

DOMESTIC ARTS

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Introduction

*whatever order may be apparent in the world
is largely a projection of the human mind--Joseph Conte*

Trains. My earliest memories are filled with trains, their proximity to my daily life. Each morning, a train passed our house on its trip north, and I stood waving; in the evening, it returned on its south bound journey, and again I waved to the outline of heads glimpsed through the lighted windows. Never imagining that it was more than one train, I believed that if it would stop at our front door, I could climb aboard and travel to a magical place I only knew as north and return safely home before bedtime. So strong was my desire to merge myself with the stories I heard unfolding in the roar of metal traveling along metal that I would leave the breakfast table or hop out of the bathtub should the train be passing. If, as Richard Hugo claims, “your obsessions lead you to your vocabulary. Your way of writing locates, even creates, your inner life” (15), then my life-long obsessions to connect and to become, my need to make sense out of a/my chaotic world, has created these poems.

These poems contain elements of ritual--the physical ritual of play, the spiritual ritual of the quest; they are in a sense intended to be ritual, are intended to speak to our need to connect through ritual. Yet, they also contain my beliefs that we do not live only here and now: we have lives in different times and in different dimensions. It is often a memory or a glimpse into another reality or a present event that reminds the participants of these poems what they have forgotten of themselves, or brings to light for the first time the participants' other possibilities. I cannot say that my perspectives on reality and time

belong only to my gender; I can say, however, my gender does shape my world view, thus my poetry. In these poems, the play between the self in its various incarnations--young girl, daughter, lover, wife, mother--as it explores time and memory appears almost small and static against the backdrop of geographic movements, amid images of fertile fields and alien landscapes. Yet this smallness also contains something of the heart's largesse as it moves from hope to understanding, from despair to acceptance, sometimes even finding joy, as it seeks out the spirit's unbreakable connections. Although each incarnation takes a different stance toward the world in which she finds herself, each in her own way "becomes a pivot point in time," becomes a connection between past, present, and future possibilities. In "Lullaby," the new mother finds an ever-shifting, timeless landscape in her simple act of "Reaching down to lift" her infant, as she watches her "hands disappear/fingers curve around/into this time and space" that mother and child "occupy simultaneously." In the mother's lullaby we find amazement and wonder tinged with sadness as she realizes their "histories write themselves/in the movement of continents/drifting apart as what's left/of [her child's] first day" begins to blur into time and memory. Once I concede that we construct our own narratives, that everyone to some degree constructs her own reality, I also must concede that we are inevitably a part of other narratives, other mythologies that also define us. "On the Eve of Wisdom" concerns itself with how women are constructed, often erroneously, by a larger, self-serving, male-generated narrative. Growing out of my disbelief/distrust of the Eve myth, wanting to assert my own belief that Eve was actually very hairy and ape-like, yet still beautiful and worthy of notice, I created a speaker who questions what we take on faith, a

speaker who knows that we create ourselves when we finally learn to say “*I, me, mine*” and find the strength to walk away. Since this poem, like others in the collection, is concerned with how we gain knowledge, its unfolding on the page tries to capture this often erratic process. The poem’s irregular lineation--some thoughts stretch out, other thoughts seemingly run into or tumble over each other in shorter lines--attempts to capture the “[r]hythmic sound [that] has the ability to imitate the forms of physical behavior as well as express the highly complex, continually shifting nature of human emotion” (Gross and McDowell 9).

Although our age is “more inclined to disbelieve the fictions of [the universe’s] coherence” (Conte 17), allowing us to define our own realities, create our own voices, and locate ourselves in time, it also reminds us that perception is slippery at best. What is being perceived and spoken, both the world and the poem, is phenomena. Often this phenomenon is filtered through chaos--through the commotion of a sometimes incoherent, extremely noisy, but mystifyingly beautiful universe. By taking up our positions on the front porch and letting the sounds of human emotion and behavior rush over us, sweep us up in the wake, we eventually, for better or worse, reach an understanding with this chaos and find ways to express our perceptions. Over the years, my mealtime interruptions and wet footprints tracked through the house as the trains approached became part of my family’s narrative, so much a part that now I often question where their stories end and my memories begin. Although time, distance, and repetition have blurred these lines of authorship, I find myself inevitably returning to that image of a young girl standing witness. It is her obsessive desires to connect and to become that create these poems’ reciprocal impulses toward lyric and narrative, impulses

that attempt--at least on some private, personal level--to order the chaos of my world, while at the same time they struggle to locate me within the larger narratives that I am inevitably a part of. And in that way, they reflect my ever-changing philosophy.

... the most effectual forms are those that most actively engage and clearly interpret phenomena, those that foresee implications rather than reflect them in an unmediated way, those that present the world as it has become--even if we are ourselves not fully aware of the changes--Joseph Conte

This collection of poetry, like my earlier memories of trains, renders particular occasions by insisting on both “an interior (emotional progression) and an exterior (plot) narrative structure,” from the vantage point of what Tess Gallagher labels the narrative-lyric hybrid of contemporary poetry (74). In her discussion of contemporary poetic forms, Gallagher notes that traditionally “lyric has been associated with the cry, the exclamation, the unanswerable voicing of states of being.” In contrast to these attempts to name or locate or express the self, the narrative is “devoted to rendering actual or imagined happenings in such a way that we are moved by our involvement with the characters to the point that we wholly enter the realm of story” (72). Looking back and trying to understand the forces at work behind my memories, I still feel the urgency surrounding my attempts to be a part of the train’s repeating journey. Perhaps, as Gallagher explains, I was merely following a child’s impulse toward the sense of “again-ness”--the “boundaries” or the “fixed way” of telling--inherent in narrative structure (68); I was being drawn toward a “need to ‘hear it old’” (69). In my memories, trains derived their narrative structure in part from movement; and movement on such a grand scale,

juxtaposed against my static smallness, held mystical powers. These powers were strong enough to interrupt our daily life, to elicit from me an as yet unintelligible pronouncement of self, thus adding an interior, lyric quality to the experience.

In examining the characteristics and expectations of traditional lyric poems, Jonathan Holden states that such poems “consist of predominantly subverbal feelings.” As such they rely “upon imagery to evoke the unspoken,” to elicit “tone and emotion.” Likewise, the lyric supposes a particular “subject matter” and “a generic persona,” and “will often be in the present tense . . . with the speaker talking or musing to himself or herself” (23). Using this criterion to examine a poem such as “Writing at Sunrise,” the lyric qualities are clearly evident. The poem’s speaker, who is identified only as a writer, is caught in the solitary act of witnessing the repetition of one more morning’s slow birth:

I feel this town’s deepening breath at the back of my neck.
It is slow to wake like planets riding the horizon. There is
no ceremony behind the inevitable pulling away of bodies
forced awake; their movements simply unravel into a tide
of slow burning lights.

In the speaker’s musings, the loneliness of disconnection, the sadness that often attends being human takes its shape--not only from the inevitable pulling away taking place inside, but also from the ever expanding yet contracting outside world: the passing train whistle; the retreating stray animals; the emerging trees that moments before “stood invisible, flat/against a shapeless dark”; the doves that “call back/and forth” echoing that all too human “need to lie down/close to another body.” But those “desires” that need yet refuse naming can only find expression in the image of a silent writer/speaker who

can only wait

for the words that will name these desires like the children
who come to the corner to wait for their buses, sleepy still,
anxious under the yellow glow of streetlights late to go out.

The presence of the speaker, the “I” who muses and grapples for understanding in “Writing at Sunrise” and similar poems such as “Behind the Storm’s Eye” and “Straight Talkin,” is as important to the lyric quality as the images used to “evoke the unspoken.” Within these lyrics, the spoken I evokes more immediacy, even if the feeling or experience is being recalled from a distance that allows the speaker some sense of emotional detachment. The I of “Behind the Storm’s Eye,” for example, possesses a calm that only time could supply, yet the speaker’s calmness brings the storm’s violence, the “desires/so long unacknowledged” into clearer, immediate focus. At the same time it creates immediacy, the I’s presence allows for less exposition without creating ambiguity for the reader. Consider, for example, that what assumes importance in “Straight Talkin” is not the absurdity of the occasion, which the speaker “lying in bed” listening to “piss/splash against the edge/of [her] house” never elaborates on, but the overheard conversation and how she internalizes the cowboys’ ideas, blends their ruminations with her own thoughts of love as “sacrifice,” as “the inconvenience/of being needed that much.”

Holden asserts that good poetry “depends . . . upon the capacity of its author to pay good attention to the world, to learn from it, to take an interest in it, to be at times surprised by it, and to observe it accurately.” This close attention reveals itself in part by the choices the author makes, including “choices of language” and “choices of value,

choices between what or what not to notice and bring to attention” (176). If those passing trains gave me a voice, taught me to create lyric possibilities with myself as the speaker, the trains’ interruptions into our lives also taught me that sometimes observation can reveal a different truth of an occasion. By their observations and retellings, my family participated in the unfolding of my imagination, my utterances of being; moreover, their perspectives, much like those of a camera’s lens pulled in and out at will to choose the best angles and lighting, emphasized “not only what [I] ought to see but how [I] ought to see it.” In poems such as “Grace with Flowerpot” and “A Moment Lapses at the Mouth of the Biloxi River,” the speakers take similar stances as observers, present certain aspects of their lyric moments to the reader as if they were holding out a snapshot or painting a still life. As lyric elements in these poems, the speakers elicit certain emotions, create the poems’ tone not only by their seemingly detached presence (or absence) but also by what they choose to reveal and to leave unanswered. In “Grace with Flowerpot,” the speaker readily focuses on the smallness of Grace who is “little more than ankles and thin wrists,” on Grace’s refusal “to smile,” and Grace’s future family. But just as the speaker’s relationship to Grace is left a mystery so is the context of the photograph itself. Who “scrawled *Grace 1918*” across it? Who preserved this uncertain moment as this young woman “moved toward/(or away from?) the opened door of the old homestead”? These unanswered questions shift the focus of the poem away from any question of who the speaker is or what provoked the speaker’s musing to the subject of the photograph, Grace herself, and to the actual feelings behind her refusal to smile or why she “briefly paused” to allow the photograph to be taken. Just as this

speaker brings Grace into focus by redirecting the reader's attention away from the given, the seeable to the indiscernible or the speculative, the speaker of "A Moment Lapses . . ." puts the reader into an almost postcard-like setting to emphasize the seductive quality of the sea. Just beyond the images of an unwinding river, an island floating in the heat, "Slender, straight pines," birds and blue sky, the glinting sand is "the distance," a seductive "mirage of closeness" that has the power to lure "in another swimmer." If, as Holden claims, the lyric attempts to speak to or from subverbal feelings, those often unspeakable feelings that we share, then this speaker lures us into that moment when all that is left of seduction is the sound of a redemptive bell ringing, "like a prayer, growing faint."

Memory is a form of dream: it belongs to our single selves, alone. Telling you about something that happened does not, cannot, let you be there, not in the as but only in the as if. The events of our lives are individual, unique. Our responses to them are shared--

Ann Lauterbach

The speakers are not merely lyric strategies, however. As Gallagher explains the relation between voice and narrative, "the intimacy of voice . . . establishes the hear-it-old requirements of the ancient narrative impulses" (71). She also suggests that "this intimacy" of contemporary narrative is accompanied by a sense of "confidence"; that is, the reader receives the narrative as if it has been given only to him; furthermore, this confidence supposes a familiarity between voice/poet and reader. Likewise, the closeness of the speaker and the poet invests the contemporary narrative poem with an "instant history," with the ability to make myth. Whether or not I can or have achieved

an effective balance between the emotional narrative and the factual narrative that Gallagher sees as an essential characteristic of the well-crafted contemporary lyric-narrative, several of my poems readily admit to a need for story, for the instant history, the myth making that narrative offers. In “All Hallows Eve: 1967” and “Last Christmas Visit to the Suburbs: 1968,” the speakers’ addresses establish a one-to-one relationship with the reader, bring the reader into a familiar story, make the reader a part of the lyric impulse toward the unspeakable emotions that attend self-awareness. Moreover, just as important as the poems’ intimacy are the poems’ attempts to locate not only the how of feeling but also the why of feeling. Alan Shapiro points out that:

A commitment to narrative presupposes that feeling is unintelligible apart from source and motive on the one hand, and destination or purpose on the other. Which is to say, the complete articulation of feeling implies a movement, not a stasis, an arising from as well as a going toward. (40)

The speakers of both “All Hallows Eve” and “Last Christmas Visit” acknowledge that the feelings are located in the events; in essence, the events shape the feelings:

We were alone,
had only ourselves to determine how far we’d fallen,
how far we might yet rise. That Halloween, we had
no dead saints to honor in the morning, only our war
to wage.

Tonight, behind the hymns piped out into the suburban streets,

behind carols flowing through plywood Santas and Nativities,
there's a calm that can still touch something deep inside, the way
disaster can sometimes force hope to surface.

As Shapiro suggests, feelings are not static, and these poems insist on movement between events, both literal and figurative--insist the reader move from childbirth, first communions, a Christmas tree search toward the unknown waiting for us at the end of the path like "the plots/of a graveyard overgrown by vines and new saplings" to the eventual recognition of "what we had forgotten/of ourselves."

If the power of propaganda is to change minds, perhaps the power of the poem is to change the soul because the poem is the most direct means of communicating with the soul. What we call the soul is really a kind of song, a fugue of thoughts and emotions, perceptions, beliefs, ideals, hopes--C.K. Williams

At a time when I was content to sit in dark corners and secretly write, silencing any precarious sense of the "I" that might have existed, a good friend who knew I read and wrote poetry gave me an illustrated copy of *Sonnets of the Portuguese and Other Love Poems*. This book held tremendous significance. Unlike other books in our house, this book was mine; I did not have to share it; I could consume it at my leisure, as I needed. I initially responded to the music inherent in its pages. Like Shakespeare's sonnets, I read and re-read Browning's sonnets for the music of the form, the repetition of sounds and parallel structures--the expected, the public elements. Yet, unlike my reading of other poets I knew at the time, as I read Browning's sonnets I eventually came to understand these sonnets as a record of a personal journey, read and listened to them

as a private, interior, lyric ordering of the world--the distinctions between poet and persona blurring in positive ways. At the time I did not understand that I saw myself only as I was being constructed by other narratives--the narratives of popular culture, a male-dominated society, even the individual narratives of my family and friends. I was aware only that when I tried to create my own narrative, I fell mute.

In the great on-going discussion of poetry's purpose, the function it serves--as if a thing needed some value outside itself for justification--Stephen Dunn claims that:

Poetry should offer us something we can *believe* about ourselves and the world, or it should offer us something that will *provoke* or suggest *contemplation* about ourselves and the world. . . . If we 'believe' a poem, it is because the voice behind it and the rhythms in it have become inseparable from its *assertions* and claims. (17-18, *emphases mine*)

Marvin Bell claims that poetry can "give a phrase or sentence or thought more meaning. Or [discover] how much more it meant all along" (224). Holden adds that poetry's "bringing something to attention . . . is an act of valuation." A "subtle" act that "has to do with the value of things in themselves. It has to do with the act of *significantly* noticing one's experience . . . *choosing* what to notice or to ignore." The poem's attention can imply that the "most seemingly peripheral aspects of our experience may be worth our attention" (175-76). James McCorkle extends this definition of poetry as liaison between poet/idea/world/reader by positing that on an intimate level poems also "are the records of the poet's reading of the world, of the self, of language" (18). For me, Browning's poetry accomplished all the feats set (proclaimed) for poetry precisely because I needed its provoking, asserting, appraising, noticing, and recording. Although

arguments can be made that Browning's sonnets are not particularly feminist, particularly the links that she forges between love and submission and self-worth, in those professions of love, the poet gives voice to the values inherent in her needs as a woman; she chooses to speak of what she feels or desires. Browning's voices prepared me for other female voices as loud, daring, and empathetic as Nikki Giovanni, as proudly feminine as Lucille Clifton paying homage to her body and its magical powers. Their unique rhythms, their language play, their particular noticing of the world truly mattered to me, became part of the narrative I was constructing for myself.

In writing about poets and their works, especially as they have influenced me as a writer, I suppose I should discuss the structural, the poetic techniques accomplished. But I cannot honestly remember ever initially coming to or being affected by technique or style. On a first reading, I have rarely, if ever, said "wonderful use of enjambment, brilliant assonance." I wonder if I have ever insisted on sharing a poem with a friend because the writer is particularly adept at line breaks. In his discussion of the reader/text/author relationship, Wayne Booth claims that "[e]very literary work of any power . . . is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the reader's involvement and detachment along *various* lines of interest" (123); moreover, the text "will grasp and sustain the reader" only as long as the reader finds in the text and in the author's authority answers and insights that "are likely to prove valuable." Although most poems appear on the page in a linear fashion, the reading or understanding process is not linear. I suggest that readers, much like the writers themselves, first enter the poem subjectively, first establish a relationship, a response to the idea, feeling, or vision of the text. I return to the Clifton poem "a homage to my hips," like many of the poems in *two-headed*

woman, for the celebration, the rupture of worn thoughts. Once a subjective relationship is established between reader and text, the reader/writer establishes a relationship with author, an objective relationship that asks *how*. How is it that Clifton creates celebration and rupture? By litany, the repetition of sounds and parallel structures that work as incantations to praise and proclaim the power of the female body; by insisting on her own grammar, just as she insists on images that will not fit into the “petty places” prescribed for women. Booth reminds us that while literary works might provoke or satisfy the reader’s “intellectual curiosity, . . . they make us desire a quality,” a quality whose “satisfaction . . . is to some degree distinct from the pleasure of learning” (124). I wonder if a text that satisfied only our intellectual curiosity would, in fact, have the power to control us, or any power at all. Is it not rather that a text, a poem for example, controls or influences the reader precisely because it touches something pre-verbal, instinctual in the soul?

The important thing is to find poems that truly matter to us--Stephen Dunn

More than a decade ago a dear friend, saying simply, “I know you’ll love this,” placed a copy of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* in my hands. As I read, I laughed and cried, and when I reached the final line, I flung the book across the room; this incredible journey had ended too soon, ironically leaving me satisfied yet famished. I suddenly knew the answers to those silly party questions: if I could time travel . . . ; if I could dine with any person, living or dead. . . . More important, I, “who always [thought]/of happiness *rising*,” felt “the emotion/that almost startles us/when a happy thing *falls*” (94). In trying to locate the influence this book has exerted over me, I wonder if it is enough to say the

Duino Elegies froze my blood and blew off the top of my head? And what of that “emotion” evoked, that feeling that initially propelled the book across the room, that same emotion that has drawn me back to the *Elegies* and other poems by Rilke time and time again?

Although the *Elegies*, as David Young argues, “resists paraphrase or identification . . . it addresses itself to what we call the human condition, with considerable force and *honesty*” (9, *emphasis mine*). Writing the *Elegies* consumed ten years of Rilke’s life. The process was, as Young describes it, “an act of great artistic patience and restraint”; more important, it was an act of “*listening*” (8-9, *emphasis mine*). Honesty, listening--for me, elements of authenticity, sincerity; that is, true engagement between poet and world, an engagement fixed “in a voice [voices] at once deeply personal and piercingly impersonal: Rilke’s voice, . . . the voice of the wind, my voice, your voice too” (7-8). And, I must add (though it is not often associated with authenticity or sincerity), voices that can seduce us into the poet’s own “fierce vision,” that it might end in “praise/and jubilation”:

That the heart’s
clear-striking hammers
might not falter
from landing on
slack or doubtful
or snapping strings.

That my face, streaming
might make me
more radiant

that this homely weeping
might bloom. (85)

Critics often credit good poetry with the ability to make us think. Dunn argues: “The good poem informs us in ways we couldn’t have been informed if the poem had not existed. It has surprises throughout, and its words and rhythms convince us they are the inevitable words and rhythms for the feelings and thoughts that the poem explores” (38-39). And great poetry, poetry that seems to exist outside time? “[M]eter and rhyme and the other musical devices of poetry,” Booth argues, “do not lose their importance” over time. These devices arise from experience and our reactions to them “lie very deep” (128). Poetry’s power to seduce extends from these reciprocal acts--of desire and satisfaction, of arising from and reacting to. As Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell explain:

A poem is not an idea or an experience rendered into metrical language; still less is it an attitude toward an experience. A poem is a symbol in which idea, experience, and attitude are transmuted into feelings; these feelings move in significant arrangements: rhythmically. It is prosody and its structures that articulate movement of feeling in a poem, and render to our understanding meanings which are not paraphrasable. (8)

*If you always use a compass to draw a circle and a ruler to draw a square, you will always remain a slave. As the ancients say, you can't build a house inside a house--*The

Art of Writing

To understand the wide range of poets and poems that matter to me, I defer to Emily Dickinson’s wonderful description of poetry’s ability to effect in us physical, metaphorically violent, reactions:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way? (Bianchi 276)

And I would add to her understanding that what we need and take from poetry is not static, just as our hearts and minds are not static. Yet, exploring the workings of the reader/text/writer relationship, examining how I as a poet respond to other poets, their ideas and language, raises a more significant question: how does my relationship to poets as diverse as Browning, Giovanni, Clifton, and Rilke play itself out, appear in my poetry? I cannot, in good conscience, suggest that I write like any of these poets; their influences are more subtle.

If standing on the porch as witness to the passing of trains bore in me the need to connect, a need to become part of a larger narrative, standing witness to the stories of other poets leads me to new ways of knowing. I read and re-read Browning's sonnets for the music of the form, the repetition of sounds, and parallel structures. More important, though, I returned to watch the ideas play themselves out, enchanted by the poems' turnings, their habit of juxtaposing the predicted, the anticipated against the unexpected discoveries of self and life:

... Straightway I was 'ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,--

“Guess now who holds thee?”--“Death,” I said, But, there,

The silver answer rang,--“Not Death, but Love.” (15)

If I was not fully aware when I first read the *Sonnets* that “rhythmic forms transmit certain kinds of information about the nature of our inner life,” that “through rhythmic structure . . . the infinite subtleties of human feeling can be most successfully expressed” (Gross and McDowell 9-10), I was aware that woven into these lyrical moments of revelation and discovery was an equally important, almost urgent need to re-order the world.

There are no sonnets in this collection of poetry. This collection is, however, ripe with moments of self-revelation, self-discovery; more important, though, these poems, much as Browning’s sonnets, attempt to re-order the world through personal experience. In the poem “Barren Ground,” the speaker dismisses heaven’s prescribed spiritual, other-worldly nature, draws on her own experiences to name heaven “a valley of bones/surrounded by dead volcanoes.” But heaven is not just a literal place south of Albuquerque; it is a temporal act of survival, a self-created metaphor:

escaping one heartbeat before the firestorm .

.....
Leaving emptied handed, without silverware or plates,

or even shoes and a toothbrush, was heaven too, in its time.

This poem ask us to re-think our particular way of knowing; by juxtaposing the traditional concepts of eternity, love, even madness with images of volcanoes, barbed wire, and celebration, the poem ask us to re-examine how we have come to our particular ways of thinking about, defining our beliefs. The poem also insists on re-interpreting the

world around us and our place in it; it further suggests that by releasing the all “too familiar” we will discover our selves. By releasing her “fear of heights,/the fear of gravity that has kept [her] stooped too close to the earth,” the speaker of this poem is free to refuse the tired “images uncovered/[that are] only shards of women, their hearts staked to the ground”; she is free to “rewrite the poem of two women driving to Las Cruces” with her own language; she is free finally to “laugh out loud” as she scales “the fence surrounding [her] madness.”

To write honestly, sincerely about the world as we experience it, to question how we come to know, often requires that we write from the empty places. Many of the poems in this collection spring from places left emptied by “science,/and our all too human need/to express our divinity”; by the memory of a young woman wandering “into the garden maze, to lose then find herself,/laughing--breathless--”; spring from places abandoned, even from places we can only dream of. This is what I learned from Rilke’s *Elegies*: that “music [poetry] began/in the midst of mourning”; it pierced “the arid numbness” and “made emptiness vibrate/in ways/that thrill us/comfort us/help us now”(26). And poetry [music] that arises from such places not only thrills, comforts, and helps us, it connects us all, frees us, if you will, to search for the words and rhythms necessary to explore our memories, to record the personal and the private, to disclose and become part of the larger narrative--to pick up our pens to draw our own houses.

By becoming self-aware of the enunciation of words, we become possessed by them.

There is a double movement of absorption: we consume the word in all its fullness while simultaneously being absorbed into the body of the word--James McCorkle

When my family still lived in the country, I discovered the reality of language. Accidentally. As was my habit then, I spent long summer days outside playing with my sisters and brothers. Roaming woods, wading creeks, building forts--this play kept our bodies tanned, our hair sun-streaked, and our imaginations in overdrive. And on one of these days, after I had raced into the house to tell my mother I had a pain behind my eyes, I discovered the word headache. I cannot remember now what my mother did; I imagine, though, she gave me a few pink baby aspirins before sending me back out to play, but what I do remember is actually learning the word headache. I am not suggesting I was illiterate up until this moment; quite the contrary. By this time, I could read our collection of Dr. Seuss and the Book of Children's Verses as well as any first grader. On this particular day, however, language became something I could feel. Headache was no longer just a word, something abstract for grown ups to complain about; included in this unique combination of letters and sounds was something physical. I could not see the word or hold it the way I could hold a ball or a cat; this word was inside me--I could literally feel it resting there in my skull, as if it were a part of my anatomy. I cannot say that at the moment of my language epiphany I danced around with joy as Helen Keller did when she finally understood the significance of the signs Annie Sullivan had been pressing into her palm; I imagine I just took the aspirins and returned to my play. But, from that day, I looked at language differently. Words were more than sounds; they were, or at least had the power to be, connected to me in some intimate way.

Regardless of how we come to language, I do not know that anyone wakes one morning and says, "I'm going to be a writer." Rather, I think words find the would-be writer; and, as Hugo claims, it is the poet's relationship to these words, not merely

subject matter, that determines her art. A “private poet,” according to Hugo, “emotionally possesses” words, “at least certain key words [which] mean something to the poet they don’t mean to the reader” (14). He does not suggest private poetry be intentionally obscure or impenetrable, but suggests rather that a specialized vocabulary “implies how [the poet] feels about the world and about himself” (14). The poems in this collection are filled with “words from my private myths about love, and dreams,/words I refuse to destroy or erase despite the best advice”; with grasses, stones, roots, clouds; with seasons and weather; these poems are littered with body parts. As a lyrical strategy, the repetition of personal words, on the one hand, is my way of breaking down an often subjective world into understandable/knowable parts. Can we ever know the whole of a thing, a place, or person? Is it not rather the shape of the rocks we recall after we pass through a desert, or the touch of a lover’s hands we miss? On the other hand, my insistence on particular words and images is as much a narrative strategy as lyrical. These key words create my particular understanding of the world: that one thing is connected to, can become, another, that stones can rise into grave markers which can become the walls of a city, that a child’s game can connect this world to another. Often my private words come to the poems unconsciously, serve as connective threads linking not only past, present, and future, but also connecting idea to idea and poem to poem. Although these repeating words possess a ritual aspect, they are not static, just as our memories, our sense of self is fluid. Consider, for example, the word and idea of love in “After Moving Seventy Miles North,” “Laying Down a Pallet,” and “A Young Bride. . . .” In the first, love is an “old need/to simply hear myself say the word *love* over and over

again,” a desire to be connected. In the second poem, love cannot grow or survive close intimacy: “Lying that close,/it was impossible to love, to trust the warmth escaping/the bodies next to us.” And finally, love and recognition of the importance of self--that possession of “your body and soul” is more important than the desire “to be touched”--becomes an act of self-survival, albeit a violent one. Just as Gallagher links narrative strategies with myth making, David Wojahn insists that the contemporary memory narrative “asks that a personal mythology be created through autobiography, that the unconscious and the conscious, as well as the past and the present, engage in a reciprocal interchange” (30). For Wojahn, the writer can only develop and grow by confronting memory, by confronting the self, and to this end, narrative offers a “method of investigating memory” (24). In the private mythology created in these poems, love--the idea, the emotion--appears often, yet seldom in the same manner, since my mythology does not demand love be just one concept or one emotion, or exist peacefully or externally to the self.

Wojahn points out that the interchange between past and present, thus our investigation of memory, becomes “a process of recording the poet’s struggle to locate him/herself in time,” a process that finally “seeks--above all else--perspective, a knowledge of one’s significance within the boundaries of time” (23). The stylistic choices made in these poems, whether viewed as lyric or narrative, are informed by my obsession with time and all its implications. Though trains--my earliest symbols of timelessness, of expansiveness, and possibility--were in part responsible for regulating time, an inherent need to place myself, to create/recreate myself in their illusion of timelessness drew me to the porch as witness. I am not merely speaking of linear time,

mechanical, constructed, measurable time, but rather of time as “a question of the play between presence and absence, origin and end, eternity and temporality, metaphysics and history, thing and representation--a never ending proliferation of terms, viewpoints, perspectives.” (Jackson 20). Consider, for instance, “Connecting Joint” and its speaker’s insistence that what holds these two together “reaches deeper than time.” This connection remains constant, though it appears in different images in each stanza. First, it is a “power” with “firm roots,” a part of nature that, even though the two separate, “creeps across the yard toward town” to follow “with vengeance.” Second, it takes on almost human form, is “a hand steeling through eye-flesh,/muscle-walls, driving straight through to bone” that can penetrate any “imagined protection.” And finally, it is knowledge of what is to come, “the names connected/to [the] children” not yet born, the knowledge that the two companions have “done this before, will do it again.” Despite the various images, and the narrative’s weaving in and out of time, this connection between the two never changes; what will change is the addressee’s attitude toward it. Throughout the poem, tensions exist between the eternal and temporal relationship of these two companions, between what is felt and what is known, between the origins and end of reality. As this particular narrative ends, the speaker knows there will be forgiveness, tells her companion that “one day you’ll remember/how wet and cold winter can be, you’ll call, ask me/to visit, invite me to supper.” The poem has returned to the opening image of the speaker’s arrival for supper, and we are left with a sense of closure for this story. But, as Wojahn points out, memory narratives must be approached with the knowledge that “things do not progress as much as they repeat” (24). At the close of

“Connecting Joint,” we find the suggestion of yet another narrative, another meal yet to be shared.

We preserve ourselves through metaphor; through metaphor we protect ourselves . . . we can share ourselves through metaphor--attempt to put, in words, the flow of some of our internal pictures, sounds, sensations, and feelings and hope that as the reader reads the pages these 'metaphors' would be 'activated' and live in her--Gloria Anzaldua

On a drive to Oklahoma City a few years ago, a colleague complained that my poetry did not disclose enough of my private life; he wanted to see more of my daughter, my ex-husband, my early upbringing in the rural South. In response to his complaint I wrote “Domestic Arts”; though it contains nothing of the three parts of my life my friend asked to see, it is very much a poem of disclosure. As Hugo points out, “[e]very poem a poet writes is a slight advance of self and a slight modification of the mask, the one you want to be.” Poem after poem, the writer creates “the mask [that] comes closer to fitting the face” (73) perceived in the chaos. Amid this story of a young girl involved in the innocent rituals of summer play are the obsessions that continue to influence my writing, my sense of self. In her act of recreating this land set aside for death, creating order in an “angry land pitted/by an absence of water,” she “becomes a pivot point in time,” a connection between the dead and the travelers who momentarily interrupt her narrative; in the gesture of her wave, she links stasis and chaos, permanence and impermanence. Ultimately, her play with the possibilities discovered in “neatly outlined plots” transforms itself into the possibilities of “music/and dance”; belief transforms the landscape into “a house,” “a street,” “a city” large enough to hold her and her

imagination. During my studies, I have come to appreciate that good poetry should appear as play--play with the given, with possibilities, with beliefs--yet, I have also learned that like the young girl's play in "Domestic Arts," poetry is work that streaks our faces and souls "with sweat and dirt." More important, though, I have discovered that writing honestly demands taking good notice of the world and all its ambiguities, peculiarities, and incongruities and testing what we observe and learn against what we think we know. Although Hugo suggests that "when you have done your best, it doesn't matter how good it is, that is for others to say" (73), to write honestly and to ask the reader to accept or at least consider your retelling, your restructuring demands both courage and faith.

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Section I

Deer Island

A Reflection on Clouds

When clouds crossed the sun long summer afternoons,
we burrowed our blunted fingers through wild grass,
into the top soil's cool dampness,
rooted ourselves to the spinning planet,
lay flat against the earth's curve, beneath foot hills
mounting into sheer white cliffs,
cliffs that deepened into canyons.

Horses and riders approached from the west;
schooners rode low, bulging with circus animals
and talking birds; red, green, yellow bananas
dissolved into a fog bank;
a lone dragon stole a last look over his arched back
as his kingdom thinned to a curl of chimney smoke.
Not even the sky's coastline escaped
the clouds' rewriting of space.

Softly carved gulfs, river inlets, peninsulas forged
by white banks wore dream-thin,
lingered only a moment like a taste
of birthday cakes, shadows, and first kisses.
We called our survival a game, pretended
we were holding ourselves fast against the turning,
against the possibility of being thrown,
against our fear of being swallowed.

A Last Christmas Visit to the Suburbs: 1968

Riding through well-planned streets no one notices the tilt of the trees, the way they have learned to survive despite the wind's constant sweeping motion. Their logic fools our eyes with a deceptive symmetry. We're here for the lights, to *ahh* over the reds, greens, blues, and yellows blinking in the hollow of darkly screened windows. Our eyes follow white lights racing across the outline of roofs. No one carols or stops for wassail. It is the silent beauty of similarity echoing off these houses adorned from porch to pitch that has drawn us here away from the familiarity of our particular warmth.

Just yesterday we followed my brothers' lead deep into the woods stretching out from our back door; we joked about our quest, pretended our bundle of coats, scarves, knit gloves protective armor. Duty bound our motley band of knights vowed never to return to the homeland without victory over the perfect tree, and enough live mistletoe to hang from every door frame. Our journey took us deeper than we had ever traveled, to a forgotten homestead. Its rooms and walls, the roof that once protected its family a collapse of charred timbers; yet, still standing in the center of it all, a lone chimney, weathered bricks crumbling back into earth.

On an old path sloping away from the ashes, we found the plots of a graveyard overgrown by vines and new saplings; one plot no larger than a cradle, and for just a moment no one spoke. In that silence it was easy to imagine the bones once a family of stickpeople drawn with big round faces, smiles, each slim body connected to the next by thin awkward fingers. A family lined up outside that house, with a dog made of circles, and triangle ears in the background, all of them so alive, still happy in the yellow sun as smoke curled up from their chimney. Only the sound of the ax striking the trunk of an evergreen, my sisters applauding my brothers' success could release me from the spell cast by those tombstones tilted against time, separate me from the names, dates, those last sentiments of love and grief that were almost invisible.

Just before sunset we returned with our sack full of mistletoe, the evergreen hoisted over our shoulders, unaware we resembled

pallbearers--that knowledge would come in the spring.
Tonight, behind the hymns piped out into suburban streets,
behind carols flowing through plywood Santas and Nativities,
there's a calm that can still touch something deep inside, the way
disaster can sometimes force hope to surface. As our father points
us to another house, he imagines the family inside its placid beauty
moving toward each other, away from each other like fine clocks;
he even envies their mechanical precision, their strict logic of survival.
He believes this is what he has worked for, what we will need.
But in neither our coming nor leaving does he stop long enough
to notice the irony of it all: this land and these lives plotted out,
divided up, rejoined by galvanized chainlinks.

Laying Down a Pallet

The cows looked like inflated pool toys; occasionally a tail flicked as we studied them from the gully rim. He called it “a survival strategy,” said it’s in a cow’s nature to stand fast against the heat, knee deep in the muddy water dragging dirt from the high pasture down to sea level. He told me, “lie down flat to the earth, see how they live.”

My head lowered into heat-rippled grass, flies lightly touched down, tickled my face, then flew off; gnats trapped in sweat struggled to free themselves; overhead, balanced along a telephone wire, a gallery of black birds watched; their heads turned in unison formed a feathery question mark. Even now as I remember them, they aren’t afraid of us, or our voices.

Even when the wake of a passing livestock truck shooed them away, they returned, re-aligned themselves a wing-tip distance apart, never any closer, any farther. Surprised by how easily I obeyed his words, grandpa laughed; I expected leaves to rustle, the stream to ripple as the pasture filled with his hot deep breath. Only one cow lifted its head, paused to take notice of my smallness.

That night after we walked the pasture, long after the black birds had left to roost somewhere safe, a pallet of blankets and sheets was laid across the living room carpet. Brothers, sisters lay shoulder to shoulder, flat, almost solid-like. A laugh nervously rippled across the room skimming from chest to chest like a stone skipped across the pond: this was our strategy.

Even as night carried the scent of mimosas in through opened windows it was our nature to be afraid. The smallest turn meant disrupting the file, giving away our position; we’d betray ourselves, our dreams overheard, stolen, if we released our bodies to sleep. Lying that close, it was impossible to love, to trust the warmth escaping the bodies next to us.

Behind the Storm's Eye

On the bulkhead, arms stretched wide, you let me
see through to the center, peer into those desires
so long unacknowledged. In our search for solace
against the sea's lashing out, we said nothing--
but even that was swallowed by the growing wind.
How odd, I now hear in that silence your need
for *something more*, a need only brushing my face
as the pressure continued to fall, driving us down
into an unimagined calm. It was that need to be
at least a minor god, the chance to meet the storm,
ride its rage inland without the smallest of mercies
steadying you as the rains wrapped around us--
as your desires to be feared or worshipped, for love,
creaked against their moorings.

**A Moment Lapses at the Mouth
of the Biloxi River**

as it unwinds, stumbles into the Sound's
heaviness. And in this heat

Deer Island seems to float
on the horizon. Slender, straight pines

reach higher as gulls and blue
drift in. Across the distance

the sand glints whiter than the oldest shell.
A mirage of closeness wakes

between shore and island, lures in
another swimmer. A buoy rings,

like a prayer, growing faint.

Writing at Sunrise

*I would like to sing someone to sleep,
to sit beside someone and be there. Rilke*

I feel this town's deepening breath at the back of my neck. It is slow to wake like planets riding the horizon. There is no ceremony behind the inevitable pulling away of bodies forced awake; their movements simply unravel into a tide of slow burning lights. A train passes at the edge of town; its whistle shapes the night receding into itself; possums, stray cats, skunks scurry to the safety of shadows our lives cast over the earth. Moments ago, trees stood invisible, flat against a shapeless dark; that balm of uncertainty now seeps back into cracks of rough bark. Mourning doves call back and forth with sad patience, echo our own need to lie down close to another body, search its warmth for stories to hold us steady, even against the weight of light's gravity. I wait for the words that will name these desires like the children who come to the corner to wait for their buses, sleepy still, anxious under the yellow glow of streetlights late to go out.

Holiday Weekend

Sunrise slowly dissolves like a lump of old sugar at the bottom of a coffee mug. She hears it moving about, banging into walls like the woman next door who's decided to give birth. She tries to wake before the gravity shifts, before her space grows any smaller. If she rolls over, she could touch her husband, but she can't remember how she thought herself to this place. Or how senses flatten, desires lose their footing. They can no longer detect the difference between 6 o'clock news and party conversations overheard as they travel to and from this bed. Once she thought it possible to stand on the edge of the universe, extend an arm into nothing--before he returned from the market, recipe cards stuck in his pockets, excited, face flushed by similarities he'd discovered between eggplants and sex, that neither were what they first appear, neither held any resemblance to eggs, held nothing of love. He arranged them both, captured their likeness on canvas, in still life. That day, as he bent down close to her face, his breath reeked of insects, of earth in its slow rise to meet god's footfall; this is what she thought as she closed her eyes before falling to sleep. Leaning against the wet plaster as the baby bleeds through, she anticipates its first cry, its first gasp of breath, tries to imagine herself out onto the edge of that prairie always lying just beyond the opened window; tries to imagine herself deep in the sway of tall grass.

Sunday Afternoon in the Laundry Room

The lady from 3B sorts colors and whites
as an emblazoned peacock struts across
the red kimono she's thrown on over shorts
and tee-shirt as an afterthought. Its feathers
disappear around her ribs into a blue-green
embrace, a gift from the man who comes

on Thursdays. His gaze always locked behind
sunglasses, he takes her stairs two at a time,
white deli-sacks, wine bottles brushing his thigh.
Thursday mornings she vacuums, leans over
the balcony to shake out braided scatterrugs,
a radio keeping time through the open door.

She whistles in the shower as the water flows
down the pipes behind my wall. Later, they eat.
I curl in the corner of my sofa, stare into a book
propped on my lap, voices fall through the ceiling,
the meat of their words picked away, bones dangle
at the end of ligaments; overhead, a shoe drops.

She makes change for another dollar. I glimpse
the soft fleshy parts of her life caught, matted in-
between the floors separating our lives in the twist
of her shoulders as she slips the kimono off, as she
presses its smells against her face before dropping it
into the last washer set for gentle, cold.

At the Reading
for Jeff

In another life, this poet charmed snakes, now
she wraps her songs inside words about her mother
and father, about growing breasts in junior high,
how unnatural it all seemed. Like bats hanging
upside down in a cathedral, something in the cock
of her head reminds me of my mother's roses
facing another late afternoon sun. Another poem
ends, and I think thirst and rain also feel this way,

like the room erupting into applause. Next to me
a man sweet-talks words from his pen; a swarm
of antic-bodies squirm through prehistoric rituals
covering his bite-size notebook; words congeal
in overhead spots, become a poem while we're not
looking. I catch words like friends and phrases
of a junior high dance trapped in graceless motion:
two young boys line a gymnasium wall, eyes locked
in thoughts of erupting breasts and freshly shaved legs.

I reach across his arm, like reaching for a cup of punch,
loosen the tallest boy, pull him onto the dance floor.
We take the room by storm, tell everyone the man
sitting in third row center is writing this poem, this story
of friendship, companionship, even loyalty, this poem
about boys and their penises, how unnatural it all seemed
as if the rising music had charmed their flesh to stone.

Natural Phenomenon

The yellow cat, carried away
from a deeper study
of tentative shadows
descending the window box,
now sits nearly motionless
against the squeal
of the garbage truck
banging to a miserable stop,
overweight, panting. To take her
for porcelain, the mere likeness
of a posed cat, is easy at this distance
as the dance of cans lifted up
onto the waiting lip, tossed
back like cleaned bones, plays
itself out against the curve
of her eyes. Only the slight
flicker of her tail across
the grass gives way
to what I know
of her
--that late night she whores
beneath this window, shivers
lodged at the back
of her throat escape
mournfully
--that she leaves
for the next yard
unconcerned anyone
knows.

After Moving Seventy Miles North

*this distance between us
was my love never had*

Ferron

Some mornings, as my breath floats above the covers, I try remembering why I've moved to this place, even find myself trusting how wrong Wordsworth was to immortalize what *remains behind*, how wrong to believe a remembrance could ever be anything more than a half-starved dog gnawing down bones, its mouth and teeth working against muscle, our marrow whirlpooling in the draw of an insatiable appetite.

It's the remembering that sticks in the throat like a familiar sin: I leaned close to you at a garden party, only wanting to say *love* over and over again, all day, or as long as it took for you to give in to those old fears you clung to, the fear of having too much, the fear I might say *forever* with my next breath, at the end of the day. But even the fear of discovery cautiously shaping your voice when you asked me to dance held no power over music; you'd go with me, return to that apartment you never thought large enough for you and me and *love* to live comfortably.

Some mornings, I find myself wanting to set the record straight, wanting to tell you and Wordsworth that those *first affections*, *those shadowy recollections* are only light tricks played against our eyes like rainbows force-born from prisms. But these desires, these palm-size lapses into treason so easily drift off into steam, leave me alone on these long winter mornings with that old need to simply hear myself say the word *love* over and over again.

Things I Thought I had Forgotten

Smoke rising from the mill bore nothing
of how tall or into how many doors
and houses and pages the pines
could possibly sprout. That winter,
even as the radio voice predicted a bleak
future for pork, there was no time for prayers;
time only to collect dry leaves, bundle
fallen branches and twigs, time to build
bonfires beneath discarded Christmas trees.

Tonight, a fire kindled with old newsprint holds
back the snow blowing like falling ash;
a prophecy of blue flames molds its shape
around wood patiently gathered. Smoke curls
up, bearing only the scent of its birth,
carries away the beauty of fire cupped like hands
around wood. Easily, the eye is tricked
into forgetting where these things begin:

how those ritual flames ate away the dark,
the last inches of the year, and evergreen
needles popped shooting sparks up, into
the possibility of heaven. Even at sunrise,
smoke clung to the air with a stubborn dryness,
lingered on my tongue, telling me of things
I thought I had forgotten.

Section II

Flash Point

Domestic Arts

for James

The story begins with a young girl,
arms and legs tanned from summer
roaming, playing in streams, along tracks.
She makes her way through sparse trees,
across a gully to set up housekeeping
among stones rising into angels and lambs,
fashioned into vine-wrapped tree trunks,
chiseled into crosses and opened pages.
She stakes claim to neatly outlined plots,
builds houses, mansions, whole cities.
Family-size plots foundations for living
rooms, great ballrooms, apartment houses,
entire city blocks; single, lonely graves
bedrooms and baths, swimming pools,
clubhouses, corner shops, movie theaters.
Gravel aisles run into hallways, exit
into streets, parking lots and freeways.
She pauses, glances up from her work,
her face streaked with sweat and dirt;
she waves to passing cars, to travelers
cutting through this angry land pitted
by an absence of water, this sea of rocks,
flesh-toned, scattered like jacks, erect,
lonely rock penises, rock camels kneeling.
Their faces fixed on the tips of aspens
and cottonwoods just visible on the horizon,
they imagine they'll find water over there,
or flat open places to set up camp and rest.
Her presence becomes a pivot point in time.
These dead move further from concern;
she throws birthday and slumber parties
for her closest friends; they play music
and dance. She believes one day she'll live
in a house, on a street, in a city like this.

Flash Point

Just before midnight, we cross the line
into Oklahoma, set camp among the stray
purple flowers of protected grasses
grown taller than ever imagined. We warm
ourselves beneath the land's subtle flatness.

This is our habit now: waiting for something
like life to happen, we move further inland,
plot distance and time between state lines
like fortune tellers reading the earth's palm.

It was the closeness, a clinging dampness
working its way into our house, creeping up
walls, spreading overhead, that ate at our
extremities, pushed us out. As surly as your
father's silences. I couldn't confess my fear
of moss, afraid it too might consume our forms.

I could only pull us free, lift you onto the open
desert, only to discover flesh never forgets
our need for rain. We waited, our heads uncovered,
tin cups face-up; we sustained ourselves on soup
made of dryness, salt, spices, fresh-pressed garlic,
soft bruises lightly healing just beneath skin.

This was your famine: waking inside another dream
you never conjured. Pouring old words into new molds,
you joked about love, even the lust jettisoned to lighten
our journey; you tried to fill empty spaces intricately
carved, but laughing only made us thirstier.

Watching Summer Pass

As if their flesh has grown too heavy to care about, the children drape themselves across the porch swing, carelessly. Summer is being written in their eyes, silent and quick, in flashes of heat lightning. Bug songs and near twilight fall into that space held by unwinding voices, fill in questions about the length of summer, the weight of suspended rain. I can't tell them this heat will pass into sleep, into their dreams.

Between them sits an old pot stained deep purple by berries eaten earlier with cream. Silences hang like wishes from a tree. Closing my eyes, I miss the slow movements their bodies make as they turn into the shadows now lightly filling the world. At the edge of the yard, a stray dog steals away with the last bite of day clutched between his teeth. I feel the earth's coolness cake against his feet as he digs.

A Prayer for Winter

The moon, caught in the pull
of this 3-digit heat wave, sucks
at my toes; I feel their liquidcenters
ebbing. I should laugh at legs
and thighs before they disappear,
before grace has been forgotten,
smile at least as the heat evaporates,
eats away the land mass, but it's
like fighting time in a dream or
recreating the world from the inside
out. The moon's hands, their skin
wing-thin and blue-ribboned, juggle
my knees like tomatoes. I can taste
the uncertainties resting on her tongue,
the aftertaste of stewed apples.

I pray for winter, for sleep absent
of verb tenses. Her face, scared, yet
still beautiful, pushes its way deeper
into my rib cage. I remember
that closeness of light, the way it
teases a heart that refuses to exhale.
Soon I won't be able to grow hair or
spit or escape her orbit. If only I
could open my hands, I'd ask her
to let me go, unfold herself, spread
out, flower. I try to image this,
a field of these. It is not endless rain
that drives the insane back to sanity.

Ladies' Night at the Deer Ranch Bar & Grill

On the dance floor of the old saloon, melodies offered up in prayer return in sheets of rain at 45 degree angles, like angels with trumpets, music between their lips and brass beginnings; their mouth pieces formed by heat into imperfect Os, they search for the woman whose dance inspired the whole note, whose hips gave rise and shine to the perfection of the imperfectly held blue note, its blissful shrug of shoulders, its laugh.

In the Ladies' Room between sets, women don't talk about the times they came here with pockets of quarters to feed the deer, how the chicken pecking at a keyboard made its own kind of sense, before they studied Pavlov, before falling in love that first time. Before petting animals became refugees and relocated, there were no codes to live or die by 500 feet past the city limit signs. Four times on Saturday, twice on Sunday, gunslingers died, rolled off rooftops, spun around, collapsed in the streets to the applause of onlookers, to the amusement of free roaming peacocks. Resurrected from dust, they tipped their hats, bowed, invited everyone in for a drink at the bar.

Flesh itching for the next big shoot-out, one final show-down, their eyes curve along the movement of legs, hold the bounce of breasts; with no last call in sight, they wait for the perfect moment to call out the next challenger. Stale deer musk drifts in, wrapping itself around bodies ready for the dance; the bartender throws more sand across the dance hall floor, summons the music that repeats like angels come to return their lost imagination, to birth their salvation.

A Riot at Customer Service

*Bears sit waiting
ready to eat
the sillies who tread
on the cracks in the street.*

A.A. Milne

Number 58, in a long line of numbers, swears
she did make breakfast this morning,
“even if no one remembers,” she says
in the direction of the man who’s brought her here
complaining she no longer works.

43 glares back, a bandaged finger over her lips,
“sssss, it’ll go bad for all of us, if you keep that up.”

What she won’t say in front of the man who thinks
he’s holding her in line, thinks he’s brought her here
is that she’s longed for this day, has dreamed of being
returned.

“I’ve heard of these cases,” 60 says, gently poking me
in the ribs, “how some of us will do ourselves in
by simply forgetting we’re not toys; we didn’t always
live in stories, or dress up like dolls.”

(The muzak grows louder.)
(Necks up and down the line crane for a better look.)

“Do you want to lie around all day on a shelf collecting
dust? Wait for someone with more money than sense
to come along, take you home, dust you off, sit you
on the mantle like you’re a prize?”

(Heads up and down the line bob, smile to the blaring muzak.)

“It’s a myth,” 60 shouts. Twisting her arm free, she climbs
on the counter, “they made it up so we’d go more willingly
when they get bored, or we look too worn, or get too smart.”

“You remember,” she says in my direction, “how good it felt
to just run wild, to eat what you had killed?”

(The muzak crescendos)

60's gone, hauled off through the swinging doors before papers kicked into a flurry can float down and settle on the floor. Her companion moves to the head of the line for a full refund.

(Fingers tighten around arms; the line stiffens like a dead snake.)

"My family no longer remembers," 58 says, rubbing her shoulders that ache from lifting the past eleven years over her head, and these scars on my knees, "look at the scars, from kneeling, stooping, sliding into home plate."

"So delicate," I exclaim, "like fairy stitches, fine as the skeleton of a salmon."

"I collect purple," I answer when asked what complaint is being filed against me. Purple foods, and shoes and hats, even nail polish.

"Is that an offense to their sensibility?"

"Only if you wake reincarnated as a bear."

Listening to Voices from Another Table While Dining at Ralph & Betsy's Cafe

She's been telling her stories in rapid succession,
one face bleeding into another, names transposed
with bites of salad and crackers; between sips
of ginger tea, days and hours reduced to a fraction
of their original volume. From this distance,
even the pauses seem rehearsed; her study
of each new figure stepping in, out of the cold,
deliberate. And in her hand's steady motion,
as it lifts itself to tuck away stray hair, I see
through to her purpose, to the hope
that in this new telling, like each retelling,
her solitude can be easily forgotten.
But it's still there; as she leans forward
while eating, her body remembers
that slight stoop of a young girl crouching,
alone in a partly-dark corner, writing,
her family sleeping, night playing
its way through the house and into her.
"I clutched that pen like a rosary," and at the end
of that final sentence she smiles across the table
looking at no one in particular, her eyes reaching
for street lights just beginning to flicker
in the growing dusk. I know then,
as if I had been there reading over her shoulder,
I'll feel her in the snow that begins to fall
as I walk home. My boots will stir up
giant sycamore leaves and I'll hear her
telling her companion how it'd all be different now--
"If only I had believed in magic back then."

**A young bride, still dressed in a white taffeta tea-length gown,
pauses to reflect, her tuxedo-clad groom lying crumpled on the floor
a few feet away**

"I couldn't shoot myself, so I shot him"--
from the statement of a 20-year-old bride
arrested for shooting her husband on their
honeymoon.

It enters you like a slow poison
Warming your blood
Winding through your veins
Pooling in your skull--
That need to take it all back
You want to rearrange the constellations
You're standing in the middle of a white-hot fever
You're standing under a waterfall
The air touching your skin burns
You want to slip out of the flesh
That is pinching your ribs

Soon your organs are involved
You're floating in the ocean on your stomach
You're floating to pieces on a cloud
The light stings your eyes
You can see the heat seep out of your pores
Igniting the sun
Singeing the edge of distant galaxies
Soon your head is covered in ash
The temple walls are colder
Than you imagined they could be--
Harder ungiving unforgiving

Words beat against your bones and break
Splintering your voice
Stealing your next breath
The world is flat again
You're lost in an evergreen forest
You're caught in the underbrush
The vines wrapping your legs bleed
This is the other side of the mirror
This is the absence of light and sound
You try to dance
Your fingers are useless

You close your eyes
Open yourself to a world made of red velvet
Step onto a tongue that knows the answers--
This is how it has always been
You have always listened
You give away your last muscle
The one connecting your body and soul
You want it back
You want it back more
Than you ever wanted to be touched

Documented Fear

The camera focuses on a young woman as she sets an extra place at her family's table, lays an invitation for the fear growing inside her husband.

She pours soup, smiles; off camera an anthropologist deciphers her actions, explains that in their language fear does not exist simply as a verb or a noun.

the first one met fear deep in the forest, invited fear to eat, to warm by the fire

The doctor cups his hands to emphasize his point: in this tribe fear is real, something cradled, even worshipped.

A young man enters the frame, addresses the camera; another expert apologizes to those of us who have been influenced by Freud, television, capitalism, who cannot quite comprehend the tribe's syntax or understand that fear, like grace, is a god's blessing.

as the first one slept, fear wove a dream

The holiest of the elders will honor this home tonight, he will lie down beside the young man as he sleeps, study the movement of dreams as fear burrows deeper into his soul. Tomorrow the villagers feast to honor the visions they know follow from fear.

The young man taps his chest, spreads his arms wide toward the camera; his hands divine an endless flow of time: *from fear's dream, the first one became*

The food set aside for fear remains untouched as they spoon up the last of their meal, as a religious scholar reduces their narrative into yet another harvest metaphor, encourages us to imagine the young man's body a rich fertile field.

The space spanning these two voices hides more of faith, of wisdom than can be translated or caught on tape. And if fear understood this metaphor, it would refuse the implication, its reduction to mere chemical reactions.

The young woman proudly unrolls the sleeping mats; her husband gently rubs his chests in anticipation; the translator repeats, "fear lives inside me."

When he learns we no longer welcome fear, learns we blame it, hide it, even try to kill it, a sadness we can no longer imagine floats across his face.

The camera eases back one last time, leaves the young couple to sleep undisturbed, pulling us into its seamless ebb and flow from village, to university, to commercial--from faith, to wisdom, to greed.

On the Eve of Wisdom

Palming the woman's skull, the doctor claims
in the mere act of standing erect
we separated ourselves from other primates.
She traces the theoretical shift of gray matter
as blood searched for new ways to flow back
into the trunk, reshaping forever our view
of the world.

But science has unearthed no evidence of her mate's
fear when he saw her standing
for the first time, how he was frightened
by the way her body resembled the trees,
by how she could so easily stand against the wind
and not fall.

He did not feel the blood flow
down from her head, as it cut
through her like a river,
didn't understand the bits
and pieces of wisdom
quietly settling under her skin.

There, where they found the skull, scientists uncover
ashes of a campfire surrounded by more faint evidence
of bipedalism, enough evidence
for them to speculate that contained fires,
her duties as a cook began
in this new rush of blood.
But they offer no explanation for the still
visible impressions her body carved
into the dirt as night after night
he tried to pin her
back to the world.

The scientists who visit this site believe
it home to the first real family,
to monogamy, to faith, and fear.
But uncertainty is the soul of science,
and they warn without written records
we can never be sure.

Perhaps she only wanted to taste
the freshest fruit
hanging from the highest branch.
Perhaps the male who shared this campsite
spread the rumor it had something
to do with snakes
and defiance.
Perhaps as the fertile land around her shrank
into a desert, she grew rounder
with a need for more,
more to eat, more to drink,
more hope.

The young woman's face reconstructed with wax
and clay; her eyelids, lips, cheeks--the spread
of her nose--precisely calculated
to within an acceptable error
of 5 millimeters;
this new layer of simulated flesh painted
rich walnut brown, spackled with coarse wiry hair.
The experts claim she would've lost
this protective coat of hair to the prick
of bramble and tree branches,
become more beautiful than him,
once she gained her equilibrium.
There's no tangible proof that when she danced
the wind slid over her bare shape
with an unusual grace,
or that she ever dreamed her body
carried the whole world.

Her reconstructed skull spins before the camera
reminding us how we came to this time.
How near a now dead river,
the young woman who once lived
behind these enigmatic glass eyes screamed
the first smooth-skinned child into existence.
Perhaps her mate--certain nothing good
would come from such pain--finally had proof
of how wrong she was
to imitate the gods.

Perhaps it is only an old wives' tale that there,
in the afterbirth, she discovered
the first image of herself,

that she nurtured it until she could say
I, me, mine
without hesitation.
And when she was strong enough, she lifted
herself up
and walked away
from his fire; she stepped out
toward the unexplored dark
mountains,
leaving her tracks
in the drying earth for us
to follow.

Barren Ground

for Carmela

In the poem you send from Albuquerque, we ride across what I imagine heaven to look like, a valley of bones surrounded by dead volcanoes. We move south, string the highway with stories of our survival, you leaving home for another slim possibility of love, me climbing over the fence, escaping one heartbeat before the firestorm. We laugh at this vision of me, wrapped in chintz, folded over the spikes of barbed wire. Even then we knew to go down into this valley would be better than going back. Leaving emptied handed, without silverware or plates, or even shoes and a toothbrush, was heaven too, in its time. Now, alone in Oklahoma at 2:00 am, it's easy to confuse religion with criticism, to think the world has finally withered, to think the long-promised rapture has come and gone, easy to imagine everyone I ever loved ever hated erased in the blink of a god's eye, easier to believe I was abandoned on the prairie with only this book about women novelists, left to the eternity of just one more paper to write about how things change with each pen stroke. All is too familiar. The images uncovered only shards of women, their hearts staked to the ground, fingers amputated, buried beneath concrete war monuments, blue historical markers set deep to remind us exactly how far we still have to travel. At the top of the next page, I refuse this rapture leading me onto another barren landscape, into a new struggle against shifting sand. I release my fear of heights, the fear of gravity that has kept me stooped too close to the earth. Not to fly above it all, but to walk through the flatness, the peaks rising from limestone and shale, into a yet unnamed canyon. Here I rewrite the poem of two women driving to Las Cruces, fill it with words from my private myths about love, and dreams, words I refuse to destroy or erase despite the best advice. Here I laugh out loud as I scale the fence surrounding my madness.

Amazed

for DeVonne

Driving across the Ozarks, I reconsider
the young woman who stooped down
in front of me at the Palace museum just
outside London. Her skirt hem brushes
the ground; pines growing from these iron-
laced mountains fade into the fabric.
I reach Little Rock, only to lose myself
in traffic; she runs her fingers over footsteps
worn into the cool stones leading to the cellar
where a long line of Henrys stored wines
and ales. Reaching up, she pulls her hair away
from her face, lifts it, only to let it fall back
over her shoulder. I exit to catch my breath,
to call home, to tell whoever will listen
not to wait supper; I've been caught
in an unpredicted shower. I shout this
into the phone; rising, the woman smiles
at me over her shoulder. Again she asks if I
can imagine how much tenacity, how many trips,
how much weight it must take to wear down stone.
My hand reaches for her arm as I cross the bridge
into Greenville only to remember I'm afraid
of falling; I play pointless mind games to forget
the distance down to the water I am floating above--
estimate I've traveled 510 miles, divide by time,
calculate a mean speed of 48 mph. Over tea
and cakes in the formal gardens, I notice
she's wearing silver earrings, rosebuds frozen
in that moment just before blooming. Rain
falling into this vast, almost endless shape
of night, is boldly becoming ice. Curving
toward another state, the highway takes another
number; from Tupelo, a radio voice cautions
we have only two more shopping days before
Christmas. I anticipate the next town, another
landmark, a place to pull off; she wanders
into the garden maze, to lose then find herself,
laughing--breathless--

Doppler Effect

I

When I step out of the bathtub, you say
“We have landed on Mars”--

As I bend forward to wrap my hair,
I try to steady your image against my mind:
arms folded across your chest,
your eyes pinning me against the wall.
This is like a song I once knew
all the words to:
the two of us caught in the late
afternoon sun--only now
it's too hot to build a fire.
Your shadow is bleeding
across the bathroom tile,
seeping from your toes,
a Divine finger almost,
recording this moment--

how far we've traveled, though not by grace
of any god, but science,
and our all too human need
to express our divinity.

II

For three nights in a row, you burn supper
because you can't sleep;
For three nights in a row, you've come
to bed hungry, wondering out loud
if this has anything to do with . . . ?

Rovercam movies, shown every hour
on the hour, interrupt your litany,
bring the possibility of a new homeland
into tighter focus.

Before I taste the breakfast you serve
me in bed, "yes" and "yes" and "yes"
fall from my spoon;
your tongue lashes
against my raw skin,
staining the sheets.
I confess nothing else.

Imaginations blossom into a new religion;
experts speculate on ways to colonize
this landscape, transform it
from red to green.
In the Arizona desert a visionary's growing fat
selling slices of Mars for \$2,000 each,
"like pizza," he laughs during an interview,
"only I don't deliver,
or offer guarantees."

III

Motion must slow, our weight increase,
as you reach for my ankle; I scream
something unpronounceable
in French--
we can't change these rules--
you thank God in elementary Spanish.

Around the world, drawing boards go up;
theoretical nations forged, cities, towns,
highways, and streets cut through
iron-rich soil,
memorialize great minds,
sports legends, fallen idols:
the language of our homeland.

Alien words dance on tiny feet
in the attic over our heads,
scurry in circles like mice
and madwomen--
before breaking orbit,
rushing away at the speed of sound
into a passing light wave.

IV

At dinner tables, before saying grace, families
discuss the Doppler effect,
that closer and farther are only variations
of color,
that science can measure the distance
between bodies, the possibility
of other worlds,
map out our heavens,
our place in them.

We wake thirsty,
out of breath on the surface
of an invisible planet,
the shift of a nearby star
wobbling side to side
forever links us to
color and distance and time.

Re-entrance

*Whoever you are: in the evening step out
of your room, where you know everything;*
Rilke

I have seen that likeness before, always
in relief, etched into tomb walls carefully
lined with objects patiently gathered,
with offerings that hold onto their shapes
even as night approaches. Always the door
into the next realm filled by squared shoulders;
a face in profile, its chin faintly tipped up
into the heat, into the light we cannot see;
its one larger-than-life eye turned west,
into the unaccustomed. Only a taste
of what might come lingers on a mouth
created with one quick chisel strike,
a single stroke of crimson paint.

Fingers have written our fortunes in the dust
now thickly settling on horizontal surfaces:
knowing is easier than creating--
creating even a single image like a tree
darkly appearing against the sky,
a tree too terrible in its uncertainty
for an eye to hold.

But your stepping out is a matter of light
moving from blue to red, becoming a pin point,
a fiery prick that draws blood, opening a rip
in the sky, a hole to peer into the next galaxy.
And in your eye's tender letting go of what lay
just beyond that door worlds change,
objects realign themselves, and the heavens,
without apology, expand, altering the course
of us who navigate by words and starlight.

Just before the storm
for Britton

the facades of old buildings drift
away, and the sky grows soft.

Heat rising from asphalt-covered
roofs beats against its flesh--

and the whole world
seems to be caught
in the shock wave
of air as it thins
into frayed ribbons
of orange dust--

Anticipating the first rain drops,
we extend our emptied hands.

This is how the world began.

Section III

Labors of Love

A Lullaby

Reaching down to lift you
my hands disappear
fingers curve around
into this time and space
we occupy simultaneously
our histories write themselves
in the movement of continents
drifting apart as what's left
of your first day here with me
blurs into the sculpted colors
of this globe
spinning between us
in my palms
another mountain range
a sea the slope of a valley
come into view
as this world slows
then stops

In my arms you rest lighter
than I first imagined
like light bent then unfolded
into pure color

All Hallows Eve: 1967

If an artist's canvas could think and speak, it would certainly not complain at being constantly touched and retouched by the brush. St. Therese of Lisieux

Only after giving birth do I remember the need for faith, and that Halloween: how brothers and sisters divided into warring camps, took the empty field for a battle ground. My rebels lined up behind fenceposts and trees; lying in trenches, we waited the game's unfolding. Knowledge of victory lifted from history books, from hymns of Protestant soldiers stoically marching toward martyrdom. No one dared to speak of grace, of miracles following faith into reality, or that the stories of our lives might constitute sainthood. My family had sold off our saints, our faith in things unseen generations before this night. Painted, disguised, we hid behind what scared us, believed what followed us to be nothing more than wind as we tried to create our own myths out of darkness. We'd forgotten that once each year our world and theirs collide, that spirits cross easily with only the lightest tokens of faith.

A young girl we'd never met left her innocence, offered her first confession of sin, offered her soul to the care and grace of four sainted women and their God in exchange for her first taste of flesh and blood. My grandmother gave us this story flatly, that she could be someone we never imagined, her gesture the same one she used to serve dinner, to offer us dessert:
My other name is Mary Catherine Therese Elizabeth
I watched her undress, her flesh becoming more-- a blessed keeper of secrets, a writer of stories, a prophet. Even my grandfather, who'd love her for more than sixty years, was surprised by her revelation. She had proof to offer, a photograph of a young girl in a bridesmaid's dress clutching her father's hand, a photograph taken by her mother

on the steps of St. Jean de Baptiste moments before
Lousia stepped out of frame and forever disappeared.

For years, my family found faith in nothing more
than a taste of juice and crackers, the weight
of silver dimes pressed against palms as we waited
for the collection plate, and music. We were alone,
had only ourselves to determine how far we'd fallen,
how far we might yet rise. That Halloween, we had
no dead saints to honor in the morning, only our war
to wage. In the darkness, approaching steps warned
us to be even quieter, to hold our fire, to wait for just
the right moment before leaping from our sanctuary,
before releasing our volley of overripe persimmons.
Stringy flesh, the smell of defeat clung to our clothes,
signaled our kills. But I could not swallow the sad
bitterness resting on my tongue, even then something
in me knew the taste of what we had forgotten
of ourselves.

Grace With Flowerpot

Across the dirt at the bottom of the photo someone
has scrawled *Grace 1918.*

She's little more than ankles and thin wrists poking
out of a dress, hair tumbling over her left shoulder
into a soft *S*, like the end of a kiss.

She refuses to smile into the camera, afraid, perhaps,
that what she wants or thinks she needs will pour out through
her lips before her tongue can make the words.

Her posed stillness doesn't explain why she briefly paused here,
or if she chose to remember herself on this day as she moved toward
(or away from?) the opened door of the old homestead.

But the potted crocus balanced against her hip, resting along the crook
of her arm, betrays the babies she'll carry, deliver, and nurse
before she is twenty.

Labors of Love

A young woman already showing offers to share something of her life, a story of her favorite movie stars.

She thinks it's the extra hormones making her brave enough to share a story with this roomful of strangers who share her condition. She twists the story into a question addressed to no one in particular, to anyone close enough to care, about the movie playing downtown, about her fear that she could never conceive daughters beautiful enough, with legs long and thin enough, to ever be happy.

She doesn't want the son she's carrying to be as beautiful as a movie star either. With a candle and silver ring, her friend's already divined his future--he'll grow up like his father who knows only masonry arts, the truth of foundations and walls.

If he's too beautiful, if his eyes are too crystal blue, he'll never be happy. She's learned this from years of studying movie magazines, from following stories of who's sleeping with whom, who fathered or mothered whose child. She believes if she'd married a movie star, a man who moved gracefully, who laughed and cried on cue, she'd be jealous. She confesses her husband doesn't know she fantasizes--when he's at work, or sleeping next to her too tired to make love--someone beautiful is climbing off. Slowly rubbing her expanding womb, tenderly she comforts her son just awakened from a malicious dream.

Grammar Lessons.

In odd moments found left over
at the bottom of the washer, I remember
things like the vibration of train
whistles, incense unwound to ash, you
stooping to pick up a sock; these actions
contorted into question marks at the end
of my peculiar habit of pushing into human
form what I daily pass, occasionally pause
to scratch against, sometimes embrace,
like the way I add a period to the end
of a thought. Then the next paragraph begins.
The overhead light plays out at the height
of our final crisis, and suddenly, you disappear
like a birthday wish exhaled into a circle
of flames. And the prospect of you never coming
true again curves around inside me into
a feeling that I need to write a poem that is you,
the lines spliced together with commas that hinge
thought into poseable logic, until the poem *is* you
pacing my skin, curling itself into a fist.

Straight Talkin'

Lying in bed, I hear piss
splash against the edge
of my house, listen
as the cowboy
outside ruminates

on *women* and how seriously
they take the word love

always calling,
wanting something

always a little more than he's willing
to sacrifice.

In sympathy, his friend grunts

just hang up, man,
she ain't worth it,

as if he too knows the inconvenience
of being needed that much.

Moving East to West to East

for Robert

You call to tell me you found love again, to ask
for a warm place to sleep as you journey west
to reinvent yourself. This is your habit:
tempting fate, locking love and resurrection
inside the same breath, leaving happiness out
to wither in blinding sunlight. I try to conjure
an image of you, untwist your face distorted
by the sun as you travel toward husband, father,
as you move into another alien landscape
that will pick your bones clean before you feel
its first bite. I don't have the heart to repeat
what whiskers left in the sink foretell:
next time you'll call about losing love.
You'll say only that you miss the ocean
blowing in as you sleep, miss waking to a body
caked with salt, ask for a warm place to sleep
as you travel back East toward home.

Now, I can only open my arms like daybreak
and let you go forward into a shadow of yourself
lying alone, the Late Show jokes not funny enough
to take your mind off the two prostitutes fighting
in the parking lot outside your door. The miles west
to east have taught your gestures a private language;
this is what I think as your hands draw
locking circles in the air, as they plot out
the past week. It seems important, your need
to explain your movements, explain how no one
even said thank-you for moving west, important
I see the blue police lights bleeding through
the cheap curtains of your room on Central Ave.
Word by word you recreate the drama of lust
and jealousy played out just beyond your door.
You need me to feel those swelling voices washing
away everything you thought you still owned.

It's not as hard to see through to that moment
as you imagine--
women locked in an all too familiar debate

over territory and men, their inherent worth,
you waiting for the right moment to leave
your room, feigning thirst, a need for ice
you searched the parking lot of the Blue Mesa Inn
for tangible remnants of what went wrong,
hoping for shards to piece back together, willing
to settle for scrapes, fabric, hair to fashion
into a voodoo doll--I, too, have been lost
in that desert without a map or enough water
to sustain my shape. You think it silly now,
how you combed the parking lot, wished
without reason for at least a blood-stained outline
to study. A laugh almost rises with your cigarette
smoke, a wickedness sprouts in your eyes
as you describe the broken heel formed of clear plastic
discovered in the shadow of your truck,
the closest thing to an omen you've ever found.
You don't have to tell me how smooth or cool it felt
in your hands, or that when you held it up to the blue
and green neon lights you could see red and gold flecks
suspended inside like snowflakes--
I know the heaviness that clings to even the smallest fossil,
know how it feels to tenderly wrap possibility in a towel,
smuggle it back home; I know if I only ask, you'll let me
hold its lightness between my hands.

After the Last Apple is Picked, Placed on Top of the Basket

We leave the orchard, return to the house, its lights
Glowing pale orange against evening. Already
The sky is turning black. We watch for the first stars
To reveal themselves, Mary turning an apple around
And round with her fingers. Contemplating the first bite,
She makes a wish to hold us safe.

Our mother has taught us to preserve, put away fruit
For winter. Pulling the knife toward her, unafraid,
She explained how to turn the blade into flesh, how
To unravel skin into unbroken ribbons:

In another time, she is a witch filling her bowl, teaching
Her daughters the secrets of her magic. We refuse
To breathe, afraid to speak, afraid our voices might break
Her spell. Looking up from her work, she tells how
This power followed her here across country. Laughing,
She recalls stopping at each roadside orchard, Magic always
Standing among the trees, watching as her hands reached to pick
Fruit; watching as she washed the apples in buckets of cool water,
Like children dirty with play. With Venus slowly rising,
She hand-dried each one. Laying them out "to breathe"
In the night air, she crawled up next to Magic, slept peacefully.
Each apple eaten, demanded she stop, bury its core to mark her way
To this orchard now empty, covered in night and sounds of insects
Slowly coming to life.

This is where Magic led her--to rows & rows of apple trees.
How Magic blessed her--with daughters of hardwood.
What Magic has taught us--

Tomorrow, Mary will scatter cores and seeds for the birds
To feast on. I will make sauce and butter out of bruises
That've broken down flesh, will spread apple-skin curls out
To dry into tart red leather.
Tonight, we'll sleep peacefully--Mary's wish turning
On her fingertips like an apple--its bloody skin darkly receding--
Her first bite revealing flesh bright as a moon come to full term.

Composing in Early Spring

is like music or rain walking across the earth,
stubbled fields rising
into a harvest
behind the old man
as he bends ladles

damp earth into the cup of his hands

his unexplained movement startling

spotted brown meadow birds
feeding on bared worms
and beetles.

Wingbeats flirt with the raw edges
of spring.

Among turned rows
his figure looms

small and sudden
beneath this back-and-forth
song
of spring.

The Magical Paintings of Li Sun

Believing there'd always be enough, the young mother patiently worked the land, bending down and pulling from it all the earth promised. She told her son their story while he nursed, as he fell asleep beside her.

How just before dawn the mountain god held out his hand, and a soft stone mountain rose from her womb. They each grew strong believing she knew a god, that while he coiled around her spirit, she knelt in a god's

cupped hand, had drawn water to her lips, reverently cutting the path of her son's life. Stepping into his cool violet-green shadows that fall then rise into the mountain's likeness, it is easy to believe the stories,

swear that in releasing the fears that pin us to this earth we can hear wing beats fluttering against silk, feel the mist as watercolors pool beneath jagged cliffs. Some believe when Li Sun traveled to what was then the end of the earth

in search of this mountain, he saw the world's first white crane in relief against a darkening sky. That night at the river's edge, the boy drew the crane's likeness in the sand, offered it as praise to the god who created the beauty

and grace of birds. Some believe the god so pleased he freed the crane from the sand at first light. The other gods--those of such mysteries as waterfalls and valleys, even the god who cared for the dragons--were jealous.

At night they shared secrets with Li Sun's spirit, secrets only gods should know. Secrets of brushes made from reeds and grasses and his own hair; they led him to the source of the truest colors. As his arm rose to meet the canvas, winds

blowing along the curve of the world caught beneath the skeleton of his wings, the wings we were all born to. And each morning he woke with a greater hunger, a hunger that led him farther than he ever believed it possible to journey.

Faith

The guide book we follow west claims that a voice dropped from the north rim of the canyon will be pulled down by the earth's magnetic force, claims gravity can transform sound into an avalanche that picks up momentum, gains strength in its struggle against the inevitable. And for years my husband has dreamed he could meet his own voice at the bottom, could breathe it back into his soul before it shattered against the rock. I listen to this story as we drive west out of the pine-belted south, as we cross the Mississippi; and as we slowly gain altitude, our bodies expanding in the thinning air, this vision he's slept with since childhood grows clearer, like a voice calling to us from just outside a screen door. As I cup my hands around my lips, lean into the canyon, and shout *yes*, I remember these stories:

How the history books I followed through school showed children standing in the cradle of civilization, their arms extended west, as if knowing even then what mystery lay just beyond the river that suckled them, sang them to sleep on those first cool nights. Below the photograph of these first dark-haired, wild-eyed children the caption explained away their excitement, their burgeoning wisdom as mere superstition based on celestial phenomena.

How I witnessed my mother grow tired, heavier with the weight of each child she carried, felt the pull of each new mouth gladly lifted to a breast. And as I learned to think logically, learned to measure the human heart with a straight edge, I discovered that sadly missing

from those epic moments set in type, collated into one complete, uninterrupted narrative were the minutes, entire days, weeks, even months of those awkward times when we took our first steps, cut our first row of teeth, uttered the first no, formed the first yes, tasted the first drop of blood taken by force when a child obeyed those desires not yet understood.

How, in a motel in Shamrock Texas, my husband began his story at its beginning; his mother's voice warning him, making him promise never to answer small, late-night voices calling for him--the sharp ridge of her finger pointing through the door facing west where she believed death was waiting to be invited in.

Snow Angels

I.

Last night, after you slipped
into bed, after the overhead light
was out, the weather lady warned
that the storm would "blow down
and out of Canada," repeating
"snow" "snow" "snow"
at the end of each breath, the end
of her stick tapping against the roof
of our house. "Snow here, spreading
throughout the metro,
throughout the day."

You slept through it all; the first winds
gathering, the sky bending into an endless
gray sea. Suddenly, as you twisted
in your sleep, I remembered
I will always love you, remembering
how cold love can sometimes be.

7:45 a.m.: I walk you to the bus stop,
wait at the end of the block for you
to cross the last street safely; I watch
for the promised snow, a little frightened
at how easily you step from my ability
to focus, how easily your likeness weaves
itself into the landscape, until the frozen
colors of your clothes, your hair,
seem a part of the storm I am holding
myself against.

II.

It's only the moon reflecting blue off
the winter's first snow as it falls, crowding
the house, keeping me awake, rehearsing
what I'll say in the morning when I wake you

with news of snow. With breakfast I'll recount
another old wives' tale, this one about babies
held up to dance barefoot in their first snow.
You'll be amazed you've survived this long,
especially with a woman of such ready faith,
a mother who'd let your feet dangle in the snow
until you cried.

Maybe it wasn't love, but it could be why you'll fall
so easily into this new landscape almost too white,
too barren in its need for footprints. Maybe that taste
of snow is why you'll never settle for just one angel,
why you'll lift yourself again and again to create
a choir of wings, why you'll so easily sweep beauty
from such clinging coldness.

Connecting Joint

Walking home through the empty lot, I know
you've fixed potatoes for supper, know you
no longer find it funny that we can read
each other in passing, the way blind fingers
arrange a face into an epic. I am not surprised
this power follows us when we divide, separate
into mornings, nor amazed by its firm roots,
how it creeps across the yard toward town
the way just-mowed clover recovers, returns
with vengeance and white blooms.

Water-thick days are hardest for you. Words drip
from leaves--a pretend rain, a joke about spring.
You pull up rootfulls of damp grass to weave
a skull cap, a breast plate, imagined protection
from this hand. That is how you feel this joint
where we meet, a hand steeling through eye-flesh,
muscle-walls, driving straight through to bone.
You imagine this into your weaving, yet your fingers
cannot free us from this skewer pinning us together,
spinning us above flames.

In the self portrait you give me for Christmas,
you sit on a fence, hands cover your ears. You don't
want to know what I see or hear the names connected
to your children who'll play along the river banks,
or taste the mud caked to their souls like wind.
I'll say: we've done this before, will do this again,
this hand reaches deeper than time, just as I know,
tonight, as you sleep, you'll forgive this hand wrapping
us in its fist--as I know one day you'll remember
how wet and cold winter can be, you'll call, ask me
to visit, invite me to supper.

VITA²

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