor and writer have been invaluable to me as I reworked the poems. I'd like to thank Dr. Gordon Weaver, my teacher and advisor for three years, whose guidance, wisdom, and humor have made my stay in Stillwater memorable. It is also with the greatest fondness and respect that I'd like to mention Dr. William Pixton, Dr. William Mills, Dr. David Berkeley, and Dr. Jane-Marie Luecke who have made my graduate work most worthwhile. I'd also like to thank Michael Cecilione for being the finest critic, supporter, and friend. In addition, I'd like to thank my father, who, some may assume, appears frequently in my poetry but who, in fact, lives peacefully, growing strawberries and raising bees in Warwick, New York. I wish to dedicate these poems to my brother Matthew, to my mother, and to Dan Masterson, rare poet and teacher, who introduced me to the world of poetry.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. <u>KRISTALLNACHT</u> : A COLLECTION OF POEMS	18
Minescongo Woods	19
<u>Kristallnacht</u> , 1938, Berlin	20
In Thiells Before I Was Born	22
By Minescongo Stream	23
Girl Before Hunting Season	24
The Mountain	25
In Stones and Soil	26
Crippled by Minescongo Woods	27
Mechanics	29
More Fallacies About Women Poets	30
Baby	31
Retired	32
Behind Arnie's Bar	34
Intruders	36
Escape From Tennessee	37
The Hunt	39
Cicadas	40
A Blues Heart Magazine	41
She's Pretty So It Hurts	42
The Intruder	43
In the China Closet, Far Back	45
A Coyote in Barnsdall	46
The War	47
Wagons	48
For Her Father	49
A Hospital Room	50
<u>Kristallnacht</u>	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	52

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My collection of poetry deals with the individual's survival in a world which is violent. I have called the collection Kristallnacht, the German word for the night of the broken glass. On this night, Nazi instigators destroyed 10,000 homes and synagogues and deported 30,000 Jewish people to concentration camps.¹

In my opening poem "Kristallnacht, 1938, Berlin," which appears in the first section "Minescongo Woods," I describe an incident in Jewish history parallel to Kristallnacht. In 160 B.C., Jews lost their freedom and lives as the holy Temple was destroyed. In the poem, the oil that a Hebrew boy offers to the temple is hidden and escapes destruction, burning eight days in the festival of lights. The survival of the Jewish people in this poem, despite pain and suffering, gives them strength and hope. Human tenderness exists, despite cruelty, the desire for freedom surfaces, despite humiliation.

The human capacity for both joy and cruelty emerges in the collection of my poetry. At times, basic human instincts are positive, as in the poem "In Thiells Before I Was Born": a father expresses both his desire to have children and his

love and respect for the earth--sentiments which are celebrated again and again in the Old Testament. In some of the poems, however, which appear later in this collection, positive impulses are repressed as in the poem "Crippled by Minescongo Woods" in which a father beats his daughter "to keep her home." In the poem "Behind Arnie's Bar," which appears in the section "Mechanics," human instincts surface but with cruel results. A man strikes a woman in self-defense, and a fight ensues, resulting in his death. In "Kristallnacht," which appears in the section "Intruders," passion and violence merge. In this poem, which titles my collection, Nazi footmen, in a kind of Dionysian frenzy, break the glass windows in Jewish homes and temples. Human life loses all dignity, and, as I describe in the poem,

a million human leaves
are raked to graves.

I describe the holocaust, not to reawaken horror for the Nazi campaign, but to evince the potential cruelty in all human beings.

The holocaust has revealed much about this cruelty. As Freud asserts, "cruelty and the sexual instinct are most intimately connected" as "taught by the history of civilization."² The holocaust demonstrated the extent to which instincts can be distorted and destructive impulses unleashed. The lessons of the holocaust are complex. It has exposed the human capacity for violence as well as the individual's capacity for courage in the face of great suffering.

Personal accounts of Nazi persecution, Anne Frank's The Diary of A Young Girl, for example, and documentaries of the holocaust are numerous. The particulars have been recounted again and again by such great writers as Elie Wiesel. Poetry written by children in the Theresienstadt Ghetto are especially affective:

The path is narrow
And a little boy walks along it.

A little boy, a sweet boy,
Like that growing blossom.
When the blossom comes to bloom,
The little boy will be no more.³

The magnitude and intensity of the holocaust crimes have had an immeasurable impact upon subsequent art. Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" is a striking example of a work filled with images of the holocaust: she writes,

Not G-d but a swastika [was]
So black no sky could squeak through.⁴

The poetry in the collection Kristallnacht has been strongly effected by this history. Many of the poems describe small holocausts: the cruelty which results from the distortion or repression of basic human needs and the individual's struggle to survive in a world which can be powerful but destructive. The following discussion of the sections "Minescongo Woods," "Mechanics," and "Intruders" will hopefully elucidate my poetry so that the themes in my work shall emerge.

"Kristallnacht, 1938, Berlin" opens this collection of poetry and contains many of the themes which reappear throughout the manuscript. The poem describes the survival of the Jewish people, and, by extension, all people, in spite of great adversity. Embracing their heritage, the father, mother, and old men continue to light candles, plow the fields, and sing songs at temple. Despite the assertion that Abraham sleeps "to the music of his children dying," the poem's message is hopeful; the poem depicts the love of the father for his wife and son, the old men for the Torah, and the young boy for the Temple. The poem hints at the cruelty and tenderness that can exist side by side. This theme--the potential violence and cruelty in the world and the human potential to love against all odds--surfaces in many of the following poems.

I use various prosodic devices in this first piece. A regular cadence gives the work a steady, resounding beat. The lines have three hard stresses each, except for the last line of each stanza, which has two hard stresses. The large number of feminine endings gives the poem a melodic quality, which sharply contrasts with the final poem of the collection, "Kristallnacht." I use alliteration to heighten the impact of certain phrases: "farmer's fist," the "best branches," and "oil from olive wood." Slant rhyme closely connects certain words: lover, Torah, and Hanukkah. The line break often heightens suspense:

Kiss as lovers
the Torah.

Sometimes, the line break can effect two meanings in a line:

He died in burlap cloth before the temple
fell.

Though the poem does not contain traditional metric or rhyme patterns, it clearly leans heavily on prosodic techniques to achieve its desired effect.

The language and stories in the Old Testament clearly influence the poem. Many of its details and images originate in the Bible, and the meter appears in many Hebrew prayers.⁵ I believe that these influences and allusions strengthen the poem, underscoring an important theme; the close connection between the Jewish people and their past.

While this poem is the only one in the collection which deals directly with Judaism, I believe that it appropriately opens the manuscript and this particular section, "Minescongo Woods." Many of the poems in this section, like "Kristallnacht, 1938, Berlin," which describes the oxen and plowshare, have rural settings; the images, particularly involving woods and trees, symbolize the potential strength of the individual and his concomitant vulnerability. For example, a tree often represents a human being's strength but ultimate mortality as in the line "the best branches are cut down." The poems in this section, like many of Theodore Roethke's poems, "Big Wind," "Root Cellar," and "The Far Field," for example, are rooted in their setting,

specifically a rural setting.⁶ I focus, as Roethke does, on the particular place, its uniqueness, the details of the environment.

The poem "In Thiells Before I Was Born " describes a particular place, Thiells, the chestnut trees, the worms in the black soil, and the father who longs to have children. The spontaneous outbursts of the child who is waiting to be born seems best expressed with irregular line lengths, quick changes in meter, and the sudden appearance of rhyme. The sudden shifts in form support the quick fluctuation in the child's emotions. The poem describes the human spirit unleashed in the joy of creation. Thus, I chose a form which appeared less structured and traditional than a sonnet or ballad. There are, however, a few poems in this section which do work well in traditional forms.

"Girl Before Hunting Season," written as a ballad, gains momentum and speed from the alternating four-three beat lines, the rhythm echoing the excitement and fear of the hunt. The ballad, which traditionally tells a story, suits the dramatic situation well: a girl ventures into the woods for the first time only to find herself in the center of a hunt. She identifies so closely with the deer that she experiences its death as a loss of her own innocence. The last stanza ends the poem where it began, with the girl's entry into the woods. The situation is thus cyclical, as ballads often are: death and pain occur again and again--often in similar patterns--in an individual's life or

in human history.

"In the Stones and Soil" reflects the tremendous influence that nature can have on the psyche, especially a child's psyche. In the first stanza, a young girl "stalks through weeds" and "hides in lilac leaves" as if she were living in a jungle. Discovering her father killing a hen, she, like the persona in the previous poem, identifies with the female animal being killed. In the second stanza, she is quite a bit older, and has her first sexual experience in the environs of the old barn. Now, the forces of nature are no longer frightening. Her own impulses have merged with the impulses of the wailing tomcats.

"Crippled by Minescongo Woods" shares many qualities with "In the Stones and Soil." Alliteration enhances the emotionally charged lines: "the witch woman wailing for her cats"; "the bull breaks free free, runs his pasture." In this poem, the forces of nature stimulate and shape the children's perception of themselves and the world. The animals and the woods embody human impulses. The bull personifies the male energy released in the world as the brother is born. The rats and hornets suggest the potential cruelty of nature, though this cruelty is not at all personal or conscious. The branches that "her father beat her with" typify the repressive forces in the girl's life, which will always keep her outside the gang of boys, and which are partially responsible for the jealousy which she holds for her brother. The poem ends in tragedy: the young girl

falls "to the cracked river bed." Yet it is the brother's love for his sister, despite her cruelty, which carries the poem. Like "Kristallnacht, 1938, Berlin," this poem celebrates the endurance and survival of love against all odds.

This poem ends the section "Minescongo Woods," which deals predominately with nature, birth, and growth. The second section, called "Mechanics," is a collection of poems that I wrote primarily while I was working in a garage. Like the small rural town in Thiells, whose rural setting and specific locality mirrored so much of human nature and elicited good material for poetry, so the mechanic's shop and the people around it seem to offer fruitful subjects for poems. James Dickey, who, like Roethke, is a master at describing a place and its particulars, depicts a dump in his poem "Cherrylog Road" where the details of the car parts become almost as essential as the dramatic development: he describes a blue chevrolet that releases "the rust from its other color."⁷ In this second section, "Mechanics," the milieu of the garage and the specific details are essential to the poems.

I chose to write many of the poems in this section in non-traditional prosody. The choice to write in 'free verse' stems from my belief that the subjects of these poems are best suited for this less traditional form. Many of my poems start as traditional poetry and then break from the confines of the structure. The ambiance, the local color, and the voice seem best expressed in 'free verse.'

The first poem in this section, although it is not a narrative, does rely heavily on the choice of details and particulars rather than on prosodic techniques to achieve its effect. The poem parodies the unrealistic vision that some people hold of poets, particularly women poets. James Dickey calls women poets "so many scab-pickers," accusing them of concentrating "on their little hang-ups."⁸ Roethke asserts that they lack "a sense of humor," embroider "trivial themes; ...caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times and so on."⁹ The persona in my poem holds a similar view toward women poets, insisting that women poets

can't wear red
or pose in front of mirrors.

The persona continues to categorize and list many of the stereotypic qualities traditionally attributed to women poets. The poem relies heavily on surprising line breaks and choice particulars for its impact. The discrepancy between the persona's view of women poets and this author's view of women poets creates some irony and humor, though this attempt at humor may well be lost on the reader.

The rest of the poems in this section also rely heavily on the recalling of significant particulars, the re-creation of colloquial speech patterns, and the focusing on an important dramatic moment. The poems in "Mechanics" all capture a significant event and bring it quickly to its climax. I do not embellish the moment with rhymes, allusions, or metaphors. I simply attempt to use the dramatic situation

to reveal human nature.

A good poem focuses on a dramatic moment, to reveal its significance as fully as possible. Of course, as James Dickey so aptly points out, the importance of an event can be overdramatized. He says about himself and other poets that "we've made it so that we can't peel an apple without self-consciousness."¹⁰ However, a poet, without being too analytical, can reveal an object in a new light or find significance in a seemingly unimportant object or event; poetry captures a moment or a series of selected moments. Anne Sexton writes, "I like to capture an instant. A picture is a one-second thing--it's a fragile moment in time. I try to do it with words."¹¹ Focusing on a particular character, as I do in "Baby," or on a particular event, as I do in "Retired," I attempt to render such characters or incidents memorably.

Robert Frost, in his poem "The Death of the Hired Man," takes a seemingly insignificant event, the return of a farmhand, and makes it memorable. My mother read me Frost's poem when I was very young, and I did not remember the poem when I wrote "Retired." However, on reexamining the poems, I find some similarities. In "Retired," I write,

And Harry was retired:
 "After all those years it feels good,
 I guess.
 First you watch the young guys come.
 They think they know it all after you teach 'em
 a trick or two you learned along the way.

Frost writes in his poem "The Death of the Hired Man,"

Well those days trouble Silas like a dream.
 You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
 Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.
 After so many years he still keeps finding¹²
 Good arguments he sees he might have used.

Frost's choice of subject, his description of the farm, and his use of dialogue influenced many of the poems in this section "Mechanics." The details of the mechanic's shop, the colloquial language, and the dramatic situations that I use in this section attempt to achieve what Frost achieves so well in his narrative poetry: the use of simple language and story line to render events memorably.

The last section, "Intruders," is the longest and probably the most important section of my thesis. Combining the prosodic techniques that I used in the first section with the narrative techniques in the second section, I draw upon dramatic situations and describe them lyrically, using rhyme, meter, and alliteration.

While the poems in this section are often dramatic--involving more than one character--the voice is less colloquial than the voice in so many of the poems in "Mechanics." In "Intruders," the narrative persona often describes a situation lyrically, using metaphors, similies, and other poetic devices. In a poem, such as "Retired," the persona speaks in the same language as the men in the shop; however, in the poems in the section "Intruders," the persona describes the dramatic situation, using poetic language: in "The Hunt," for example, the persona describes the girl's hair, "spread like a scarf." Thus poetic language as well

as prosodic devices enhance the dramatic situation.

"The Hunt" has a setting similar to many of the poems in the first section, "Minescongo Woods." However, the poem uses a strong narrative along with metaphors and prosodic devices to achieve the desired effect. I describe the husband's touch as "cold as the lip of the swamp." I use alliteration as well: "back curved to cold." I end every line with a hard beat, wanting to emphasize the singleness of her purpose.

The poem "She's Pretty So It Hurts" is also a narrative describing a dramatic situation. The persona renders the details with precision, but without feeling. Of course, the choice of details, the iambic beat, and the shortening line lengths increase the dramatic impact of the poem. Here, I rely on the particulars and on the characters to render the event significant.

Many of the poems in this section center around a female character. In my work, I focus on a variety of female characters. I particularly admire Anne Sexton's various female personae and Sexton's ability to write with great empathy and tenderness about women whose plights, visions, and desires differ greatly from each other. Anne Sexton's "Her Kind" is not only a finely structured poem, but a beautiful demonstration of her ability to create stirring female characters:

I have gone out, a possessed witch
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve fingered, out of mind.

A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.¹³

As a woman and a writer, I aspire to bring the sensitivity to my work that Sexton brings to her poetry.

In this section "Intruders," more than in the other two sections, I work with images: metaphors and similies, in particular. A strong central image reverberates, increasing the impact of the whole poem. I am particularly moved by William Jay Smith's use of central images in his poetry. He writes in "The Massacre of the Innocents,"

Not until I can no longer climb,
Until my life becomes the tallest tree,
And every limb of it a limb of shame,
Shall I look out in time, in time to see.¹⁴

Not long after reading Smith's poem, I wrote "A Hospital Room," in which I compare my mother's body to a sweater:

They folded her body like a sweater,
arms draped to her waist,
so they could fit her in that drawer.

I do not believe that I could have written my poem without first being so strongly affected by Smith's fine poem.

"Kristallnacht," the final poem in the collection, contains many of the images found throughout the collection: the snake, trees, the soil, fruit, and father-strength. However, the poem depicts an evil force, which, at least for a time, can destroy all life and overcome the strength of tradition and faith. The snake personifies this evil element in the poem as the Nazis destroy the Jewish shops and homes.

The Nazis' desire for power and control becomes cruel and sexual in nature as they ravage the city. Berlin is depicted as a bride, welcoming this savage groom. The image of the cruelty of the soldiers in this poem sharply contrasts the image in "Kristallnacht, 1938, Berlin," in which the old men welcome the Sabbath (often depicted as a bride in Hebrew prayers) and hold her "in ram hugs." I end the collection with "Kristallnacht," rather than with an uplifting piece, because I believe that only through the recognition of man's capacity for cruelty and man's concomitant vulnerability can life's hopes and joys be appreciated and understood.

The poems in the three sections, "Minescongo Woods," "Mechanics," and "Intruders" describe a broad range of human experience: joy and courage as well as suffering and repression. The first section, "Minescongo Woods," describes the joy in birth, fertility, and man's close relationship with nature. In "Mechanics," characters are joyful, at times, but removed from the natural world; they have become somewhat alienated from the people around them and detached from their feelings. In "Intruders," the characters have become further isolated, experiencing life as an outsider and yearning for some kind of relief and acceptance. Their actions are often futile, isolating them further or causing them or others pain and suffering. In the final poems, in this section, the world seems sterile and bare. In "A Hospital Room," death is handled clinically, and ~~grief is ironed from the~~ "washed linen," the sheets "hospital cornered," leaving the persona

angry and alone. The last poem, "Kristallnacht," describes a society which is so repressive and inhumane that people are swept like leaves to graves. Its dark message, in the depiction of the holocaust, brings the reader back to the first poem, "Kristallnacht, 1938, Berlin," which describes a people able to survive after generations of holocausts and who has emerged, strengthened, capable of great joy. However, while the Jewish people in this poem are capable of embracing their children and their tradition, they are constantly aware of their own vulnerability and the cruel lessons of history.

While many of the settings in the poems in this collection are familiar to me, I have always tried to push the poems beyond my own experience. While I often use the first person persona, I have always sought to create a persona who would exist outside the limits of my own personality. The details that I have included may seem unnecessarily harsh or violent; however, I have tried to depict, as I see it, the world as it is.

NOTES

¹ Hans Bernd Gisevius, To the Bitter End, tr. by Richard and Clara Winston (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947), qqv.

² Sigmund Freud, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, tr. and ed. by A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, Inc., 1938), p. 570.

³ The Holocaust, (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem:W. Turnowsky & Son Ltd, 1975), p. 39.

⁴ A. Poulin, Jr., ed., Contemporary American Poetry, 1st ed. 1971; rpt. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), p. 376.

⁵ Genesis, XXV: 9.

⁶ Theodore Roethke, in The Norton Anthology of Poetry, revised, ed. Alexander W. Allison et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1975), pp. 1131, 1132, 1137.

⁷ James Dickey, James Dickey Poems 1957-1967, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 134.

⁸ James Dickey, "Craft Interview with James Dickey," The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly, ed. William Packard (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1974), p. 147.

⁹ Theodore Roethke, "The Poetry of Louise Bogan," in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, hereafter referred to as On the Poet and His Craft, ed. Ralph

J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1965), p. 147.

¹⁰ James Dickey, "Craft Interview with James Dickey," The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from The New York Quarterly, p. 145. See note 8.

¹¹ Anne Sexton, "Craft Interview with Anne Sexton," The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from The New York Quarterly, p. 20. See note 8.

¹² Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man," in Complete Poems of Robert Frost 1949 (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1949), p. 49.

¹³ Contemporary American Poetry, p. 417. See note 4.

¹⁴ William J. Smith, "The Massacre of the Innocents," Contemporary Poetry in America, ed. Miller Williams (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 49.

CHAPTER II

KRISTALLNACHT: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

MINESCONGO WOODS

Kristallnacht, 1938, Berlin

Abraham sleeps in the fields of Ephron
to the music of his children dying.
My father lies down on the grave
of his father. His arms reach to
my mother bending
into Hanukkah light.

As the plowshare cuts down the field,
the ox sways, my father stoops
to the load of his life.
With a farmer's fist, he raises me;
in love, he cries, knowing
the best branches are cut down.
My father is hard and soft
as bending light. His strength,
anger like twisted
Challah, rises.

The men catch hold the Sabbath
in ram hugs, kiss as lovers
the Torah, their voices mandolins
singing of Hanukkah:
a Hebrew boy raised a tree,
cut down a branch
to wring oil from olive wood.
He died in burlap cloth before the Temple
fell, but his oil still burns eight days
for the feast of light.

In Thiells, Before I Was Born

I hear yellow bees, smell orchards,
feel my father's strength like wind.
He plows black earth,
turning worms over and over;
he cups one in his palm
like a bird, saying,
"This creature moves the earth."

And my father kissed my mother,
saying, "Give me children,
children." I laugh
running where chestnut trees
bear fruit
and say, "Father,
I am here; I am here."
And he says, "Come":
I come as the earth comes, black and good.

By Minescongo Stream

The rain, silver petals, wash over me,
press, footsteps,
calling me to mud matted grass.
We held our hands to rain, once,
infants,
curling and uncurling
our fingers to water,
hearing storms,
hoarse, against the lost afternoon.
My body cursed softly as Eve's,
wanting to run with boys,
wild horses huddling in stubble;
I feel the fever of spiders,
the bear's joy for the stream.
Even now, the rain wakes me
to water:
I am born.

Girl Before Hunting Season

We heard the yelping of a hound
and pressed on through the wood.
We saw a flash, the hunter's red
two throws from where we stood.

The hunter drew and aimed his gun;
four bullets grazed the trees.
I watched the doe crash through the crest
and blaze a path toward me.

The doe fell once beyond the knoll;
her eyes were gray with fear,
and I, the youngest of my friends,
cried for the snow-marked deer.

The hunter tensed and aimed again,
this time to hit his mark,
but the only shell that he shot true
was rung straight through my heart.

It was on a wintry day in March
with the snow just feathery
that my friends and I had found a trail
and followed quietly.

The Mountain

After our white-washed hotel before dawn,
you stop and take a picture in the twilight;
the Rockies hold you there; you hear the stone
as the mountain's face turns pink in eastern light
waiting for the rising of the sun.

The mountain has its music and its rites
in the dancing of the flowers and the goat,
in love with light, the mark of fire in its throat.

In Stones and Soil

I stalk through weeds to the wooden coop
and hide among the lilac leaves,
watch my father kill a hen
and slice its womb to find a blue yolk.
I run away through brambled vines,
squat naked in the circle of stones
my father has set for me by the woods.

I slip away to the red barn,
lie down on strips of bark
with tomcats wailing, field mice
running through potato sacks.
In the smell of rotting apples,
I lie down in
the sawdust with the neighbor's
son,
once after dark.

Crippled by Minescongo Woods

The full moon night her brother's born,
the bull breaks free, runs his pasture.
She watches the fireflies spark
in the wheat beyond the house, hears
the witch woman wailing for her cats.

Through black-eyed Susies,
she walks, looks for him where the gang
fights with pointed sticks,
plays King of the Mountain.
She chains her brother
to the shed. He crouches,
hornets circling nests,
rats running through Mason jars.
She listens to him cry, clutching,
his muslin doll,
arms and legs pulled out,
red seam running through her.

On her cot by the fertilizer sacks,
she cries; after their Papa's gone to bed,
he steals to her, and they run out in the yard,
scattering hens.

Under the moon, she lets him push carrots
in the ground for the horses
their Papa buried in the earth.

The gang tightropes Minescongo Falls:
her turn, she clenches hair between her teeth,
prays for the quiet between her thighs
that never comes.

As the wintergreens hold their leaves,
he holds his love for her.

The trunks throw shadows,
breaking her
like the branches her father beat her with
to keep her home.

A twig snaps,
twirling through the air
to the cracked river bed.

She steps, frayed chord
too slim
for all she was.

MECHANICS

More Fallacies About Women Poets

(for Claire)

Women poets can't be stacked,
wear red,
pose in front of mirrors,
or drive sixty-six
Darts with dangling
mufflers. At diners,
alfalfa sprouts on spinach, tossed,
instead of scrambled eggs or chocolate malts.

Women poets are nearsighted,
hate Burt Reynolds,
battered popcorn,
always get poison ivy or tire on hikes.

They drink carrot juice on the rocks
or goat's milk, never dance the most
at parties, read baby-stained scripts
while a husband washes dishes upstate.
They bake loaves of banana bread for
a lover who's gaunt.

They fly the ghosts in the closet,
sing post-virginity blues,
invite death's rattler
as if he's come for somebody else.

Baby

Stalling between stations
to warm his hands by the fire
in a long gray coat
for a Russian winter,
he glances over at her:
"Knew you were a girl first time
I saw you, even bundled up as you are."

His van is red,
and when he jumps out with the water pumps
and engine heads, the men gather,
put their arms around him;
their laughter lifts.
He leaves with them, slapping the truck,
helping him on his way,
he never looking back.

He parks with her
behind the Laundromat,
kisses, eyes tough,
like he's playing craps.
Then he's soft like when he loses big.
"It only happens once like in the books
Baby.
You'd better stay with me."

Retired

When Harry came down to the garage
we were working hard.

Even I had to shake hands.

"My good ole buddy," my boss explained,
"from when I worked at Avon."

So I kept tuning like I wasn't listening,
and they kept reminiscing.

Only all they could remember was Sam,
and he was the worst son of a tramp,
and stupid, and their boss,
but that's the way it always is,
people getting jobs for brown-nosing,
but they had a hell of a time.

And Harry was retired:

"After all those years it feels good,
I guess.

First you watch the young guys come.

They think they know it all after you teach 'em
a trick or two you learned along the way.

So it's almost all right when you finally go.

They give you a party and a watch."

My boss is listening with half an ear, waiting,
then he asks about his buddy Jerry,
and Jerry is the real reason
my boss shook hands with Harry at all.
He's waiting to ask 'cause he hadn't heard.
It was he and Jerry who made the computer printout
of the Playboy Bunny.
It was with Jerry that he finally quit.
Only Harry looks quiet when my boss asks,
says, "We were all wondering why you weren't
at his wife's funeral."
Only my boss hadn't known,
and I see him turn white;
for once, he's not my boss;
I see him turn angry, and
he walks inside himself
so Harry can't see.
Only I can see
because we tune together everyday.
He feels sick even when he smiles and
shakes Harry's hand goodbye,
only he doesn't see how lonely Harry is
retired.

Behind Arnie's Bar

He had never seen the girl before.
She starts hitting him out of nowhere,
everyone at Arnie's calling him
to do something, but he just sits there.

She's stinking drunk,
hitting him,
blabbering on about her father,
screaming, "My father hit me,
hit me."

He doesn't know what to do
when a woman hits you,
tries explaining he's not her father,
tries to run away,
knocks down the jar of jerky,
backs up into pinball light.

Then he slaps the girl,
doesn't mean to hurt her;
she falls through wooden stools.
Pinball lights flash red then white.

One by one, he sees her brothers leaving,
knows they'll be waiting.

He bottoms his last mug,
takes his keys, leaves the back way
where the old Budweiser clock
has stopped.

He leaves alone,
knowing there'll be four,
five, six, and an iron pipe
coming down his back.

The fear is everywhere:
in the brother's eyes
before the pipe comes down;
the fear rests before that first blow.

The pipe hovers
because they really couldn't kill him
quite. But then they do.

The only the place the fear isn't
is in his eyes.

INTRUDERS

Escape From Tennessee.

Just off the Greyhound, she spends her last
two dollars on a compact, cup of soup.
Lingering over someone's magazine,
she prays, saved
from the bus trip, eyes wandering
to the truckers at the pump.

Loy spits, grinning,
hadn't expected something sitting there
so young.

He nods, takes off the white dress,
almost feels the down of her thighs,
pink heels from bare feet
as she sits knees tight
in the gown her mother made her
for her wedding night.

They call her Marna Sue,
from where she's from,
says, husband lying back home
playing harmonica, letting ducks
and kids run flat foot and wild,
so she hoists herself
into the Globe Union truck
while Loy, at the wheel, chews Skoal and drinks Coors.

He takes her over the dry flat lands of Kansas,
shows her the place on eighty-one
where he gets free pigs feet.

As she sips Coca Cola, he buys her
a Mother Mary souvenir; she hangs it
from the visor in the truck.

At a rest stop, waking from dreams
of her youngest crying at the sink,
she powders her cheeks,
where Loy bruised her;
he snores, rifle tossed behind the seat,
cap pulled low. She watches fireflies
spark like candles that flickered
once in the sickroom where her mother lay
in a patchwork kimona. Her mother'd taught her
to can berries, smell sickness,
hate lies and church preaching,
and love men.

When Loy takes her,
her torn dress flung
behind the seat like a lost flag, her pink heels
cross
at the wheel as if they prayed
to her mother
hanging there.

The Hunt

She wades through white pools of light,
gliding through hay,
ducking the old branches on the path to the beach.
At the bank in the darkness, she sheds her robe,
hair and arms reflecting the moon
as she swims for the farthest shore;
there, back curved to cold stone,
hair spread like a scarf,
she lies far from the gray house,
far from the husband who lies alone,
one foot shaking in sleep,
his touch as cold
as the lip of the swamp.
She fights him
as she fought her step-father off,
again and again in her mother's house.
She looks back at the shore from where she's come,
the lioness glancing
at her hunters once,
before disappearing into the woods.

Cicadas

Love sits at the window
waiting as death
waits, following me through
trees as I drive,
stalking the night.
Love's the sound of the locusts
drawing ever nearer,
your name like cicadas
calling,
a rushing rustling sound.

A Blues Heart Magazine

She's half nude, weaving,
eating farmer cheese and plums,
her hair pinned up in curls and combs,
her panties, satin pink and cold.

Three flights down in my apartment,
I eat my mustard thick on rye,
the last gray hell of sausage;
crush the crust like a cigarette;
inspect a mole.

The razor makes the blood run
down my cheek.

Behind the thicket, I duck low,
peering through the curtains.

She tires, turns down the album, smells
the poppies, snaps off a bud.

She does not know me, the dark haired
stranger from her blues heart magazine,
bursting from her blinds,

I kill the Greta Garbo
on T.V.,

the backstrap loom she's weaving on;

I paint her with her makeup kit.

I take off,

the bra and flowers strewn on the ground,
with the night.

She's Pretty So It Hurts

The steps don't feel as long or dark
when he takes them hands and knees.
She's in her room in a corner
cradling the doll her father sent
her seventh birthday.

She wonders if he's home alone
this man who's brown and drunk,
who's living with her mother
and got her sister pregnant.

He strips the blue-white jumpsuit to her knees.
She smells it all:
the raw, stale yellow of his teeth,
the bar he's left her mother in,
the sweat, the coarseness of his skin,
the mole,
the soft and wet.

The Intruder

Elizabeth and I come home; the pane
and latch of our bay window have been smashed.
Our bedroom door's ajar. Like two great cats,
we pause, as at the opening of a cave,
to scent the spray of my cologne, the musk
of tumbled quilts, the moth with wings that brush
against the wall, the rustling of a thief.

Alone, I search for him; he's in the bath,
naked, shaving cream billowing his groin.
I grab him, squeeze him, shaving cream and all.
He's hurt, but flashing my son's knife, he throws
me up against the wall. He quiets, takes
to cleaning his gray nails with emory boards
and knife, watching me so I don't move.
I pray my wife has called the cops. He asks
me if I think he's nuts. I say, "We're all
crazy" or some nonsense. He tried to screw
the girl across the street, but she scared him
off, he tells me. Then he lathers up
his face, like an artist at easel, shaving
from every angle, until the cops arrive.

I go downstairs first. There are six police
stiff like mannequins, and a doberman.
The Lieutenant orders him to come out.
He puts on my running suit and comes down,
compliments the design of the house,
whispers that they'll throw him
in the hole; then he goes away, quietly,
a hero captured.

In the China Closet, Far Back

I watch you:

waiting for a lover,

gracious with day old flowers,

your kiss, simple as rain;

your simplest gestures, I remember:

a teacup like a wren,

balanced in your palm,

your hand stretching for a lemon.

You lie in bed, sick, deserted;

your illness wracks you

as fiercely as the men

you've carried. I kneel by you

in love fiercer than the horrors

I can gather.

Death's a watercolor;

I bury you with forks and knives.

A Coyote in Barnsdall

In the summer of the drought,
they lose a hundred acres to the fire.
They watch the land go dry, their son awry.

The ham is hot,
the bottled cider passes hand to hand,
but when their son
is done, he slips up to his room
and takes his rifle down,
swears he'll kill the girl
he loves behind old Cheeh Cheeh's bar.

He drives the pickup round the yard,
and when they come out after him,
he pulls them off across the grass,
wet leaves beneath his wheel.

He rides off, howling
like a coyote,
his fury shut outside.
Seven miles from the nearest house,
by a stone barn,
he lies down in the river bed
and cradles the rifle to his heart.

The War

He kisses the pool of her back
where her tan breaks the white of the sheets.
She turns from him,
clutching,
sticking with sweat,
the clock ticking,
beating
against her eyelids,
heavy with sleep
and no sleep.

He runs the inlets of her sides,
wanting to hold her,
to touch the soft of her skin.
She recoils, eyes blazing,
to scratch that leopard tatoo.

Falling through blackness,
his life pouring out from him,
she reaches to hold him
across miles of ocean
as he crouches in jungle.
She screams against herself
as he waits for the shot
she can't hear.

Wagons

(for Florence)

As close as moon shines, stars
fall; red rivers string tears.
Fingers fall from fog rising as
children dance to dawn, for
sun spins orange leaves to hungry soil.
Owls hide in the eaves, holding night's pin
in yellow eyes.
But you must leave on night's
last red shadow,
and the barn door is shading from gray
to morning
while wagons are calling.

For Her Father

For her father whom she loves,
who beats her, leaving welts
like drums swelling to him.
She has lifted her hands,
begging forgiveness
for an overturned jar,
warding off that snake
of leather with her blue-black arms,
believing that this time she can turn
his heart;
as he barrels up the stairs,
she cowers by her bed,
drunk on the power of his arms.

A Hospital Room

It was the made bed that I came to hate in a room
colder than the parlor where they laid her coffin,
a sealed coffin too short for that tall willowy woman.

They folded her body like a sweater,
her arms draped to her waist
so they could fit her in that drawer.
Like the sweater I take out in November,
I have taken her a thousand times
out of that coffin, out of that grave in Warwick,
and wrapped myself in the wool of my mother.
But the seasons passing make it thin,
and I shiver alone at twenty-three
as I did that day in the hospital room
when I'd come to take her woven quilt
and found the made bed, the linen washed,
hospital cornered,
and pressed free of the creases of her death.

Kristallnacht

On Kristallnacht,
before the festival of lights,
a snake curls,
twists round the tree
where fruit is sweet as death.
The serpent kisses with his mouth
the tired German soil:
it jumps to light; not a single temple
stands unburned. Windows shatter
in my father's life,
glistening in the Gestapo's
searchlight.
Berlin, a bride,
glows in her crystal
wedding night.
Death glistens
in the moon,
and a million human leaves
are raked to graves.
I learn how weak
is father strength.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dickey, James. James Dickey Poems 1957-1967. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967.
- Freud, Sigmund. The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, tr. and ed. by A. A. Brill. New York: Random House, Inc., 1938.
- Frost, Robert. Complete Poems of Robert Frost 1949. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1949.
- Heyen, William., ed. American Poets in 1976. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1976.
- The Holocaust Yad Vashem, Jerusalem: W. turnowsky & Son Ltd, 1975.
- Liebman, Laurence. Unassigned Frequencies: American Poetry in Review, 1964-77. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977.
- Plato. Ion in Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Plato. The Republic, IX, in Collected Dialogues of Plato.
- Poulin, A., Jr., ed. Contemporary American Poetry 1st ed. 1971; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980.
- Roethke, Theodore. On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke. Ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965.

Turner, Alberta T. ed. Fifty Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process. New York: Longman, Inc., 1977.

Williams, Miller., ed. Contemporary Poetry in America.
New York: Random House, 1973.

2
VITA

Judith Ann Abrams

Candidate for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Thesis: KRISTALLNACHT: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Thiells, New York, March 18, 1955, the daughter of David and Bernice Abrams.

Educational Data: Graduated from Ramapo Senior High School in Spring Valley, New York, in June, 1972; received Regents Scholarship; graduated from Wesleyan University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Psychology in June, 1976, cum laude; completed the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts from Oklahoma State University in May, 1981.

Professional Data: Graduate teaching assistant, Department of English, Oklahoma State University, 1978-1980; Writing Lab instructor, fall and spring of 1980, Department of English, Oklahoma State University, Assistant Head Resident, Oklahoma State University, 1981.

Professional Organizations: Associated Writing Program, Society for Technical Communications, American Academy of Poets, Modern Language Association.

Awards and Honors: Wesleyan University Scholarship, French Intensive Language Program Scholarship, First prize in the American Academy of Poets, 1979, competition, Harry E. Campbell Scholarship, honorary mention in the Oklahoma Collegiate Poetry Contest, honorable mention in the American Academy of Poet, 1981, and first prize in the May Woods essay contest, 1981.