Night Traveler and Other Works

M.J. Iuppa

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Night Traveler and Other Work

by

M.J. Iuppa

A Thesis

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Night Traveler and Other Work
by
M.J. Iuppa

Approved: Judith Ilati
Advisor 5/8/00

Reader

Reader 5/11/00

Chair, Graduate Committee
Earl Jupp
Chair, Department of English 5/11/00
Landscape as Informant

The willingness to offer one self to the other, leads paradoxically to the making visible of the particularity of the self... Often that particularity reveals itself in the details rather than in the large.

-- Jane Hirshfield

In contemporary American poetry, the poet's landscape serves as image, metaphor, and statement. Landscape grounds the poet's ideas in a concrete and visual arena in which readers can see the connection of idea (the poet's internal landscape) with image (the poet's external landscape). Landscape is an opportunity for the poet to witness the world from a particular place. Standing in a particular place allows the poet to identify his/her surroundings: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Nature serves as a common ground where the poet can build poems based on images that readers can recognize through their senses, can see, feel, taste, touch, hear. Without this grounding in images, poems have a tendency to evaporate into thin abstraction. Perhaps one analogy would be to imagine a cloud of cotton candy on a paper stick. Think of the moment when you pluck off a piece of the spun sugar and pop it into your mouth. It's gone instantly, and you're left with only a taste of sugar. This experience is strangely disappointing; nonetheless, you pluck another piece in hopes of satisfaction, but
it's never realized. Poems that are elusive and insubstantial as cotton candy are lost in their moment, leaving readers perplexed. Poems need to be memorable. Images are the specific details that make the poet's world visible to others.

When the poet identifies his/her world, there is a discovery of life rooted in time—past, present, future—that is, in part, retrospective, introspective, and speculative about the human condition. This allows the poet to create poems that cross boundaries, or take steps backward or forward in his/her journey to articulate the ways of seeing one's life. The journey can result in poems that are lyrical meditations or narratives, or both, which in its cumulative effect becomes landscape as informant. The poems' landscapes give readers access to the poet's exterior and interior views—the images and ideas—the people and places—that inform or teach an understanding, perhaps a appreciation of his/her life.

Through a progression of concrete images, readers are able to visualize and discern the poet's exterior landscape. When readers recognize the poet's "sense of place," they are able to look deeply into the images to consider the poet's interior landscape. The interior landscape is the emotional consequence of the poem, which may be presented through its exterior images either subtly or directly, but is nonetheless the undercurrent or heart of the poem. When a poet's exterior and interior landscape is presented effectively, readers know "what is at stake" in the poem. They are able to engage readily in the poet's
progression of images and ideas and, through its cumulative effect, arrive at a thoughtful conclusion.

How do readers come to appreciate a poet's landscape, especially if the landscape is foreign to their experience? Convincing images speak a thousand words. When a poet uses vivid and fresh language, he/she is making exclusive word choices that illuminates the poem's subject. Ezra Pound, one of the most influential modern poets, wrote: "An Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant in time" (106-7). Seemingly, Pound's perspective on the image is much like witnessing the instant when a struck match bursts into flame. This image could be interpreted as a symbol for eloquent speech or a moment of clarity; whichever it is, Pound believed that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol" (107). He was known for his advice to fellow poets: "Go in fear of abstractions" (qtd. in Kennedy and Gioia 51). He believed that the use of abstract words such as truth, time, justice dealt with ideas or concepts in general terms, rather than specific. He felt that using an abstract word in relationship to an image, over-qualified the image, thus rendering it "dull" (107). An example of Pound's over-qualified image would be: the downy dove's feather of peace. Pound, no doubt, would have cringed at this. He expected The Image to embody the concept of the abstract word. In this example, peace should be "understood" in the mention of the dove's feather;
therefore it isn’t necessary to mention *peace* (107).

In Stephen Dunn’s essay “The Good, The Not So Good,” fellow poets are given a terse prescription on how to avoid being *dull*. His essay alternates in advice on what he considers to be “the good” and “the not so good” poem:

> The good poem illuminates its subject so that we can see it as the poet wished and in ways the poet could not have anticipated. It follows that such illumination is twofold: the light of the mind, which the poet employs like a miner’s beam, and that other light which emanates from the words on the page in conjunction with themselves, a radiance the poet caused but does not control. (39)

Brendan Galvin’s recent collection *Sky and Island Light*, is a stunning example of “good poems illuminating [their] subject.” The subject in *Sky and Island Light* is Galvin’s brooding meditation on the “long and short” of life. Through keen and unwavering observations, Galvin presents incidents occurring in several different landscapes: his native Cape Cod, Ireland, the Outer Hebrides, the Orkneys, and the Shetland Islands. He considers the goings-on in the natural world as a metaphor for the human condition. He speculates on bird behavior, migration, and survival in comparison to man’s behavior, immigration, and survival. Through his reflections, whether it’s looking at cobwebs (“... look/out at these sheet webs/ the spiders make and fog/lifts into sight...”) (4), or
noticing the seasons as memory ("Tagged as it was/ with a single yellow leaf/
like the idea of fall,/ green underneath/ where the grass wished it . . .") (14), or
imagining the journey of ancestors ("Here’s someone/ who might tell you a story/
beginning, Long ago at the morning of the world . . .") (38), he questions the
seemingly ephemeral state of being, and wonders what lasts beyond a lifetime.

Looking at the second poem in Sky and Island Light, “A Ring of Quail Bones,” careful readers will be able to discern how Galvin’s conversational ease
and artful use of images manages to consider the quail’s life in the past-present-
future:

I found them just off the fireroad
by the marsh, around a low
bush of wind-stripped sweet gale,
breastbones like ploughshares,
skulls papery, still unscuffed where
they’d crouched in their circle,
heads outward, still facing
whatever night brings, ready
to explode up the air
that found them out and feathered them
a flake at a time and left them under
rain and crust. This morning,
my gaze drawn upward by a muffled
thump at the skylight, three
drank on yellow feet
from a gathered night rain,
their bellies patterned with arrowheads,
another little drama of the fall;
and certain gifts from childhood
occurred, models of perfection I had
no fingers fine enough to assemble. (2)
First begin with the title’s image: “a ring of quail bones” suggests bones in a circle, an image which can mean creation, life, evolution. Now continue interpreting the images occurring in the poem. Notice how the poem is constructed in two sentences, which represent two different incidents and times: “breastbones like ploughshares,” “skulls papery,” “crouched in their circle,” “heads outward,” “ready to explode” are images of Galvin’s imagination when he discovered the quail bones on his walk. It’s apparent that this quail has been dead for some time, and he contemplates the incident of its death. The images in the second sentence construct an incident of this morning: “muffled thump,” “drank on yellow feet,” “gathered night rain,” “bellies patterned with arrowheads,” “little drama of the fall,” “certain gifts,” “models of perfection,” “no fingers fine enough to assemble.” The “muffled thump” is the quail that accidentally hits his skylight window. Galvin watches the other quails as they drink the night rain. The ending seems to be a contemplation on survival. How marginal it is between life and death? Galvin holds up the mystery of “certain gifts” and “models of perfection” that he has “no fingers fine enough to assemble.”

This poem sets the tone in Sky and Island Light. It’s a tone of serious musing, a voice which articulates the need for pause in this world in order to
make-sense of it. So many of the poems are about things, large and small, that are worth noticing: "Cobwebs on the Hillside," "Draggers," "One for the Lifelist," "The Patience of White Birches," "Apple Talk" are measures of endurance. Things that last and do not last. Inasmuch as Sky and Island Light is about landscape, it is also about the people who live there. It's a chronicle of the unusual in their daily living, their passage from old world to new world, and the continuation of family names and history.

Two poems, "For a Daughter Gone Away" and "Getting Through," which occur at the center of the collection, are the most intimate and personally rendered in Sky and Island Light. These poems address the issue one witnesses when a child grows out of the family home and enters adulthood. Both poems are pivotal in the collection's progression because its focus switches from the observation of nature and things to people and circumstances. After this point, the poems delve into retracing the steps of ancestral emigration. The poems recreate the stories and myths, hopes and fears of family making their way to America's New England.

The title poem, "Sky and Island Light," is both whimsical and serious in its delivery. It begins in dialogue claiming, "My mother used to watch the angels/ diving off the clouds up there" (46). This is said in the cemetery where the view, an expanse of sky and sea light, could make people aware of their smallness.
in the world. Yet the young want to leave their small island for the cities to seek their fortunes, and it is the elder who says, "‘They’ll/ not see any angels in Edinburgh,’ she said. ‘The island gives you a right/ relation to yourself. You’re small/ but you’re not lost in the dimensions/ of the place you know . . .’" (46). This phrase, “the place you know” seems to be Galvin’s closure that in spite of one’s movement from place to place, there is history and memory, time, and a family record of births and deaths; and you, careful observers, are the keepers.

Another offering of Dunn’s “good poem” advice:

Poets must be both cocky and humble. They must trust their own assertions and observations in the face of overwhelming uncertainties. They must know their job is not to offer The Truth, but to be persuasive about their version of it. The key is the voice. In the good poem, the voice informs us that the poet embodies what the poem asserts. (38)

Billy Collins’ collection Picnic, Lightning lives up to Dunn’s expectations of “cocky and humble.” Collins is capable of being sassy, smart, fun-loving, and playful. The secret to his poems is voice. He is able to capture your ears as if he were letting you, and only you in on a private conversation. He too is attentive to images and landscapes. In Picnic, Lightning, his approach to his subject is different from Brendan Galvin’s. Collins seems to focus on the
intimate details of his life. Whether while eating breakfast, or listening to jazz, or reciting a haiku, or having a dinner party, or looking at the moon, he is interested in discovering his version of "The Truth" through the personal. Some of his poems are engaged in an on-going dialogue where the "you and I" are present. Some are monologues addressing the world as the collective "we" where we're all accountable, or it's the "I" who speaks with authority, or humor, or melancholy. There is something disarming in Collins' language. The poems read like jazz improvisation. The mood shifts with its images and landscapes, and its tone of voice, which makes readers pay close attention.

In the Room of a Thousand Miles

I like writing about where I am
where I happen to be sitting,
the humidity or the clouds,
the scene outside the window--
a pink tree in bloom,
a neighbor walking his small, nervous dog.
And if I am drinking
a cup of tea at the time
or a small glass of whiskey,
I will find a line to put it on.

My wife hands these poems back to me with a sigh.
She thinks I ought to be opening up
my aperture to let in
the wild rhododendrons of Ireland,
the sun-blanchéd stadiums of Rome,
the waterclock in Bruges--
the world beyond my inkwell.
I tell her I will try again
and travel back to my desk
where the chair is turned to the window.
I think about the furniture of history.
I consider the globe, the lights of its cities.
I visualize a lion rampant on an iron shield,
a quiet battlefield, a granite monument.

And then— just between you and me—
I take a swallow of cold tea
and in the manner of the ancient Chinese
pick up my thin pen
and write down that bird I hear outside,
the one that sings,
pauses,
then sings again. (29-30)

The title, “In the Room of a Thousand Miles,” is an indirect lead into the poem’s subject of creativity. Collins begins with a statement, “I like writing about where I am,” which makes readers aware that “the Room” can be a “Thousand Miles” from anywhere; yet it is where he happens to be. Collins proceeds to reveal the details of his landscape: “The scene outside the window—/
a pink tree in bloom,/ a neighbor walking his small, nervous dog.” This is his view, “his window on the world,” where he watches and drinks tea or whiskey and finds “a line” into a poem. He creates poems out of the routine of his life and suffers his wife’s scrutiny when she reads them. She feels he should be having larger thoughts, “opening up [his] aperture to let in” the world beyond his view. Collins is remarkably good-natured at her advice and says, “he’ll try again.” But
in his traveling back to his desk "where the chair is turned to the window,"

Collins, in a twist of irony, "thinks," "considers," and "visualizes" long enough to have an aside with his readers, and after a swig of "cold tea," that bitter edge he needs, he continues as he always has--deliberate and certain, writing down what he knows.

"Picnic, Lightning," the title poem of the collection, reveals Collins' intention to see one's life in the unexpected. He begins the poem using an epigraph from *Lolita*. Humbert says, "My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three." This epigraph is a *jumping off point* for the poem and, perhaps, the collection. The epigraph, in itself, is a gem of a thought, so instead of merely reinventing the scene of the picnic and lightning in the poem, Collins proceeds to speculate on all the possibilities of "freak" accidents: "... struck by a meteor/ or single-engine plane/ while reading in a chair at home," or "The heart, no valentine/decides to quit after lunch" (24). These are rare occurrences, but the thought of them makes one pause and consider the moment of one's life. The concept of "be here now" surfaces as Collins describes his planting impatiens. His thoughts on Death emerge as he looks at his hard work in the garden, but the possibility of life continuing to the unexpected is what keeps him attentive:

> and all I hear is the rasp of the steel edge
> against a round stone,
the small plants singing
with lifted faces, and the click
of the sundial
as one hour sweeps into the next. (25)

As Collins finds the personal in his landscape, Louise Glück creates the spiritual in hers. Dunn purports that:

The good poem allows us to believe we have a soul.

In the presence of a good poem we remember/discover
the soul has an appetite, and that appetite is for emotional veracity and for the unsayable. The general condition of the soul, therefore, is stoic hunger, stoic loneliness. (40)

Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* is a collection of poems working in a sequence that reveals the soul's "appetite for emotional veracity and for the unsayable." Glück's style is highly restrained and imagistic, yet it is fueled by its intense, emotional undercurrent. *The Wild Iris* as a sequence of poems builds in a cumulative effect. It's a "braiding" of three voices speaking to each other. All of the "flower" poems, such as "The Wild Iris," "Trillium," "Lamium," "Snowdrops" are the voice of the poet-in-the-world, speaking about the art of making art, making self, and surviving. The "Matins" are morning prayers. This is the voice of daily living where the poet contemplates her life alone, her life with family, and her life in the world. "Vespers" are the evening prayers-- the introspective voice of the poet, reporting the outcome of daily events, the
successes and failures [mostly failures] for which the poet claims responsibility. The third voice is the voice of God. God speaks in all the poems which reveal themselves as a force of nature, or in the cycle of seasons. Poems such as “Clear Morning,” “Spring Snow,” “End of Winter” are moments of God’s point of view, which may be kind or dispassionate dialogue, depending on the “weather.”

In regard to these three distinct voices, it is important to recognize that Glück has artfully constructed different personas through her use of pronouns. The pronouns “I” and “You” are read differently in each of the “voice” sections. The “I” can be the poet, herself, or speaking as the “I” of mankind, or is the “I” as God. The “You” can be God, or the poet in her daily life, or the indirect or direct “you.” This switching of pronouns gives Glück an opportunity to have “balance” and finesse in presenting her voices without confusing her readers.

Glück makes her world visible through the particularity of her New England landscape. By choosing specific wildflowers and trees that are indigenous to New England, she is able to create poems that extend the metaphor of “where does one belong.” Since these wildflowers and trees are native to this place, then it is understood how they can lay claim to “owning” the landscape. Being “native” implies a certain tenacity that most “wild” flowers and trees have. The fact that they grow on their own means “survival,” and survival promises “new” life in every Spring. It’s in this garden, much like the garden of Eden,
that readers witness a cycle of life in the natural progression of a year. The three voices heard through the flowers, matins and vespers, and nature are engaged in a living dialogue: questions and answers that are pushing toward the poet’s reconciliation.

The title poem, “The Wild Iris” begins this collection:

The Wild Iris

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death
I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of pines shifting.

Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came

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a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater. (1)

"The Wild Iris" begins at a threshold. Its lyrical voice, *stoic and lonely*, is the flower speaking from its "soul" [bulb] "buried in the dark earth." It remembers, and consequently, it knows that it will rise from its "oblivion" to bloom with a voice. This opening poem describes a "perennial" resurrection which, as a metaphor, can be extended to the human "rebirth," or a belief in second chances. Glück's imagistic style coupled with her use of rhetorical devices, such as "that which," "in which," "in the same degree" demonstrate an effective restraint in her poetic line. It forces a sparsity of words as well as a compression of images, which creates a highly charged, breath-taking poem. There is a remarkable leap from "The Wild Iris's" opening: "At the end of my suffering . . ." to "from the center of my life came/ a great fountain, deep blue/ shadows on azure seawater." Its first words are engaging and intimate, making readers sympathetic to its voice. The ending is dazzling. The image rises up in its full bloom of self-awareness.

It's in this self-awareness that *The Wild Iris* begins its journey. The journey questions the human condition, man's responsibilities, and puzzles over the concept of eternity. This questioning "wrestles" with life, wanting to name the difference between "knowing" and "being."

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In the end, the banter between God and the poet-in-the-world ceases. There is a silence, an introspection, where in the poem, “The Gold Lily,” the voice cries out, *why have I been forsaken?* And God doesn’t answer. The answer is another garden, “The White Lilies,” where a man and a woman become the garden of their own making.

This reveals that living, *truly living* has its risks, but it is worth that moment when one’s life is fulfilled and released to its ecstasy:

```
Hush, beloved. It doesn’t matter to me
how many summers I live to return:
this one summer we have entered eternity.
I felt your two hands
bury me to release its splendor. (63)
```

Transformation or the spiritual in the natural world informs readers when it’s least expected, giving them an opportunity to see *beyond* what is known. Transformation causes a sometimes subtle, sometimes radical change in the readers’ perceptions. The change can’t be contrived when the poet’s landscape is physical, emotional, and spiritual. Perhaps this change embodies all that is *social* or *political* because the human condition is “settled” on it, or is “rooted” in it.

As Americans, we are constantly searching for what is “authentic,” a place that we can name and call our own; and because most of us are descendants of emigrants, we are intrigued when we hear the narratives that were carried from some distant land and rooted here. Perhaps this is why Galvin’s, Collins’,
and Glück's poetry is successful. Their poems are "authentic" to their particular landscape. Reading their poems heightens our awareness of our landscapes, making us contemplate why we've settled in a particular place, or traveled to other lands. The knowledge gained seems to be the same desire that the ancients wanted when they left their "hand prints" on the cave's wall. It's a claiming of history, a statement of being visible (I was here), and an opportunity to face each other and recognize what we have in common in this world.
Works Cited


The Landscape in *Night Traveler*

Standing under the dome of lake sky in the early morning, hearing the shimmering peepers’ song in the first days of spring, watching for the return of the Canada geese and Mute swans and that faint green-haze on bushes and trees, catching a glimpse of the pastel bee boxes tucked away in a thicket of woods... these are only a few of the images that name my landscape. I am drawn to Nature; I am intrigued by its persistence, strength, humor, and beauty. Nature offers me images daily, giving me an opportunity to create poems that talk intimately about human concerns without being confessional.

*Night Traveler* is a collection of lyrical and lyrical-narrative poems, which is divided into four sections that represent the passage of time in a “symbolic” year. The speaker “I” isn’t fictionalized, nor are the events, or landscape. The “I” is authentic, as well as my family who populate these poems. The circumstances of these poems are actual events in my life. Facing the deaths of my parents, remembering my past and attempting to find some solace and renewal in my daily living is the ambition of this collection.

*Night Traveler* moves through time, beginning in autumn
with the foreshadowing of death, through winter’s brooding and uncertainties, into “beyond winter” which is a hesitant release into spring, and then to summer where the “I” reconciles her past and present so she can make a commitment to the future.

The images that inform Night Traveler are: corn (in all stages of growth); Lake Ontario in its various guises; strings, lines, connections—things crossed, and broken, and mended. There is movement in the lyrical narratives, where the language is charged with locomotion, pushing idea and image into new territories with its irony of situation. In the lyrical poems “holding still” compresses idea and image to sustained meditations. There is remembrance of the past (good and bad) and recognition of the future; and a sense of journey, which is literally driving, place to place. Yet there is an unknown destination—the unfinished journey. In the web of all of these images is perhaps the core of Night Traveler, which attempts to name women’s work and the concept of “home.” Home represents the past, present, future and, like Nature, is ephemeral, constantly changing, yet maintaining itself. When the “I” reconciles her losses, anger and responsibilities, she finds herself at the water’s edge wanting to go home.
Night Traveler

“Cold Cuts” is forthcoming in Tar River Poetry and “Imagining the Face” and “Mourning refuses relief” are forthcoming in Yankee. Some of these poems appear in the chapbook Sometimes Simply, Foreseeable Future Press, 1996; “Neutralities” appeared in Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry, “Trout” and “Rain” are forthcoming in an anthology Fresh Water, Pudding House Publications.
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For my mother, Josephine D’Andrea Iuppa  
April 7, 1910- September 17, 1997

who taught me how to appreciate and recognize others.

&

For my father, Louis A. Iuppa, M.D.  
November 15, 1906- January 2, 1999

who taught me to be observant, and be prepared.
Section I
Hiking in the Mountains

The cow pasture called *Heart*
lies neatly carved
in the face of the old mountain.

Below, the Allegheny
snakes its way past small towns where names
on mailboxes match gravestones.

Time seems to keep measure, season to season,
and love, while hiking in the mountains, is negligible --
I found this path a struggle, climbing against rock and wind
and bramble--
    Just to stand for that glorious moment
and look out beyond myself.

    Honestly, I didn’t expect
to find someone so down to earth
this close to clouds.
Corn, dark green streamers overhead, flickers

in heat; deceives my eyes to think of water
rippling across the field. In motion is sea,
a place floating without anchor, but anchored
in the maze of corridors where a small space
lets me slip in without being seen, and I
can run hard against the sound of water,
walls of green that hold me where I am going to
a place beyond recognition, somewhere and any where,
and smells of earth and water, and is green.
Green as the eye of day that foresees my grief
that grows slowly in me like the last child, the one
who fears night in day and flees because every day
is quicker than the last, like shadows turning
the corridor that lies just up ahead.
I need to chase the one that leads me out.
Red Peppers

Today marks the last day in the garden. I smell ruin in the raw air, feel slight bruises, spreading under skins of peppers hiding their brilliance under a collapsed canopy of leaves.

I part the waste of spoiled flowers and blighted buds to push the forward roll of peppers into the cup of my hand.

I am detached, knowing the peck basket holds peppers to its brim and tips over, but it isn’t over until peppers are carried beyond shadows on the grass to the heat of the kitchen. Here, rumors are settled, and a lukewarm bath is the beginning of coming clean.

These peppers are heavenly, supple bodies ready to be offered:

Placed under the searing heat is the moment of separation—skins fall away and hearts are lifted.

In a dark blue bowl, I resolve roasted red peppers drenched in virgin oil and garlic.

It is a timeless gesture.
I put out bread, and call you to the table.
Hawk

He scans every rustle in the wheat before
dusk failing
to capture one furred vprice.
Without sensation of being conscious, nerve
preserves his idle work to a moment
of falling from branched darkness, honing
color, shape, movement
to a pinpoint in his pupil.
His mood changes ever so slightly.
Passing the Hat

_for Louis A Iuppa, M.D. at 90_

My father, the good doctor, is patient, sitting perfectly still in his chair, thin arms crossed in his lap with five of his favorite hats stacked on top of his head.

... 'We are moving back to the city, closing the lake house for another winter. My mother speaks to me in few words, and I understand what steps need to be taken.

We work at the same time, but alone, glancing out bedroom windows at the new stretch of beach; the lake mirrored blue as the sky without wind or cloud, believing that we'll be back as we bundle summer clothes in bedding and shut doors behind us.

I pass my father—once, twice, three times. His pale blue eyes follow me; he smiles, but doesn't shake his hat heavy head. He gives me “thumbs up,” reaches to the top of his hats and tosses me one. In his effort, a chuckle catches in his throat. He turns his face away until it passes—

This is the way it is.

Tentatively, I place his cap on my head—he watches me pull the brim down over my eyes, and asks, _Are you ready?_
Not Any Moon

In a night sky in early September, the moon
shies away,
yet, I see its light through honey locust leaves,
shining
its braille of shadow that survives long enough
beneath fingertips . . .

And when no one is watching,

light strikes again
its silvery wash,
cold as ash, and slippery as ice, is a conceit I know
in a life spent on what's missing.
Not another autumn

but this autumn, bright
Chinese lanterns bound to bittersweet;

sprigs of silver dollars trembling
on thin wires overhead.

I buy a bunch, honoring this afternoon
and shadows caught in the kitchen

with its fire spent. No doubt.
The ashes, warm and powdery grey,

stir my disbelief that you're no longer
sleeping to wake on the west coast.

The funeral was our sleep walking:
We passed each other, night into morning,

missing your voice and movements
to hurry us to the hill.

Instead, I took my time combing mother's
hair, listening to her breath, rise and fall;

her fingers fixing her pearls around her neck.
None of us were quite ready to close the circle.

I didn't listen to the blessing
of dirt, or prayers we know by heart, but

felt fooled by death's bribery:
knowing God is big, isn't enough.
Crossing Borders  

(Paris, 1969)

Narrow-cobbled streets  
between churches lead me back to the door  
with the lion’s head where the walk-up flat  
affords us discomfort. It was love, and  
a pull down bed that unhinged itself  
in any rocking—the late night train  
rumbling by like clockwork. We were vaulted  
beyond sleep into the wall’s darkness.

A friendly drug addict who heard our pounding  
called our ritual benediction.

We’d see him alone in the cafe eating black  
bean soup and crusty bread after days of bingeing.

He’d wave us over to sit with him. His chatter  
preferred blonde whores after highballing—  
struck by their scissored legs, bare shoulders, black  
lips blowing sickles of smoke just above his head . . .

It made us uneasy: the blind man at the bar with his blind dog,  
the two-way mirror, the sound of submachine guns firing  
around corners after curfew, and footsteps scraping over  
broken walls . . . I left home to forget Christianity and  
the Irish boy who could melt words that were good  
for nothing, but a few tarnished coins dropped in a tithe box
bought me a skinny match to light one of a hundred candles in red votive glass.

I always chose one closest to Mary's bare feet. When I put out the match with my fingers, I'd breathe in

the sulfur, and see the serpent's sapphire eye, his mouth slightly open with the weight of what stood on his neck.
Practicing cursive

The Spanish mansion on the hill, at dusk, its watery windows
bright with the sun's fire, and the approaching wilderness
sinking in quick shadows with the wind's concentration
cool on our foreheads, and sound of mother's sigh
as she lay down on her homely sheets, glowing blue
in the dark, her bedroom window cracked open, letting
in the smell of pine, and wet earth, and howl of tick
hounds tripping through old-leaves, running down
the hedgerow, that sudden swivel of silence made us sit up
and listen hard beyond our hearts pulsing in our ears, hear
any snap of twig or wild cry in the woods, reciting, always
writing, the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.
Imagining the Face

Pumpkins, lying in wait in a field, sprawled
against hardening vines, ready
to make a clean break.

The one that picks me isn't perfectly orange, or
insisting on a face with tooth and grin;
but a sleepy head that settles
in my hands.

I hold its weight
against my chest, imagining the face
that's not child or man or wolf, but
someone on the slip of breath,
a secret living its moment of light
that stands for itself, drawn well
in uncomplicated lines.
No one told me to take this road

Forty miles from home, sitting at an intersection of a hill where five corners converge beneath a flashing signal, someone expects me to stop long enough to see where I am...

Who lives here is anyone's guess: no one is ever out, standing on corners, watching cars.

Only empty porches and brooding windows reflecting the pioneer cemetery with its sagging gate and swollen trees, the Turn-In Tavern's neon honky-tonk; blistered clapboards in the shadow of the church, and the Thread n' Needle thrift shop...

Whoever lives here waits for someone else, for anyone to make this stop more than a quick decision before turning left on High Street...
Holding Still

In the dark corners of the farmhouse, they wait. Thick as thieves, they are the eyes—the keen sense poised in the center of the web.

They wait to feel the humming in a moment when wings are heavy and fall to collapse in the illusion: safety has a hollow sound.

Each morning I brush away the ends: the half-eaten wound in silk, the unhatched. And they, they are spitting among themselves, waiting to put the first line back.
Niagara Falls Museum

*Butterflies, moths, mummies--*

Walking dim corridors, Ancient Times,
we stop and look through glass
to see the petrified:
Death's grimace locked on insect and man
begs us, save them.

It's cold in here, and cruel:
odd splits of nature birth the two-headed calf,
three legged dog; the twisted cat--
kept specimens that argue they exist.

We turn to the present on the fifth floor,
a window overlooking the falls:
There it is--
the flow that is power,
its current moving.
Early Morning

In the wide yard of an abandoned farmstead,
a giant fir tree has collapsed--
fallen in the place of its shadow, lying broken
and stiff, its roots exposing the sore
mouth that's unable to speak--
I've been driving since the night before,
wheeling down mountain roads, seeing woods
and small towns repeat in the thrum of wind
and tire, and I am tired, coming closer
I stop, stop for a long time, look hard at
the giant fir, at the abandoned house, at
the wind-whipped yard, and wonder what life was
before shadows left country roads,
before nights became vacant space
and the house turned out its lights and only a tree
was left to stand against the odds of falling down.
Keeping Room

I'm starved for sleep. The bed looks enormous—comfort and comforter, I want to collapse into its fold.

I can't sleep, but hear water's soft drag on leaves, the sound sinking into gravel.

Nothing is wet, not roof or railing, I turn from the window, wondering about the hum in the wall, the crackle of dry air, the loom of a death star, turning on the moist breath of wasps.

I dream out of bed, listening to cicadas' steady thrum; I imagine a decent conversation, an understanding over a cool drink of water, a place where I can be awake.
Deer

If you could draw a line that traces
the birches growing white
near the fence, would you
picture it a threesome
clumped in conversation
over evidence of footprints
in the orchard, and apples
picked clean off branches
in early morning and
at dusk?

Would you
stare at clues, feeling
shy and cold-- your breath
smouldering over the impression
matted in grass?
Would you leave it alone
as a warning to others?
You could turn and run, run
very fast if you had to.
You could draw a line.
Night-Traveler

Driving late into the thick of country,
the mountain road rises up above the pines
into new moon blueness.

The open field stretching out before you is moving.
Bulky shadows, darker than jet, drift closer,
then float slowly back, caught
in the stream of your lights--a sea of long faces.

Holsteins, sleepy-eyed, rolling grassy tongues
in steamy mouths, look at your sudden stop
with no particular surprise. And you,

night-traveler are unblinking in this crowd
in the middle of the road, adjust your glasses;
worried if you've crossed over to the other side.
Section II
Blessings

After the first hard snowfall
the apple orchard appears blameless.
A scene from another country framed
in your kitchen window where
you watch the few leaves flail
like small open hands.

You count your blessings:
a ritual in Winter where David
walks beside you in a pioneer graveyard,
and you read the names of his family--
Zachary, Sarah, Sweet Georgie;
and dates of newborns marked
in small white stones . . .

You count on your left hand
the hundred days of Summer when
the apples bud small and green,
and leaves grow thick and dark,
full enough to hide you.

Evenings,
when you feel the ticking of the fire
and smell the first picked Macintosh
and Paula Reds, you see yourself
sitting on the bank of the Allegheny
on the blanket covered with dog hairs,
sharing apple wine . . .

Now after more snow
you feel a chill.
The woodstove is burning low,
and you begin to count the logs.
Boundaries

No doubt. There is talk in the absence of corn. As far as I can see, snow subdues these fields, diminishing the wild dreams of the man who intends to keep this land in the family.

Every year at this time he broods over the neatly tied bundles, bills and seeds, uncertain of the boundaries where whiteness dances in the sharp clap of wind, and snow swirls up and down and drags across the furrows in an unending-S signature that is his name . . .

He stares out the window, willing to accept whatever hypnosis offers beyond hope and the dark seed he keeps sewn in his inside pocket.
Compass

Is December the beginning or end?
Is this dome of sky with snow
swirling in wind’s cruel twist
over pocked fields, ditches,
rural routes turning
into another direction
a scene from life, or life?
Camouflage
white on white
blind thoughts
no horizon
Where am I?
Is it flight of blackbirds,
the point of return?
Apples and Oranges

Waking to darkness and senseless cold makes us recoil on the edge of our beds until we make our leap to swipe the snooze button on the radio—

Dumbstruck, the numbers flip to 5:12 a.m. on the red dial, and we curse under our breath, the ungodly beauty of our creased faces, hair stuck flat to our heads . . .

Downstairs, under the kitchen light, we meet: My daughter, head-bent, snatches a green apple and bites—tartness puckers her lips; she chews thoughtfully her eyes open wide and wider—watching me watch toast—the slice she’ll filch off my plate and I’ll be left with one, and a minute to talk to her . . .

She disappears before light fills the sky; and I’m in the doorway, moving backwards in her steps to stand again in the kitchen before the basket:

I pick the orange, and peel open its bumpy-side; let it blossom slowly.
Crossings

Dullness has no mercy.
It collects like dust
in corners and under beds.
I sweep the comings
and goings, half-asleep
in thoughts kept
simple. Tasks
in this household
are ancient additions
like beads slipping by tens
through my fingers.
I fail to pray
beyond the flatness
of my voice. My body
has gone to a different
residence, and the shadow
in the open door
grows out of its corner
thin and reproachful
shivering
Malaise

Something wrong isn't quite right:
a niggling feeling
in the pit of your stomach,
more than yearning, less than
grief . . .

It's trouble
and pain and hunger.

Cast down-in 'bright sun,
hard to see, harder to say.
Cold Cuts

I know I'm helpless, waiting in line in front of the Deli case, trying my best to describe thin sliced. The woman, who is Proud to Serve, looks through me, bustles toward the heft of light hams and hauls up a fresh one in absolute coolness.

There's a low, inarticulate hum: florescent buzz, counter click--63, 64--drone of all the words not spoken when the customer is right.

She says, "Half a pound?" without looking up from the bite of the blade. I'm embarrassed. She's caught me confused, surprised by her accuracy--the first slice waving in her hand like a flag of surrender--"Yes," I say, "that's right."

She isn't interested in approval. She says, "Anything else?"
War Stories

Let his eyes narrow with rage,
hard as brittle pinpoints,
his words like snake bites
on his pulse—venom
milked in blue tropical history,
story I’ve heard before
with another man
whose hands melted ice cubes
in bombay gin,
whose anger sunk him up
to his knees in river mud
and mosquitoes; night sweats
listening to leaf insects move
light as the hairs on his neck,
the disconcerting chill, the jerk
of a log breaking to embers,
his blade at my throat, my hand tight
on his wrist, throwing his sleep off me;
let the nightmare break apart into noise
of the television gone to snow,
and the red-rimmed eyes closing
without the stinking fear of knowing too much.
Weather

Snow falling all morning in the wind: the windowpane full of flowering fern crystals bent in a waver of unspeakable weather, invisible chill makes you fretful and taut, testing the view.

Isolated thoughts of never going back on hard words, your eyes roll in tension, ice set-blackly before your next move brings inertia, and a confused buzz hangs in your ear--you must move: eyes closed--arms outstretched.
Amnesia

When this table is left, mid-morning,
sun upon egg dishes,
a bead of orange juice on the oil cloth,
I hear our conversation.

It hangs
low on the scent of heat coming on, the predictable
sulfur of the slow crumbling globe,
the remains . . .

I doubt so much,
wanting purpose to carry us with grace,
the wishbone to break.

It fails.
By evening’s return, you walk through the doorway,
exclaiming: Darling, how are you! You look marvelous!
I found a glass sliver in my finger

No bigger than an eyelash,
it felt like a nail.

I held it under cold running water
and put pressure on the blind

opening; rubbed it, rolling
its hitching pain into sight.

Like a witch doctor, holding
my hand up in the air, hissing

prayers and profanities
to be released from this marriage.

I twirled, undue effort. This terrible
world throbbed, grew narrow

and blank behind closed eyes.

   My hand lost feeling--
frozen in its womanly shape like

a single glove lying open, palm up
in my lap. Like a hand I know is

unpredictable in love or hate, able
to smack me with the same heat,

but this shard of glass held me up. I
should have seen it coming. Something

so obvious, it gives me shivers.
Keeping Distance

Is aging another geometry?
Does the body suffer in degrees
what the mind loses?
My father, at ninety-one, sleeps
in right angles for hours.
Swaddled in comfort,
he dreams he’s alive, riding
the curl of each breath.
His stocking cap puckered
on the dome of his head.
He shudders when I wake him,
his blue eyes shock into widening
circles—he pulls back
to recognize me, moving
like a praying mantis,
his head tilts side
to side—hands
raised in prophetic
gesture, insistent,
nailing the air:
I’m here!
Nature

Out of nowhere
the opossum drops onto the pond's ice.
Its fur is grey, stuckfast to its forehead
and pink belly. It waddles, hurrying
to its first morning pee; oddly hesitating
to smell whatever else is fetid, or
pretending to be dead.

It doesn't see.
Its leathery tail drags, drags like my boots
against ice, testing this loss of balance,
that slip into the gaping blue crack.
While Staying In Someone’s Brownstone

Not for long—becomes longing for comfort, longing where loneliness makes sure of its routine, and nothing familiar—not table or chair or green leaves of plants—graces work with a sense of place, supper with family, bustling times...

Something to be said about modern elegance when you are the oldest object in the kitchen: You back off from chopping celery, carrot, onions to push away errant strands of graying hair, and stare at small red potatoes—boiling in the black pot; ground meat simmering in the skillet... Steam hits you in the face and you think Is this a joke?—second thoughts about eating alone in a city that has too many friends expecting more than Shepard’s pie and small talk.

You sit in the candlelight, hearing the intermittent beep of car-security, door slam, and exhaust of get away into nightfall, and think it’s a bit of luck, perhaps inevitable—lifting the silver spoon to your mouth.
Living

It is winter in the city,
The streets are greasy with rain.

Sound culls the exhaust of people hustling.

We’re confident, striding past alleys and storefronts, hardly looking into recesses filled with bedding and dirty bundles.

The gentleman isn’t apologetic, holding his cup upward.

He is exposed, toasting mankind.
Insomnia

Unable to fall asleep, I
listen to the iron horse running
on wind turned inside out.

The hooves against the roof
click like the clock’s exile.
My thoughts split into blossoms
that open in the dark.

The moon’s lamp burns all night.

It’s impossible to close my eyes
and ignore the horse’s pace—
It turns slightly
and starts again.
Window

In shivers of light and ice,
the dinosaur still remains
the age he was frozen.
A treetop eater, craning
his head back, unable
to swallow the star
on the tallest tree.

My breath fogs the windowpane
long enough to dissolve
what I can only imagine
surviving.
The dinosaur drifts
slower and slower
to a corner pool,
dark scales glittering
in winter soot.

I’ve been faithful, student.
The distance is a young orchard;
the sky is the color of a blind eye.
We are accountable to an ancient
who comes back, dark and cool,
recalling us to another life.
Snowlines

Seeing this field in winter
rinsed clean in new snow
and the scatter
of oaks, five generations
old, casting erratic shadows
in thin lines, I
think I'm a silhouette
of a woman, trying
to fall with the weight
of grief
into the gritty powder
that accepts my whim
of making angel wings
to skirt this world's
gravity.
Section III
Beyond Winter

the night grows longer and steady, standing 
with its arms and legs outstretched; 
sailing clear over the rim of the world 
without a word.

The watchful moon
knows the worst of night, shines a milky path 
with its bright eye across water, across land 
for those who look up, out of their lives 
and find themselves without kindness or faith,

shivers racing up their spines' circuits, 
shocking them into the face-to-face press 
of silence.

It's deafening: 
the roar without tongue, or sound, or spittle; 
the apparitions that appear fearsome in the hour 
before dawn vanish into the sky's ripped seam, 
their burning eyes caught in the net pointed 
with stars.
Imagine your village

by the sea, in the mountains, next to a forest.
Roofs and windows gleam in the sun.
From your window you look out and make a wish
on the face of the fountain clock.
It works.
You walk two miles to school everyday.
You learn.
Three poplars stand on the right of the farm
where you pick up fresh milk and eggs.
You leave the money in a tin cup.
No one is ever there to watch you.
You feel beautiful, walking home with the sun
on your back, your shadow leading the way.
In the end the voice of an adult speaks:

Not in the stern upbraid that hung
on your ear as a child, but
a voice like cold pearls is water
moving underground,
low-key, unwavering,
telling you to collect your wits.

Without melancholy
you look squarely into the mirror
see the face that is nearly you.
Across the floor, beneath the bed
is the scatter of blue beads, a silver
dime of your birth year, a spoon
left in last night’s bowl of soup . . .

You are intelligent.
You never threw anything away,
only lost some things when life
was a quarrel of moonlight
and hunger couldn’t be starved.

Hold your arms over your head.
No trace of muscles
that lugged losses, the ruins
like cigarette burns.

Take relief
in your hot bath, soaking in suds,
emerging with smells
of petals and wood and moss,
ready to live with thoughts
few believe in, without
being bothered--
seeing beauty in daylight,
making it alone.
Living close

She's up in the motion of her work.
The lights burn late.  When the surge
of electricity starts the fridge,
she hums.

And the lights dim:
She squints to see the room's abandon:
hers black flats 'poised on the scatter rug.
She knows that dance, teetering
in the wee hours.

She hums because
she can't be sloughed off in a name.
Her handiwork is close to the eye.
She hums, living in details
kept out of sight.
While you weren't listening in class

but talk-talking that low rumble,
that's meant to be half-heard;
just enough static to break
thoughts and keep us from learning
anything other than killing time.

... last night in a storm,
red lights flashing near the corner store,
the sharp pop-pop, the smell of gas;
screams above tires peeling away, before
he fell in his tracks on the store floor,
his jacket open, but still on, his back bloody.
He wanted to keep his leather as I want
to give this cover away. He's dead.

But while you weren't listening, more happens.
The street is hard to turn until you've lived.
The glitter has two faces, the dance is dark,
honey-layered, weaving many threads.
It catches us short, keeps us
repeating the story while you keep asking:
What do you want us to do?
What are we supposed to do
besides kill time?
Below where the softening begins in mud

eyed and brown,
peepers at dusk
ascend the invisible ladder.
A hundred voices is one voice
higher than the maples
into the pitch-black.
constellation.
Our throats swell.
Thinking of my mother, who tells my 90-year-old father that she isn’t afraid of death, but afraid of leaving him . . . She thinks it would be better if he were to die first. She knows loneliness in this world. My father is quiet. He reaches out to her with his shaky hand and says, Josephine, I’ll start dying tomorrow . . .

In front of me, a boy turns his bubble wand in a backhand wave--so many luminous spheres shake off, floating on mats of air, hovering just above the lawn’s freshly made bed of nails.

A girl, arms outstretched, eyes closed, head tipped back, tries to catch one small O on her tongue. She flies through this grey world, and swallows her sorrow, this bubble’s perfection--sun and moon, and hurricane, leaving the boy turning, turning into wind.
Chrysalis

Wrapped in the scent of leaves,
the dream is careful.
New skin unfolds beneath the old,
a lie for beauty.

The earth is cold after rain.
My secret bed hangs quietly
in mid-air.
I know nothing of the future,
but inherit this sleep.

Perhaps the world is empty
as I am brief
like a reckless soul
turning into light--
weightless beyond safety.
Mourning refuses relief:

No horizon, but haze
keeps the lake under a veil.
I search its mirror, poplars and sky
grow upside down in shadows
where minnows dart like silver
in the least mercurial stir,
and things settling in silt
wait out grief.
Sadness is the presence of the heron
watching carefully these still waters,
the reeds without sound.
The Gift

The lawn is quiet when the magnolia
lets down the great litter of tongues.

Bells of Ascension Thursday ring
in the moist smell of new loaves.

You put aside your rake
to bend closer to the living:

Drones in the grass
work hard at the tune.

You pick up where they leave off,
singing the words that took, forever.
Slow Motion

Blissful is bright gold,
the sun’s heat upon our faces after so much rain.
Even the birds’ singing quenches the quarrel
of bad moods.

Apple blossoms moist and pink
in the orchard hide the slow motion of deer holding
the stillness of the world, leaving no trace.
Found by accident

Beneath the plum tree's shade, the egg pale blue, lying in the yellow grass is a once-in-a-lifetime-chance.

And in spite of life, 
you hold it in your palm, stare at its shape, 
and know it's tough luck.

Smudged with dirt, a hairline crack 
leaks the ooze you didn't notice at first. 
The drizzle starts so slowly you hardly feel it.
Rain

And in late spring it rained, long and hard, sending Sandy Creek up over its banks into the neatly planted corn fields.

Trout swam blindly up and down the rows, splashing a glimpse of fin in their turning back toward the creek.

Children waded into the muddy water to catch the golden bodies before they disappeared between the green ribbons of corn.

It was impossible and giddy and strangely melodic—the sweetness of voices in the air.
Rock and Keep

for Meghan Rose

Not the saving of string, but
our child's game, a simple looping
of string on fingers, holds
my hands up in design.

Pick two strings, then pull:
your hands from mine and back again.
Like cats, we see for hours, in and out
of shadows; ordinary spaces

where we fit and rock and keep
passing this hand-made yarn,
this playing beyond the cradle.
Hour of hunger

Moored beneath
the flowering crab apple’s hot pink umbrella
with a cup of eight o’clock, I eaves-
drop on the honey bees’ spark
and flash of nobody’s business
heating up this late morning . . .

Wind
combs through these tender petals
in stiff, short tugs; making them
float in spirals, descending
to the dark strait
of newly planted grass:

I study this scene I’m tethered to:
Rocking the cup’s liquid to my lips,
my eyes retreat to the horizon’s
undoing, the sun ballooning to its hour
of hunger.
Close at hand is worry. So look closely--

    Edges
fray and unravel in my itchy fingers--
unconscious work.

    It's nit-picking,
perfecting a pincher grasp, tugging at
every loose thread, bump and pill that
weaves this throw into resigned comfort.

    If I were to wrap myself up
like a mummy or cocoon,
    I could sleep through this.

I could conceivably wake
without knowing.
Fields

In a corn field in late May, the corn is delicate but tight, plaits of green, rows of skinny ribbons braiding up the light and shadows, dancing on the foothills’ dark spine--

Tell me again about the Minnesota days, the end of a love affair, the woman with long brown hair, dark eyes, strong bones, sitting in your kitchen, studying the shape of a fresh egg in her thin hands.

Tell me again about the journey, the fields that all look the same, turning over the same love, good or bad, and seeds bought for Sweet Sal, Silver Queen, Bread n’ Butter; the same labor, what you felt but refused in a whim in a Winter that long ago, the same regret, not knowing but remembering, the woman and details, a child with blonde curls, that faraway look, that far away the corn fields.
Balance

Where cattails float
red winged blackbirds swing
on disappearing light.
A pond called Round.
Full of lilies, frog song--
green against waxy petal white--
those liquid eyes flash
into dark waters blind.

By touch and tap, the water
eases back into itself.
Dull heat and bug noise
whirring--
I take memory of this life:
the hard grit that remains
in bony shells,
the hour the heron
bends to its small fish.
Section IV
Awake

The farmhouse on the hill in the wash of summer’s morning light appears sleepy, screen door slightly open like a yawn, stretching shadows in the downshift of air. I hear the sound of exhale passing slowly, quietly over the yellow dog lying beneath ancient forsythia, over the murmur of chickens in the yard, the rustle of leaves above the black and white cows shifting in fields, above the stalled tractor, red and rusted, stranded in the hush of broken pumps and grinds; and below a leaky barn roof, smell of fresh hay, swallows without the sense of quiet, now articulate, my wide-eyed dream.
Blue Boat

for George and Peter

Into the reeds they push, push
beyond the mud sucking them back
to one stubborn place--
They break out and drift
into deeper water
where indigo culls
depth and sound and black fins.

The man with the orange vest
sits squarely, dragging
his paddle; the boy in the bow
leans, watching
shadows slip past . . .

The boat slows . . .
They look at each other,
at the cattails and black birds,
the enormous sky.

Something stirs beneath the water:
large, then small--
A whine sets their reels,
splitting air.
Dwelling in One Place

Country life, green and not impossible, summer
one step after another
and back to morning
glories gone wild on the fence.

A hummingbird transfixed
to blur and heartbeat
its raw tongue searching
for impossible blue nectar.

I watch this flight
as if it were youthful passion, one
moment and a whole life of misery, I thought,
I couldn’t squeeze back through the fence,

walk the fields knee high in winter wheat,
green and not impossible, growing
as if it could feed every hunger, even
the one that kept me waiting.
Simply

That song about the rain; I learned,
without thinking,
about going away &
coming back, another day
isn't about rain.

Too sudden:
The air turns crystal, the street dances,
tumbling light & hiss of tires
carries that tune far away.
Where I am is forgotten in letters

Without including what mocks me:
the breakfast dishes at night, the rubble
of a child, the junk mail saved:
like the drip of the faucet for
comfort, I say. I need.

His words come back and save me
from this life obliged
to someone else.

Letters read clean. I think. And wait.
The dark before morning is enough light
to wake me without alarm.
I move before he notices I’ve begun
another letter.
Sometimes the atmosphere closes in
And the empty chair in the room
is stranded
like morning, moored to ropes of light
sagging in the list
between tugs that pull walled voices
from sleep.

And when they arrive, feeling
caught
And disheveled in the motions
that set the table with bright flowers,
leave the cupboard door ajar,
no one-inspects
the empty chair left in the room, or
has concern over the clock's stuck hands.

And the curtain fluttering, fluttering
like moth wings is peripheral
to this loneliness, is more
than the empty chair in the room,
more than
the effort it took leaving it.
Grief is milkweed

A pod nearly ripe, splits
clean when pried open:
these damp white silks
and match-head seeds
curl in the shape of hummingbird
in my hands.

I have a fast heartbeat:
the worry of starting each day
incomplete. Thoughts living beyond
the world's light can fly
from my fingers like asterisks,
touching everyone and no one.
Small Red Stains

To touch these berries without bruising them slightly, my hand, sliding under dark ruffled leaves, is hesitant—feeling past the dead to those hiding.

I ignore the pluck and tumble of berries bright in a white bowl. This doom being stuck in mind-clearing tasks when my head aches for the other world . . .

Small red stains on my fingertips and the sun, leather hot on the back of my neck, I straighten up, and look back over my shoulder: There are Christmas trees nearly grown in a field full of milkweed and chicory, and wheat swollen, its whispering swirl of so much gold, makes inertia bearable.

Without thinking, I drop one plump raspberry on my tongue, let it melt down there, where I can’t argue that it’s lost on a sour palate.

I’m made responsible for the first time.
Trout

The boy, angler
of cold-fresh waters, casts
his line back, and forth;
pulls the tension short
in shallows where
the creek jags left, then
banks into a pool . . .

golden bodies flicker, invisible-and cunning
the slow running, the swirl to stillness
sets his intent

If my voice came from behind
he would hear me, perhaps
nod in the light wind that parts his hair.
Nothing else distracts him. It matters
this much.
Not Exactly

What intrigues me is you and yours, not mine, and that's good. I know ownership is nine-tenths the law. This is yours, not mine. Why does he take care of the kids, not you?

I forgot; yours are desperate to forget you in your absence. You pretend that yours aren't yours, but his, who refuses to have his way with you. Okay. It's mutual.

Everything is tied up in tight bundles and boxes, stacked against chaos, yours.

You're far away, saving yourself, for him. Your teeth hurt in the cold. Your car won't run up the hill, he forgets, you come back to say come back, but he won't, not exactly

as you'd have me believe in you and yours, not mine, and that's good.
The Cutting Garden

Pluck one weed, skip two
too many seen among the spikes
of baby’s breath and cosmos--
I consider what I’m taking back--
the dandelion’s head gone
blowzy white; and letting go
the marigold’s can-can,
those ruffles flipped, bright orange.
What do you expect me to do?
Nearly forty and off the deep end
in no-man’s land. This garden
made with a wild notion
that abundance is attractive
between beds. It shocks you
to hear me talk about flowers
when beauty is relatively useless.
Do you see how complicated this is?
All I wanted was a bucket of water
filled with cut flowers,
but it lasts just so long
and then
it begins to thin out.
Swimming in the Dark

Before slipping out of my sandals
to step into the pool, I am

swimming in the dark, floating
on the tide of August air, feeling

its warm current tug at my bathing suit;
drawing me closer to the swell of the moon

rising behind the pines, blood orange
and stunning in its ascent in this world

of stars adrift in a sky that has lost
its confidence to tell me where I am.

I climb the ladder to touch the skin
of water with my big toe.

Stirring its surface gives me an entrance
to let myself down, and I go

in that moment when the distinct slurp
of water sucks my whole body in.

The water lifts me on its back,
carries me in its craft.

I am
holding my head above water.
Temptations: The Myths

Somewhere late in summer, I am unable to stop
the simmer of cicadas in cowlicky grasses;
the drag of air in willows, branches
nearly touching the place
where water hits the shore.

Here I believed golden carp were born
to swim back through the channel,
spawning in shallows among cattails
and loosestrife, struggling with nature,
the moon riding on their backs . . .

It appears romantic--but there isn’t a dome
large enough to save the myths
I know by heart.

I have children who need
and will not need.
Intimacy knows its particular death
and leaves the living, unable to stop.
Circumstance

Pulled from sleep by a thrill
of swallows
in the cracked morning.

A globe of yellow,
pulsing.

I doubt where I am
in a world between
here and now.

* * *

When the sky is blue
is it empty?

* * *

Away--
in short puffs
air like a skimmer
dances
up the dandelion's
naked stem
bursting
the white sphere:
a hundred eyelashes blink.
Exile

When morning arrives dim and diffused, and fog drifts slowly above cooler waters, I know the long summer is nearly complete.

Beyond the sand bar, the hoist stands as an empty station with its gatekeeper—the gull’s cry reminds me of my fear of limbo and one desire to be lifted—

In time I look up into the clouds that pillow my childhood, shadows slide darkly across the lake into another country where I can’t return.

It’s indulgence I’m after, prayers that forgive everything and let me stay here a little longer.
On the road built to go nowhere

Bicyclists, racing
head west into the blaze of sun and sky and water.

They’re slender men, thin as minnows,
muscles glistening, black stretch shorts,
helmets, goggles and gloves.

Headstrong--
without peripheral vision, they see a glimpse of car, perhaps
a child’s hand waving hello from the back seat, and
with a wink, they push past, leaving them behind,
riding harder to catch nightfall, and
the lead racer who wears two silver balloons tied
close to his back, a road skipper, he flickers
flickers closer to last light.
Last Day of August

Falling down into
thick sweet cuts of hay and timothy,
I’ve been here before, only younger,
only attentive to the sinewy muscles
of Burgundy. Jack . . .

Sixteen hands high
and falling with a rag doll’s grace,
falling with a glimpse of sky, then
dust, and that certain dull thud.
The handsome horse stood still.

I grew expecting
this loyalty--thick like blood
and natural as rocking
in a slow canter.

I took the country
then, as it was--wild fields,
young forests slowly turning past,
early rhythms, I remember seeing
from both sides.
Neutralities

In obedience to a dream
the lake still moves at night.
Without dreaming, I move
in the corridor between home and water,
between wanting to cast aside tethers--
light as spider's silk, heavy as obedience.

It's hard to break ties in a dream.
To lift up dead weight and move
is a giant's wish . . .
I see myself dancing in the glassy surface--
two-stepping to monotonous laps--
the rasp: this way, this one way, home.
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Other Work
Other Work

Briefly, the following sections contain: more poems, short lyrical essays, and a ten-minute play. These sections represent the range of creative writing I accomplished while completing my degree. I’m particularly pleased with how the creative writing workshops encouraged this new work. Judith Kitchen, Anne Panning, Stan Rubin, and Brockport’s Summer Writers Forum Workshop share in the success of this work. The opportunity to work with these writers and workshop participants cultivated new ways of seeing. I was given a wide range to experiment in, and I was introduced to many new writers through the Writer’s Craft.

Initially, I had an ambition to blend the lyrical line with the narrative in my poetry, but where I’m truly successful in the blending of the lyrical line with the narrative occurs in the short lyrical essays. Unlike the prose poem’s elliptical style where the idea and image are turned line to line, revealing multiple and different points of view, the short lyrical essay moves in terse paragraphs through time and space. The narrative is built on a certain “timing,” much like a poem, the language demands a certain control—no unnecessary words allowed, which makes it a pleasure
to read out loud.

The ten-minute play was a challenge, a literal challenge. The Latter Day Playwrights program, sponsored by Writers & Books and GEVA Theatre, invites writers who are not playwrights to write a ten-minute play. When the plays are completed, they are "read" in a performance by GEVA actors. I enjoyed writing the dialogue. All the years of listening to people's pauses, descriptive language, and fragments paid off. There was one section where I wrestled with Beth's dialogue. I so wanted her to have her soapbox moment, but it was too heavy-handed. I was forced to unload her "preachy" lines until I had only Beth's wit, which was far more evocative. The actors were truly able to "play" this ten-minute play. There is a lot of "air" in This Heat, which creates the tension between the characters--Beth and David. This Heat is the physical weather and their emotional strain. It was a thrilling experience hearing the characters' voices that were in my head, speaking exactly as I imagined them, on stage. In June of 1998, This Heat was one of the three ten-minute play winners in GEVA Theatre's Regional Playwright Festival.
Acknowledgments

Poems:

*The Devil's Millhopper*: “Once Again” and “Sunday Morning”; *Iris: A Journal About Women*: “Caught in This Season”; *Mockingbird*:


*Press*: “Expecting”; *BlueLine*: “Anything but empty . . .”, “Face to

face,” and “On a log”; *Buckle &:* “Baby Boomer” and “Bleach”,


forthcoming in *HazMat*; *frogpond*: “Starless”; *Amelia*: “Compromise”,

and “Great Horned Owl” forthcoming in *BlueLine*.

Essays:

“Mother’s Dream” is included in the “Writers on Art” project

at the Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York; “The Weather

of Distance” appears in *IN BRIEF: Short Takes on the Personal*, edited

by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones, Norton, 1999; “Remains”

was first published in *Chelsea 67*; “Do You Remember Paris?” in *Jigsaw*;

“Lessons” will be appearing in an on-line publication, *Lights On-Line*, an

Play:

This Heat, which was initially written for the Latter Day Playwrights program sponsored by GEVA Theatre and Writers & Books in 1998, was selected as one of the three ten-minute play winners in GEVA’s 1998 Regional Playwrights Festival.
Poems
Once Again

feeling the bristle rise:
goose flesh on arms, white
knuckles and tight lips,
you won't speak at this table.

Deafness couches father's ear
in the roar of a shell. Mother
doesn't listen, never has, but
lets slip a whistle between hums,
and moves spoons and forks
from place to place.

Can I help you, dear?

Her voice is broken, wing flutter.
A sound that locks your eyes for an instant
and you see the shadow of childhood
sitting, waiting for the glass of milk
to spill the length of the table.

The sour sponge sailing through the air
to shouts come back like a hard clap
around the ears. It stings.

Indelible is sound in a meal
that's never eaten. It echoes all
the other suppers that betray you
because you did not speak.
Sunday Morning

A shift of wind sends rain pittering down through the locust leaves. A bird's weight lifts in the thicket where honeysuckle blooms. Bees hum in the shadows, and the yellow dog sighs as she lies down in her worn spot. The sky is freshly rinsed light widening its circle until it's hard to see. We trust this--stillness--clean and whole--our desire to do nothing.
Caught In This Season

_for C.S.M._

Old gloves hang limply
on the fence.
Dusk and buck moths
come swiftly into camp.
I too am captive.
Caught in this season
with my head tipped back.
The night sky arrives
with its black tooth,
and homesickness curls in
the October air,
leaving that trace of sugar
deep in the ground.
My hands are numb
in strange work:
digging with the smells
of sweat and burlap.
The taste of these white apples
flecked with mud and soft brown hairs
is blind.
Tell me what I need to do.
Witness & Fast Food

She’s mopping the red tile floor, mopping bits of french fries & hamburger, splashes of milkshake with the poise of ballerina & weight lifter swing dancer & garbage man synchronized swimmer & G.I. The swish of her stringy mop misses corners, and under high chairs. She’s lost in the works, lost in the crime of country music complaining, “I didn’t see you standing there,” and he is, suddenly, behind her. She turns, smiles slowly reads his shirt “you suck” out loud. He stammers, “I didn’t see you.”
The Unmade Bed

after Imogen Cunningham

Autumn's sudden storms, she endures
the unhappy husband singing
in his creaky voice, throughout the house
the old chill--he sings and sings . . .

Over brightly
a red leaf drops to the cold sill
and he looks up to see dull skies
spinning like his dreams, up there,
uncaring and common, he wants her
to be his alone.

But what Angel would stay human beneath him?
He never expected love out-of-control,
or knew where to hide the hairpins
she left lying on the open bed.
Expecting

A young bride who wished to remain childless would place roasted walnuts under her bosom before her wedding rite. Each walnut meant a year without child. After the wedding these walnuts were buried in the earth.

--Rumanian Folk Tradition

Standing by the window
in your wedding dress, you hold
your breath as your left hand
dips into the bowl of walnuts.

You scoop four and lower your eyes
as you tuck them under
the fold of your breasts.

Your empty hand plays
at your throat . . .
You look away . . .
Church bells begin
their dull peal . . .
The chill when the ring runs
snug on your finger.

Later in the garden
the earth beneath your fingertips
you carve a small pit
and let the walnuts fall.
Quickly, cover them.
Anything but empty is a plastic sack,

breezing high over my head, capricious
    lift and turn,
floating with ease, hanging
open like a mouth . . .

In the rush of air,
the sudden smack of a little brown bird
    flying blind into its grace
renders me:

    speechless.
for Today

The wooden calendar hanging on our kitchen wall is quaint and dependable as a broken clock.

The cardboard scene is the tizzy of winter, snow holding the red barn door shut.

While the month is April, accurate in its thirty days, with one brightly painted white bunny.

And today is just a week short of September.

It would be a crime to let another day go mostly unnoticed, although I’m tempted.

Those who know the daily minutes so lucidly, so vividly have made my keeping up appearances a faux pas.
Baby Boomer

after William Carlos Williams

Difficult day, pretending
Not to notice
Fifty candles

Melt down
Blue and white puddles
On stiff frosting

They takes his breath
Away
Bleach

A speck. No bigger
than the head of a pin.

Bright.
I can see through it,
like a knot hole.

Like a beacon, it shines
a distance
on this shirt.

"Bleach," you say, touching
the spot
just above
my heart.
Today is as present as years ago

We sit across from each other, heads bent over the sprawl of books and papers on

the picnic table in the college yard; the silence we learned as adolescents celebrates the sound of a pin drop—the perfection of holding still.

Not talking when the June sun is too bright &

the chitter of squirrels in the canopy of pines is the argument we listen to closely, pausing

in that moment where there is no answer, we look up & see each other’s bewilderment—

shake our heads, as if it were nothing, hearing the sound of our thoughts talking, our not talking.
Star(e)

The boy is looking hard at the word STAR printed in block letters on the yellow flash card. He is standing on one foot, poised like a heron fishing. Dark hair falling into his eyes, he squints. The teacher is barely breathing, waiting on his one word. He says, “Stare.” And I am, staring at them, then at a loose note in my hand that’s rumpled with a message scrawled in haste—black ink smudge, Don’t worry. “Don’t worry,” she says, “Try again.” I look up. He says, “Star.”
Great Horned Owl

In morning's lavender light, the owl,
known to be everywhere,
sits motionless on our barn's peak.

Unwavering, he stares
over the modest expanse of winter
wheat, waiting for the moment of
departure.

Effortless in feathered silence, he descends
to carry off what takes a lifetime to prepare.

Watching the owl's flight, I see my father's eyes
transfixed to sapphire, his breath spiraling.
On a log

in late afternoon  turtles black
against black and green  appear warm,
yet moist  stuck  chin to back,
head to toe  floating
stillness.

A boat gurgles by
churning water  a slow roll  tips
them over.
It looks gloomy:
The log  quivers as water
resumes what's left of sunlight.
The Way I See It

Cutting through the city
   concrete and red bricks
air-conditioner whirring
   smoke stacks and clouds
   scudding against a flat blue sky,

I know an alley
   between heat and quiet,
where screams of graffiti
   sprayed orange on brick
bleed onto cracked sidewalks
   and weeds break out,
crawl belly up on drainpipes.

          Holding tight to edges    I inch my way
broken curbs & bits
   of glass;
cigarette butts crushed in hard
   smacks &
   gridlock
   flashing: watch     your step
After an egg cracks,
After the answer comes,
Afterwards, I think.
Compromise is going halves and holding on to the notion that yours is the decision.
Outside, the world

quivers in the peppered voice
of winter wind salting
its motion through the maples’
silvered branches, tipping the bells’
tongues to summon attention--

Intensely now
and clear in a pocket of cold air
the link, link, link
is calibrated in its petition--
Maddening. In-
sinuating
that you’ve grown too old
in your ways--unable to stir
the dream of that fragrant
orchard where contentment
is the shadow waking
darkly within--

The world holds its breath
beyond your sense of breathing,

exposing you
to the raw nerve of living
without this
February snow blows slant, scuffing
    across these gouged fields, pressing
    its slick piracy into the furrows’
dark race, fixing its blued waters to marbled veins that drift
    like waves caught in undercurrent,
    like thoughts left unanswered . . .

What do we want
when we part the curtains to stare out the window?

Is it capricious, this
    bondage?

What do we know
    when the empty air is restless?
Face to face:

Clock and thermometer hint at an answer--warmer moves toward later--sooner forces an issue of going to work and school when the only light is the sudden flash of bulb, and shudder is felt when feet hit the cold floor.

We're up in disbelief, fixing our eyes to darkness, bumbling toward wall and stairs, the window that pictures day isn't imaginary but breath-taking sky, billowing pink that belies maps of weather, changes quickly like us--uncertain--ready to go.
Intersection:

Accidentally, I glance at the side of the road
& see the box turtle's shell cracked,
head to toe, its step spun
    out of time.

        I look away from the raw
    scream of its brains blossoming on asphalt,
    an atmosphere exposed to all
    & nothing.

Death burns white on black,
    x-ray floating
        in the back of my mind,
    warning

not to carry too much in this life, or the next.
Dare and Dash

Utterly wingless,
the soggy inflection of my muddy sneakers ascending
the porch steps, I look back over my shoulder to catch
a glimpse of the yellow dog poised to bolt through
the lilacs. Once again she’s grinning in this irresistible
game of dare and dash, minding not one sharp whistle
or desperate plea. She stands a scream away, testing
the length of my invisible leash. I pretend that
I could care less. This morning’s smell of
fresh coffee and cinnamon rolls float out the back
door like fuel for thought, like her--I’m gone.
Starless summer night
   No sound of rain on hot stones
   fireflies in pines
Essays
Mother's Dream


I know full well. I *am* getting away. No more fleeting moments. Wishful thinking. My hands hold fast on the steering wheel’s backbone. The pressure of my open-toed shoe on the gas pedal is exact. I am getting away in a white car on a summer road that’s the color of vinegar taffy. It stretches narrowly as it pulls around a bend, offering me another direction.

*

The dome of sky is melon. The midday sun strikes, unblinking. This is an annoying dead heat. A lone poplar stands sentinel. My car’s wheels turn on whispers. I don’t care.

*

Away is clearly a race from here to there. It’s my desire to set out on my own, without intermission, until I see that what I’ve dreamt at my desk, on my porch, in the back yard isn’t a mirage.
Seeing the wind-swept fields erases tension. My hands relax their grip. The tangle of grasses surround me. Over there, in the half light, is my future.
Start Seeds Now

Gardeners know no rest. In January, in the notion of "dead of winter," we are pacing out our next prize-winning plot. We are walking around with that glazed vision—so sweet, so juicy, so bright red that you don't need a pinch of salt on it tomato—the plant called *Glamor* that just keeps on producing, one after another until late October.

Under the glow of yellow light, we spend hours at the kitchen table looking at seed catalogues—*Annie Oakley Okra, Electra Leeks, Banquet Parsley, Bunching Onions*—the sound of their names melts on our tongues, and we can taste them—We have to have them.

Desire is most likely the secret of our success. Years ago, when we first imagined a garden, we worked a small plot by hand. The earth hadn't been turned in decades. It was stubborn and unyielding, thick clay clods that wouldn't break up into that puréed soil the book described. Charlie, the farmer whose orchard wraps round our property noticed our garden that wet spring and laughed. Not a mean laugh, but a knowing one. "You aren't gonna get much out of that," he said. I smiled at him in my we'll-see-pencil-thin-smile. Asked him about the new orchard.
Later that summer, the garden was loaded with peppers—red, green, yellow; tomatoes, beets, carrots, even celery. Ruth, Charlie’s wife, a strong, straight-forward, take-charge woman, was driving a tractor down the orchard pathway. She saw me weeding; stopped and looked over the fence into our garden. I greeted her, and we talked. She noticed everything, and complained that they didn’t have time for a garden. I offered her to take whatever she wanted. “Sure looks full,” she said. “Yes, in spite of what Charlie said,” I replied. “What \textit{did} he say?” she asked. “That we weren’t going to get much out of our dirt,” I answered. “What \textit{does} he know,” she said, “Just look at those tomatoes!”
Lesson

Near the end of June in the heat that’s steamy and heavy with the perfume of earth and grass and trees, tent worms are busy—spinning, eating, birthing within their gauze-grey rooms. The tree branches in our back yard pull down in the weight of their making. The tents look like paper lanterns in need of lights. The worms disturb my mother. She can hear their mandibulars chewing on tender green leaves. She knows she has to do something to save her trees.

She thinks fire is a solution, and calls me, a willing fourteen-year-old, to help her fashion newspaper torches on opened wire coat hangers. As we do this, she explains: “We’ll take the yellow step stool out back and place it under the branches, then you climb up the step stool and stand on the seat. I’ll light the torch and pass it to you. You stick the fire into the tents and that will be that, right?”

I go along with my mother’s plan, not imagining anything could go wrong. She speaks with such authority on how to do things that I don’t question her.

When I’m standing up on the stool’s seat, she passes the flaming
torch to me. I raise it up, over my head into the branches, and suddenly it starts to break apart in red hot clumps, landing on my outstretched forearms. The smell of singed hair rank, the heat sharp as pinpricks. I start flailing and howling. My mother stands below transfixed. She can't move or talk. I jump down, torch in hand, landing on the grass. Ashes falling everywhere. I look up at my mother looking at me, and hold out my arm. “I'm burned. This is really stupid. I trusted you.” My mother looks me over carefully and says I'll be all right, but adds, “Don't trust anyone, not even your mother.”
Daylight Savings Time

That autumn day was much like today’s weather. Air pungent and sharp with its smells of wet leaves and earth and distant chimney smoke is loaded with melancholy, just lingering to be breathed in and set loose in a sudden gush, a thought of someone not quite forgotten, someone whose embrace felt dangerous and ticklish like electricity, like power surge before black out. Someone so reckless, so wild, so willing with promises and kisses that you were swept away in a late October hour that happened completely. One hour that repeated itself, minute by minute, and forgot that you were in the wrong place at the right time. One hour that turned back on itself, so you could save face, pretending you didn’t know.

* 

You were alive and every minute counted. Sitting in the front seat of a 1968 Volkswagen bus, waiting for a man you hardly knew to come back three times in his forgetting something—a phone number, a pen, a message left on his desk, you nodded your head at him like a doopy car ‘doll that signals directions from the dashboard. You said hurry up
patient way but you knew better. This was going to be a long two hour trip.

* 

No one tells the truth about love. Talking matter-of-factly seems banal, like proving a right angle or finding the equal distance of two lines intersecting. You were listening to his love story, feeling the sun warm on your face and neck, thinking about your own. The two lane highway was slowly rising into the foothills of the Alleghenys. Staring straight ahead, you saw the wind-swept trees and fields hanging on to skeletons of milkweed and bristles of burdock made everything he said sadder. Things were sticking to you. You could barely talk. Not that it mattered. He could, and did until he realized his voice. He became silent.

* 

The thrum of the bus tires on pavement was soothing. The road was pulling away from everything you knew and opening up to the unexpected. He kept checking his rear view mirror, watching the highway lines breaking up like Morse code. You were looking ahead into that ever-changing sky. In the distance, you spotted a large maple tree

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standing all alone in the middle of a field covered with black leaves. Look at that! What kind of a maple is it? He had an answer for everything, but not this time. You asked him to pull over. He stopped the bus on the soft shoulder, in front of the tree, but still at a field’s distance. You slid out of your side, leaving the door ajar. His door clicked shut, not a loud sound, more like someone flipping a Zippo lighter shut. Strangely in the instant of that sound, the tree exploded into flight. You watched hundreds of starlings disperse into wind. The maple stood empty, except for one.

* 

There is always one. One left to know this. One left to keep quiet.
Remains

Hidden under rosebushes. Nicholas discovers Which’s cat body curled into a tight snail shell. She is motionless, dry and gray. When he touches her spine, nothing moves. The heat of summer sun whitewashes this corner of the garden, making her body warm in spite of death. Too young to be frightened by this, he looks back over his shoulder at us standing on the porch and says, “There’s a dead cat here.”

Shivers and clenched teeth. The scrape of a spade sinking into hard-packed earth, carving a neatly made pit beneath clump birches, exposes more than dirt. Not bones but bottles. The remains of another life intact. Cobalt blue and plain glass embossed with words of use and warning: 

KEMPS COUGH BALSAM-DIRECTIONS ON BOX, LEROY, N.Y.; WATKINS; FEDERAL LAW FORBIDS SALE OR RE-USE OF THIS BOTTLE. I can’t tell if all the bottles were meant to be a cure.

We bury the cat. Our heartbeats slow laying her down in the shape of chase, head to toe, like a wheel at rest.

Even after nearly a hundred years, the bottles wash up in simple soap and look brand new. Peter arranges them on the kitchen windowsill, letting sunlight fill them with brilliance. Later that night, he pours ultra pure
lantern oil into three and fashions wicks and caps. He lights them all on
one kitchen match, then calls us to see.

* 

In the dark, lights flicker. It’s not hard to imagine a life.
Do you remember Paris?

Do you remember the phone ringing all day and night outside of the Freemont Hotel, in the stand of trees where taxis came and went, and that skinny woman in a black mini-skirt, striped tee-shirt, and red stilettos nodded her head yes to someone caught in the shadows? Do you remember seeing her all night, her silky blondé hair falling across her face as she slid into one car, and returned in another? The way she walked like scissors down the street?

I was sitting on the balcony, towel-drying my hair and thinking about our visit to Napoleon's Tomb; thinking about its majesty, the columns of light streaming in and spilling onto the deep, red polish of its porphyry wood, the way the tomb floats in the center of the room. I was talking to you, but I'm sure from the street it looked like I was talking to myself. Although I'm certain no one was watching me. You were in the small bathroom with the electric commode. The one that said, 'shock, don't use. You were washing out all of your hot pink, red, yellow slips and petit pants you bought to startle our friends back home. I was telling you about Napoleon, how the English weren't going to let his body be
returned to France, because they didn’t want him to be honored as a hero, and they certainly didn’t want anyone to bow to him. Somehow, the French retrieved his body and laid it in that chilly room, in that recess where we had to lean over the railing and “bow” our heads to see his crypt. It was so subtle. Literally, thousands have paid homage to Napoleon. It took you a minute to react. You leaned out of the bathroom and laughed, so we’re part of the thousands? Right! You flipped a wet slip at me. Catching it before it went over the rail, I asked, where are you going to hang these? How about out there? On a makeshift line from a curtain cord, we hung the slips and petit pants. They looked so bright, fluttering in the breeze.

Unfortunately, this window dressing upset the chief commissaire. His station was a block away, but his corner office window was in binocular sight. Both he and the concierge were pounding at our door, arguing in fast clipped words. We panicked, not knowing what was happening. We didn’t answer. They started rattling the door knob. We were trapped. Dressed in thin chemise, we jumped into our beds, wound ourselves up in the sheets, and stood up like living statues of liberty,
waiting for them to come in.

We looked at them. They looked at us. We looked at each other and started singing. They kept yelling and waving their arms at each other. The concierge went to the balcony and tore down the line. Slips and petit pants dragging behind her hot, little steps.

She screamed: *Just look at them! Do they look like whores?* The commissaire eyeballed us, head to toe; we stood perfectly still. *All right, no,* he said, *not whores.*

The concierge held the door and the commissaire stepped out. The concierge smiled at us. You can’t do this, you know. Hanging your *Ooh-la-la* on the rail is disrespectful. We nodded at her, yes. She turned to leave, paused in the doorway; tilting her head back to us, she winked.
The Weather of Distance

Beneath the willows’ feathery boughs, a yellow-crowned night heron stands motionless at the pond’s edge. The pond appears sullen, deep emerald, like an eye struck open to its insult. It waits and sees, in defiant countenance. Only the graceful currents of a water strider streaks its glassy surface.

*

It’s February, a year since my mother’s diagnosis of cancer; she’s no longer waiting. A cup of Irish Breakfast tea with a full teaspoon of raspberry honey takes the chill off the morning and soothes my raw throat. The rain and fog of three days keeps the distance of weather. I’m stuck in a dreary pattern.

*

Nothing heals. One minute becomes memory of Mother’s dark brown eyes looking beyond conversations, while her hands skillfully slice fresh Red Haven peaches to put by for winter. There are three Zip-lock bags full in the freezer. The last harvest. I imagine eating these peaches slowly, letting the slippery, cold, orange slices melt down into her way of relish—something exceptional. It makes me feel rich.
All summer, tumbled glacier stones, stones which haven’t been unearthed in years, are found in abundance on the lake shore. Stones no bigger than my fingertip, or large enough to fit in the cup of my hand. Somehow precious stones—red, green, yellow, blue, grey and pink—the colors of my family’s emotions. My sister prizes them. She hand picks them, organizes them in shape and size and color; spends hours wrapping each one in gold or silver wire. She’s harnessing the earth’s energy. She’s keeping my mother alive.

*  

Not one family of ruby-throated hummingbirds, but three. All cunning and warring for the red liquid in the feeder at the kitchen window. Always wanting more. So much like us.

*  

Driving home from a swim meet with my daughter Meghan, I notice she’s pensive, wet haired, hungry. She’s looking out the window, up into the darkening winter sky; watching the rising full moon. It’s been five full moons since the night my mother died. She says, “I can’t remember Grandma’s voice. Make her voice for me.” I look at her silhouette, her patience with me as I say her name, “May-gan May-gan” the way my mother would sing it. She smiles. “It’s coming back.”
This Heat

Late August and no rain for more than forty days— it's evening, and
Beth is sitting on the porch, looking for a bit of relief from the heat.
She's watching the fireflies in the pine trees and the heat lightning, then
she looks down to her hands. She's lost in thought. At this point, David
opens the screen door and steps out onto the porch.

David: Hey, you're out here. I was looking for you.

Beth: (looks up, but not at him, toward the pine trees): Yep. Still here.
Melting, but not quite a puddle yet. Would you look at that heat
lightning— the lines are so sharp like an outline of a body floating in that
navy sky.

David: Dead man's float . . . It's still not going to rain . . . just listen to
those cicadas . . .

(He sits down next to her).

Beth: It makes the heat closer. (She leans away from him).

David: Too close?

Beth: (shrugs) I don't know. (They sit quietly for a moment) How did it
go today? Did you find a priest who will vouch that Jack was Catholic?
David: Not exactly.

Beth: What does that mean, *not exactly*?

David: The priest who knew Jack in LA is out of the country.

Beth: What about the Jesuits? Did you call St. Ignoble?

David: (looks down, shaking his head) Yeah, I talked to Father O'Reilly, and I guess, rules are rules.

Beth: Which rule? The golden rule, the rule of thumb . . .

David: Something like the "we really can't say we know him" rule.

O'Reilly said he couldn't in good conscience say Jack was Catholic.

Beth: Good one. But they know *us* and your *Dad* too for godssakes.

(waves her hand to cool herself). Couldn't they make an exception?

David: It's just not going to happen, not in a Catholic cemetery

Beth: Oh! (pause) What the hell? We drop the dime whenever they bang their tin cups.

David: (shrugs, laughs) Geez, Do you think we're slow learners?

Beth: Maybe this is good-- which one of us *would* go to St. Basil's? The idea of staring at a plaque with Jack's name on it-- I mean, think about it, think about being stuck in a wall, in a dark, damp room. It's suffocating.
David: But, a great place in this heat. *(Beth looks at David, then nods, laughs lightly)*

Beth: Maybe the only place in town to cool off.

David: Well, don’t worry, the burial won’t be at St. Basil’s. *(pause)* No green card. Listen, Beth, it’s going to be hard explaining this to Dad. You know how he is. The proper burial is big. I didn’t realize how big until today . . .

Beth: Yeah, I know. *(leans over towards him)* I called Half Moon cemetery this morning after you left.

David: *(surprised)* You did? Any plots on the knoll?

Beth: Hey, this burial is as grimy as that EST meeting Jack made us attend, *(pause)* remember?

David: *(laughs knowingly)* Boy, do I. Go ahead, finish.

Beth: I called Half Moon and the tape said to contact Mr. Bliss, the proprietor. So I phoned his number, thinking it was early enough to catch him at home . . .

David: Keep going.

Beth: I am; it’s so hot, it’s hard to breathe and tell this . . . Let’s see,
okay, a woman answered. It was Mrs. Bliss. I said hello and introduced myself, and asked to speak with Mr. Bliss . . .

David: So? (pause) What happened?

Beth: Nothing. There was dead silence. Ice flowed through the line. I literally shivered. I cleared my throat and said, “Ahh, Mrs. Bliss, Are you there? May I speak to Mr. Bliss?” And then, this sigh, that sounded like it came from her toes, rushed into the ear piece with her words: “He’s dead.”

David: Oh, no, you’re kidding.

Beth: No joke, dead. He’s been gone for four months. I felt awful, started babbling every imaginable condolence, while thinking, my god, Bliss is not the proprietor, he’s a resident at Half Moon.

David: (reaches towards her).

Beth: Wait (pause) wait. There’s more. (pause) Mrs. Bliss (pause) the poor, sweet woman (pause) in turn consoling me, said, “Now, now my dear, you must ask for Donald Rath and Henry Grimm, they’re in charge.”

David: (shaking his head, laughs) Bliss, Rath, and Grimm, perfect!
(David and Beth laugh, sharing the irony).

Beth: I left Rath’s number on the kitchen table for you.

David: Do you think Jack is amused by all this?

Beth: (long pause) Yeah, Jack’s amused.

David: Oh, before I forget, Kevin is overnight mailing the ashes. You have to go to the post office. Kevin knows you won’t forget to pick them up. You won’t forget, right? (David goes inside).

Beth: (pause) Right.

The End
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