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Undiluted Blood

presented by
Bonnie Williamson Davis

has been accepted towards fulfillment
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MA degree in English

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Diane Wakoski

Major professor

Date 29 April 1981

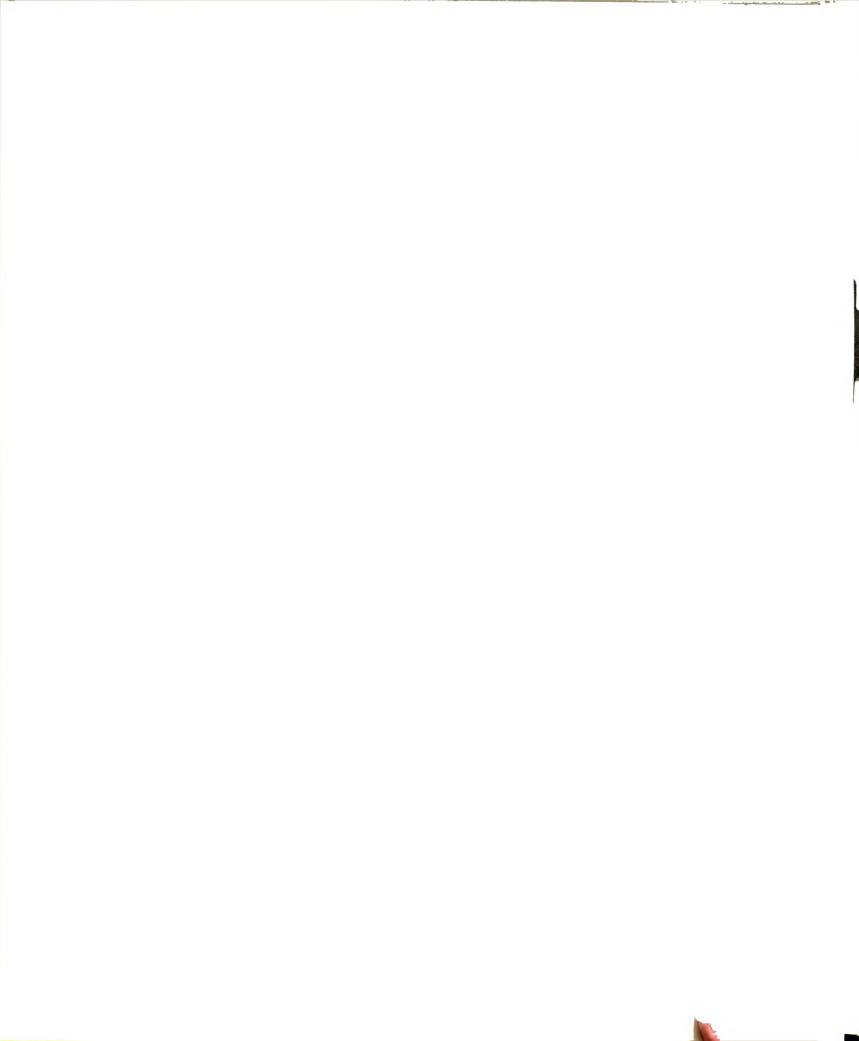


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1981

UNDILUTED BLOOD

by

Bonnie Williamson Davis

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

UNDILUTED BLOOD

by

Bonnie Williamson Davis

Undiluted Blood is a collection of poems dealing mainly with people and experiences that have contributed to my physical and spiritual being. It is a probing of my inner feelings, accomplished, not by introspection, but by looking outward and backward, away from myself.

Many of the poems show an indulgence in my fascination for ancestors and relatives, some of whom I have never known or met. By responding to them and their situations I found myself uncovering latent feelings and attitudes, stored inside me for years, passed down through generations.

The subjects about which I have written are both trivial and profound but in some way have become/always were a part of me. They are in my blood permanently, waiting to be passed on again.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Yearnings Of A Would-Be Grasshopper	1
The Secret Of The Letter	4
Feeling, Once Again, The Guilt Of My Life-Style	7
I Am Not Always A Pacifist	9
Fran	10
For Uncle Bit (And The Wild Rabbit Behind Our House)	13
My Father Never Fought In The War	20
Traveling Through Latin America	22
The Big Blue Pig With Purple Teats	26
Community Hospital, Room 309, Bed 2	32
A Misplaced Reel	34
Our Marriage Will Last As Long As This File Cabinet	36
Old Mama Lauer	41
Tracking Down A Missing Suction Pump At Community Hospital	45
A Permanent Image	47
Don't Count Me In With The Real Skiers	51
To The Three Señoritas	55
I Always Meant To Call	59
Blood Relations	64

YEARNINGS OF A WOULD-BE GRASSHOPPER

In a world of grasshoppers and ants
I was destined to become the latter
always preparing
for some season in the
future
storing up cracker crumbs
while the foolish grasshoppers
danced to the fiddle

My parents, living in a
one-room attic
 its roof so steep they had to
 lean sideways
saved all week to buy
plastic curtains for
their only window
my father cleaned toilets
sold shoes to rich women
studied at night
my mother
a typist
Together they saved enough
to buy the shabby house below
but couldn't afford to move
down

I picture them in August
inches beneath black-tarred shingles
bending like wilted daisies toward
wisps of incoming air
storing up crumbs
while the grasshoppers
danced to the fiddle

Now they possess, among other things
a penthouse overlooking the ocean
and a home in the mountains
these to be enjoyed
after retirement

My invalid mother, hearing the
strains of the fiddle
sensing the irony in storing
crumbs for the winter
bought a yacht for my father
who always wanted to sail
but had only read books about sailing
one of her many recent gestures
to make the sweat worth something

But the boat lists at its moorings
once a month they pay a diver to
scrape off the barnacles

Their lives do not sadden me
anymore than my own
we share the same instincts
a common source of energy fuels our blood

and although I am fond of sunsets
I would rearrange my Tupperware shelf
if that were the one thing left on the list
rather than watch the sky droop
into orange folds
it is the mediocrity of hard work
which thrills me

my accomplishments are both
stunning and trivial
like the ant who carries a bread crust
twice his size
already I suspect
there will never be a winter

and sometimes
I catch myself secretly watching
the grasshoppers
wishing for a suspended moment
that I might
dance to the fiddle

THE SECRET OF THE LETTER

You, alone on the seacoast
waiting out the pollen-heavy months
of August and September
wrote a letter home to your
husband and children

wanting to tell them of loneliness
and desolation
but writing instead of the
view from your cottage

afraid, because the pungent sea air,
swept across miles of pollen-free waves
had not relieved the swollen pressure
in your head.

But this was not a thing to tell
three children
sadly waiting for the frost
to bring their mother home again

so you, the gentle woman
who always held your feelings in,
wrote a letter home to your
husband and children
described a jaunty sandpiper
that amused you on the shore--
asked them about folks back home--
never spilling out the fearful
thoughts inside you

You did not realize
just by looking at your letter
they would guess the awful truth
that you, yourself, did not yet
understand

your once delicate script
now rose and fell across the page
like jagged mountain peaks.
This was not the hand of their
mother.

What you had thought to keep secret--
the massive ache behind your eyes
a suffocating depression--
had slipped out on its own
by December you were gone

I never knew you, born too late
to be your grandchild
yet I bear your name
and know that I take after you
I think of you spending your
brief life beneath that mask
never wanting to burden others
with your thoughts or problems
holding in each hurt--

but just by looking
at that letter,
its lines, sporadic as
the last few breaths of
someone dying
even I, who never knew you
understood the swollen pain
you tried to hide

FEELING, ONCE AGAIN, THE GUILT OF
MY LIFE-STYLE

I stand hunched over my
maidenhair fern
delicately parting the matted green foliage
searching for brittle stems
or yellowish leaves
hidden beneath

As I pinch them off between
thumb and forefinger
I am suddenly reminded of a
bus ride in El Salvador
where I watched a woman
stooping over a cracked sidewalk
picking lice from her daughter's scalp

The girl's thick, snarled hair
fell across her face and shoulders
as she bent her neck down
looking much like the tangled
cascade of my fern

I imagine now that I am
searching for vermin
and gently tear at the feathery
green mass
picturing the mother in her filthy cotton shift
the broken concrete
her daughter hidden by black hair

And I marvel at my own mind
which cannot stop punishing me
for the life I enjoy
for the simple grace and beauty
of my maidenhair fern
its white wicker table
the mint green carpet
that cushions my bare feet

I AM NOT ALWAYS A PACIFIST

Hesitating at the top of a hill
The tips of my skis poking through fresh snow
I am half-frightened by an onslaught
Of black snowmobiles progressing
Single file from the valley below

Winding toward me like an army of
Huge carpenter ants
They come with amazing speed and
Perseverance

I side-step into the trees and
Press my body against thorny branches
Wishing that I were giant enough to
Lift one ski and crush their shiny
Black helmeted heads
In one quiet move

FRAN

Fran, you were so ugly
I had to stare for a moment
the day you moved in.
We had heard you were -a large woman-
but I was not ready for
two-hundred and seventy-eight
pounds of you
blotting sunlight
from the open doorway.
I tried to peel away the
dimpled flesh
to visualize the attractive woman
hidden beneath
but it didn't work on you
With skin like weathered concrete
and less hair than my father
you were automatically disqualified
from any beauty plan.

Yet, even on that first day
we found you irresistible

I admired you for living with us
when you could have lived alone
we were three women
beautiful by comparison
and ten years your junior
but we posed no threat--
you had long ago
accepted your body.
I wanted so much to be like that
instead of hating myself
for things I couldn't change

I remember those three days on the beach
sweating under a terry cloth robe
ashamed of my varicose veins
while you bobbed up and down
in your swimsuit
trying to catch the Frisbee
in a game of keep-away

and the time I called off a date
because of a tiny blemish
festering on my chin
I told him I was ill
then pretended I really was
rather than let you know
the disgusting truth

I admired you Fran
with so much to hate
and yet so little hatred

but in your room one day
I found a snapshot
taken by a friend
our three smiling faces were there
captured in a moment of candid radiance
but you had torn yourself
out of the picture
leaving a jagged empty hole
standing next to me.
I had been so convinced
of your strength
so sure
that nothing really mattered
except the interior Fran.

I felt you tearing yourself
away from me and wondered
if there could be anyone
existing beyond the pain

FOR UNCLE BIT
(AND THE WILD RABBIT BEHIND OUR HOUSE)

You lived in a chicken coop near
the old homestead
while I grew up in town
it had a flat low roof
just like that refrigerator carton
we used to play in
except we cut a window
in ours
and you didn't.

but, unlike the roosting chickens
whose home you settled in
occasionally, you would drift off
for a month or two
no one ever worried
you always came back home

when Ma and Pa died
the homestead was sold
so you headed for the woods behind the coop
with a frying pan and a few good books
surviving the summer on wild raspberries
and catfish
but winter comes early in Michigan

All the aunts and uncles met together
to discuss the predicament
of you, their elder brother
camped beneath layers of flame-bright leaves
in Kellogg Woods

they finally bought you a small, gray house
embraced by gnarled apple trees
still furnished with the faded belongings
of the old man who had lived and died there

kitchen cupboards loaded, toilet repaired
they propped open every window
so the October apple-air could
eat away the smell of death--
those seven brothers and sisters
who loved but did not understand you.

we rode our bikes over to see you everyday
because you had a boogey cellar
and didn't mind us sifting through
your junk collection.
we admired you so much we hardly
realized what was happening to you

Spring dressed the bare black arms
of the apple trees in white organdy
but you did not notice

by the coming of another fall
the house reeked of stale darkness
gradually you had given up the effort
of opening windows
or even draperies
most days you just sat reading in your chair
with that engineer's cap shading your eyes.
The cupboard stock thinned out
thistles crept above my knees
and still you sat lifeless in that
dusty velvet armchair
reading

reading reading

But one day Aunt Ef spotted you downtown
clutching a brown paper sack
your white face pinched and scared
as a kid lost in a supermarket

she drove around the block three times
in rush hour traffic before she could stop
your hands were rattling the sack
wet eyes blinking against an unfamiliar sun
like a man stepping out from a dark theater

you were trying to find the bus station

you had intended to leave without
a word to anyone

not even to three kids
who had worshipped you daily

she drove you to the terminal
and dropped you off
because, somehow, it seemed
the right thing to do.
You said you might not ever come back.

gentle person that you were
I am sure you never realized that you
left behind a shattered family

my father spent a long time
reminding me how we had nursed that rabbit
after a dog ripped into its hind leg
and though we loved the rabbit a lot
he made us give it back
to the trees behind our house
Then he added
some people don't belong with other people
and it would be cruel to keep them
boxed in like the rabbit.

but you were our Uncle Bit not a rabbit
and I couldn't understand how an unknown city
on the Greyhound route
could pull you away from us

Like the parents of a soldier missing
in action
we kept your house just as you left it
hoping, unreasonably
that you would appear
tomorrow or the next day
but you never did.
eventually they bagged up your stuff
and sold the place

Thanksgiving Day gatherings
became a painful reminder that
another year had slipped away
without any word from you

we could have, perhaps
accepted a death, which through the years
fades into faintly throbbing memories
but your absence was a thing
that ached
and gnawed into us
more deeply every year

I pictured you, an educated man
one who never took an interest in
alcohol or women
lying on some dingy mission cot;
some kind preacher
saddened by your loneliness
not knowing how we missed you

When eleven years later
you strolled up our driveway
a new vibrance bristling through
your sagging clothes
we felt you had been
raised up from the dead

You were a changed man but
did not want to talk much about
the eleven years.

We sapped what few details we could
from you
how you rode the freight trains
and lived beneath well travelled bridges
feeding off discarded scraps

You apologized for such a life
even admitting the horror of it
so I asked you why you left and
stayed away so long--
You had no answer

I know now that I will never
understand you
born with different instincts
than myself
a man I loved so openly
repaid, by eleven years of
emptiness
and yet, I love you still

MY FATHER NEVER FOUGHT IN THE WAR

When killing japs was patriotic
You decided not to fight
choosing instead, at age seventeen
to march with a broomstick
over your shoulder

I often imagine
hundreds of duplicate soldiers
stepping and turning in unison
rifles propped stiffly
on proud shoulders
and You, with your painted yellow broomstick
the only flaw in a perfect pattern

"Yellow-boy," they called you.

You, whose job it was to crawl
on your stomach through mud
dragging a stretcher
without the extra weight of
guns and ammunition
to slow you down

You, whose job it was to stack up young bodies
like cordwood in open trucks
until the soles of their boots
formed a solid wall eight feet high

"Yellow-boy," they called you.

Hoping to shame you
into conformity
they placed a broomstick
in your hands--
already dead-sure
that neither you nor they
would ever give in

TRAVELING THROUGH LATIN AMERICA

We stayed at the filthy pension

only because of your tiny coffee shop next door

its cafe curtains and red-checkered table cloths

pulling at our loneliness

raking us in like dying seaweed

you served tea and delicate pastries

No tortillas

frijoles

pupusas

or semilla

No marimbas

guitars

or seductive Latin singers

we heard Brahms Violin Concerto in D

and our parched memories

gratefully soaked up the music

after these two years of drought

the next evening
when you brought our cakes on a tray
white apron wrapped around
a gaunt waist
we expressed gratitude for
the background music
humbly boasting of our own expertise
in the arts
between the three of us
we counted:
two violinists
one pianist
one sculptor
one singer
two actors.

You mentioned having once played violin

then your eyes became murky
as though our conversation
had dredged up something long-
settled in muck

"Do you still have the violin?" Peter
had asked
his own eyes glistening like beads of oil.
We had been away so long.

At midnight you locked the door and led us through a narrow hallway to your shabby living quarters. Your wife and son had removed their aprons and sat waiting in front of the piano, the first I had ever seen in these parts (except for the baby grand at the Ambassador's place).

I fell on the keyboard
fingers greedily devouring
whole octaves
exotic chords
then slunk back embarrassed
by this savage display
of gluttony

You lifted your violin from
its cracked case and placed it in
Peter's hand
we guessed the truth from those first tones
rich and powerful as a chestnut horse
the violin could only belong to a master

The three of us shrank
when you finally tucked the instrument
beneath your chin and played
Paganini
flawlessly

then your son sat down at the piano

and accompanied you

in work after work

By dawn we were good friends.

Peter and I had played the marvelous violin

Maureen had sung a few arias

And you had related the sadness of your life

How you fled your own country

giving up the concertmaster's seat

to wait on tables

a white apron for the black tailcoat

you once wore

You had vowed never to play for anyone

again.

we spoke our farewells

knowing we would travel on

before night

and I savored one last glance at the old upright,

noticing for the first time

its ivory keys

discolored and broken

like the fingernails of campesinos

THE BIG BLUE PIG WITH PURPLE TEATS

After three years in this country
most foreign kids reek

with American accents
but Waleed
sounds like he's eating marshmallows

I understand him though.
for the past three years I've been trying
to teach him English.

the first week of school
after several close hugs
I discovered a progressive case
of ringworm
under his chin.
Later on, he infected the whole pre-school
with head lice

I was grateful to just be his
English teacher forty-five minutes a day
but then
I didn't realize he would come back
year after year
unable to speak coherently

He began and finished kindergarten
wearing a tan, polyester leisure suit
and high-heeled

two-toned

disco shoes

(no socks)

his first sign of westernization

during the cold months

(and to a Saudi, most Michigan months
are cold)

pink flowered long-johns crept out
from his grimy cuffs
like grayish snails
slowly extending
from their
shells

sometimes he wore pajamas with
feet in them
instead of the long-johns

When, after three years,
he had no friends his age
he fell in love with me
wouldn't leave my room until
he'd hugged and kissed his sweetheart

Repulsion churned inside me until
it finally bubbled up
like putrid sulfur springs
and I turned away my face.

Near the end of May
I taught my kids about spring
painstakingly they copied
four sentences from the chalkboard--

Trees have flowers.

Baby animals are born.

Children fly kites.

People plant gardens.

then each one received a huge
manila drawing sheet
sectioned into quarters by my
green magic marker

"In square number 1 draw a picture
of sentence number 1.
Do you understand?"

while everyone drew big round trees like
ice cream cones

Waleed still struggled with his letters

reversing them, Arabic-style

I finally gave him a box of crayons

and told him to draw his picture

By now a rash of baby chicks

had broken out on most kids' papers

little yellow chicks

popping from cracked eggshells--

the same example I had used.

But Waleed drew a gawky bird with

long legs dangling down,

below, a white rabbit in the grass

with a red streak on its back

the eagle had picked up the baby rabbit

then dropped it, he said

that was blood on its back

Kids were whining about

kites and gardens

wanting me to draw their pictures

but I was still transfixed

by the rabbit

I encouraged him to draw a ~~tree on that day~~
blossoming tree which he did
without much interest
but near it he colored a giant
red bird, butterfly wings outspread
landing like a parachutist
on a nest full of
red eggs

I held his picture up
excited now
but everyone was busy copying
some stupid kite picture
from their reading books

Waleed went on to draw
not a kite
but an enormous blue pig
with purple teats--
underneath, a tiny orange
baby pig
they didn't look too much
like pigs
but he told me that's what they were
he drew himself offering a corncob
to the blue pig

His classroom teacher came to me that day
spelling test in her hand
the sheet was blank
except for Waleed's name
written as a mirror image
and the numbers 1 through 6
reversed and strung along the

right
hand
margin

"This is what I have to show
after one year with this kid."

I taped his picture on my office wall
a continual reminder
of my shortsightedness.

COMMUNITY HOSPITAL, ROOM 309, BED 2

Your door is closed

I push it open gently then snap back
startled by another woman in your bed
even as I read your name in bold print
a resemblance of you filters through the
heavy air
lying flat and stiff
your face the color of raw oysters
some invisible force sucking your eye sockets
to the back of your skull

Just yesterday you sat in this bed
modeling a peach colored nightgown
it stands out now against your gray skin
like the gaudy rouge on an old woman's cheek

A young boy in white glides in and out silently
leaving a tray of dead food
(as though you could eat)

I touch your bruised arm
maimed by countless blood tests
and your eyes crawl out of their dark tunnels
"During the night," you whisper
"Another clot--but they don't know yet
They've never felt their blood stop."
lips smeared with dead ashes

The odor of cold grease coagulating
near the edge of your plate
sets my stomach in motion--it rises steadily

like an elevator
until it can go no higher then I retch uncontrollably
over the antiseptic toilet

In the hall, a tin orchestra
pours syrupy music through the intercom system
two nurses sit behind a glass partition
laboriously filling out charts
I wonder if you are even on their charts

The cheese sauce on your broccoli
cools and thickens into clots

I float over your bed in disbelief
six weeks in this place
and they have not yet realized
you are my mother
that until sometime during the night
your face was soft and beautiful

You occupy a bed
above which, the nameplate
is disposable

A MISPLACED REEL

At age seven I discovered the bodies of two young women
their faces extending from underneath a black car
parked, along with many others, on a frozen lake.
they wore heavy coats and long, woolly scarves
and had been hacked repeatedly by an ax
which lay nearby on a cushion of red snow

night after night the dream reoccurred
until the idea of sleep terrified me
I would load my bed with toys
in an effort to stay awake but
the haphazard arrangement of stuffed animals
would weave itself into neat rows of cars
I would find myself in the strange parking lot
stooping to pick up someone's lost red mitten
only to discover it was not a mitten at all
rather a red bloodstain soaking into the snow

eventually, the nightmare faded
I resumed my normal seven-year-old existence
but the images had become a part of me
unnoticed, painless; there to stay--
like the steel plate inserted in my uncle's hip
after he fell

time and again I have wondered about the nightmare
wondered how a small girl whose best friends were dolls
could develop such a thing within her head
a girl who had never seen read nor heard
about chopping up women with an ax

Twenty years have passed since The Parking Lot Murders
but the blood is still wet and shiny.
I drift through life wondering about the dark side of my
brain trying yet to decipher that macabre attempt
at communication from some murky source
and half expecting to spot a red mitten
lost near a black car, parked, along with many others
on a frozen lake

OUR MARRIAGE WILL LAST AS LONG
AS THIS FILE CABINET

When we got married

Paul gave up everything
except his used file cabinet
he left behind the house he owned
with the screened-in back porch
and the basement he had finished off
he said good-bye to his disabled Saab
knowing it would never survive the
journey of six blocks

He walked away without his collection
of pots, pans, and pink cafeteria trays
without the old hide-a-bed couch
and formica kitchen table

but the one thing he would not give up
was his battered file cabinet
bought second-hand for \$85.

Eighty-five bucks! I said in disbelief
You can buy a new one from the Sears Roebuck catalog
for \$59.95.

But he insisted the cabinet was first-class
solid as an armored tank and heavier
with steel ball-bearing rollers
not found nowadays

We bumped it up his basement stairs
on a rented dolly and rolled it
into the U-HAUL
its drawers packed solid as
cans of Libby Pumpkin
containing everything he had
ever collected

Into my house of antiques, Nippon china,
and mint green carpet
we dragged this used file cabinet
up the staircase
knowing we could both be maimed
if either one let go
we made it around two corners
without a scratch
but with one miscalculated move
the file cabinet fell heavy as an
executioner's blade
and split the top of my carved walnut desk
clean in two
it happened so quickly the hand-painted figurines
barely flinched

We got married anyway.

I painted the file cabinet brown

and parked it in the corner behind the door

As part of our wedding vows I promised

to let that be his territory

and relinquished all rights thereof

 a concession of 15 cubic feet--

 not out of line under the circumstances--

although I later threw in part of the basement

Since then, his presence has steadily infiltrated

the eyelet lace and crystal goblets

unusual books have sprung up like wild blackberries

to choke off my thin volumes of poetry

From the basement a new workbench billows

sawdust and toxic fumes late at night

The emaciated frame of his maroon 10-speed

hangs grotesquely from a hook in the garage

Unclaimed brown socks accumulate near the dryer

like homely girls without dates

But certain items which are sacred

he has piled on top of the file cabinet

where they enjoy diplomatic immunity

from vacuum cleaners and Windex

There, huddled together, are the things

he can never give up/I can never accept

A large plastic model of the Invisible (pregnant) woman
complete with snap-out belly and removable fetus
A green ceramic frog ashtray although we abhor smoking
His unwieldy sculpture crafted of coat hangers and wood
in 7th grade
A rubber statue of Jiminy Cricket with all the paint chewed off
A Cracker Jacks box chained to a brown jug
the significance of which I have never understood

These treasures which would never be tolerated
by my onyx chessboard or pewter candlesticks
have survived on a technicality
because we both feel the weight of wedding vows

It is inconceivable that Paul would ever
surrender his one strong-hold
so I have given up
and although I feign utter disgust
the truth of the matter is that
I have grown attached to this
blight on the landscape
It is the one thing in my life which I can never
control or perfect
and despite its dents and layers of dust
it will never wear out or give in

However,
should contract negotiations ever reopen
perhaps I could have it moved to
the basement

OLD MAMA LAUER I sat at my desk

like almost everyone there I was selflessly

You were the matriarch of our high school

not just the choir director

students and teachers alike fled at the

warning squeak of your rubber soled tie shoes

When you parked that massive load of flesh

behind the director's stand

eighty-seven slouching spines snapped

as though you had yanked a common chord

running through their vertebrae

I would sit trembling at the piano

positioning my frozen fingers with one eye

watching the tilt of your wrist with the other

terrified at the prospect of missing a downbeat

I knew your throaty voice which rode

through school on the backs of arpeggios

could scorch a person black

with the ease of a blowtorch

once you humiliated me so deeply

I dripped hot tears on the keyboard

because that day my fingers

like giddy horses

would not be bridled by your turning wrist

Something though kept me coming back
like almost everyone there I was helplessly
drawn by your power and I hated you for it

But when you stood before us
arms outstretched, white head flung back
enormous bosom heaving against the jersey dresses you wore
draining music from our veins that no one guessed was there
I could only envy so magnificent a source
until that day we filed in as usual
to take our places and
you were gone
we finally noticed you sitting in darkness
behind the glass wall of your office

From my piano bench I watched you
but you did not move, did not even realize
more than eighty pairs of eyes were on you
I slipped in your door
with the caution of reaching in a
sick animal's cage
but there was no fierceness left
in the sagging flesh
no heat in the eyes as they rolled sideways
to look at me

It took three men to get you home.
because you could not walk nor even stand
they dragged you clear across our room
still sitting in your gray desk chair
sweating and straining they bumped you
past the alto section into the hallway
your head slumped heavy legs spreading
awkwardly apart

I had wanted so badly to see you struck down
humbled as you had humbled so many others
but the sight of you scraping
across the floor on that chair
burned a deep hole in me
which ached for days
They told us your daughter was dying.

Eventually you returned
awesome and penetrating as ever
but it was not the same
we had seen you stripped naked
and could never believe in your power again

I taught my fingers to follow your swooping wrist
and did not tremble
but the singers' voices grew flat and stale
and I could not fill up the emptiness
of that ugly hole

TRACKING DOWN A MISSING SUCTION PUMP
AT COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

Old man, I do not even know

your name

but you will leave this place someday

your prone gray body

solemnly flanked

two men in muted suits

their white shirts

crisp

even at 3 a.m.

I crept in here yesterday

during the ash-covered dawn

you were sleeping/unconscious

it doesn't really matter which

I only came to verify

the call number

on your suction pump

but stood, instead, beside you

watching that clear tube

spiraling down from

suspended bottle

like some thin wiry snake

dripping venom into your vein

its transparent mate springs
from your nostril
its twisting body brutally fastened down
by adhesive tape
it hisses like a thing alive
arches up indignantly
then coils tightly
slithers into the jar below

You could be someone's father/husband
perhaps people once looked up to you
but all I see, old man
is this nest of snakes
crawling on your flesh
and you, paralyzed
by their poison
Already dead

A PERMANENT IMAGE the chipmunk
under the brittle green than sound

We found the chipmunk underneath the kitchen sink
twisting and squealing in pain
having feasted on rat poison
not meant for him

While we pressed in among the crusted pipes
and towering jars of soap and polish
wondering how he got in
and what we could do to save him
You quietly stepped outside
to find your shovel

Get a box, someone shouted
And some soft rags!
But already you held the chipmunk
in the giant steel palm of your shovel
still rolling from side to side
eyes shut tight as any crying baby

We crowded through the back door
You ahead of us
striding quickly toward the underbrush

Slowly, you eased the chipmunk
onto the brittle grass then paused
to take in the ring of
silent spectators
drawn like magnets to the steel blade
of your shovel

You had not expected an audience
but we stood there
fixated on glistening metal
You staring down at the squirming chipmunk
Your face pinched as though a bad smell
had escaped from an opening in the ground

Suddenly
You cracked his neck
with the clean slick edge
of your shovel

You, my father
 who hated killing so much
you refused to fight in war
 who risked your life to
drag back the wounded
cracked the neck of that chipmunk
as though you were snapping
a string bean

The backyard hung ~~there~~ ~~young~~
suspended in silent shock
while the brown fur quivered
and finally lay still

I glanced around at the rest of them
eyes glazed with horror by
this execution of a thing so innocent
and I knew then
that they did not understand

Two stabs into the crumbling earth
hollowed out a grave
You slid him in, head flopping loosely
water-color streaks of blood
painted on the muddy shovel

I expected you to wash it off
but instead, you walked back to
the house

They hung around, these young
friends of mine
their hands burrowing deep
into pockets--
I knew what they were thinking
and I wanted so much to tell them
that you were not cold-blooded
that only a strong person
could have killed the chipmunk
that you hated violence above everything--
except suffering
but I didn't say a word

While you sealed the poison inside
an empty jar
and swept beneath the sink
we milled aimlessly in the sun-scorched grass
the three of them
quiet and uneasy with me now
an image of you fixed
in their minds
like the blood and dirt
hardening on your
shovel blade

DON'T COUNT ME IN WITH THE REAL SKIERS

My red Schwinn bike lives on
after nineteen years
a remarkable feat since bicycles
like dogs
have shorter lives than humans

In bike-years he could be close to eighty
but faithful as ever, prolonging
for me a memory
of simpler days when bed sheets
were only white and you could make cole-slaw
without a blender

and to think I neglected the old hulk
for years, ashamed of balloon tires
the sloping metal bar which hopelessly
labeled him "sissy bike"
the rusty wire basket bolted permanently
to the handlebars

I even tried scraping off the "Screamin' Demon" decal
stuck on the front fender since 4th grade
but it was of no use
a pack of sleek silver 10-speeds with toe stirrups
had taken over the neighborhood
roaming the streets like wolves

I had no choice but to abandon him.

He fought all the way but I dragged him down
the basement steps and stuffed the battered frame
into the crawl-space

even then I knew I could never buy another bicycle

instead I devised an alternate plan which would
boost my standing among peers

I took up skiing
a sport virtually untouched by the average
hick-town citizen

I started out in an old corduroy coat
rented skis
knee socks underneath my mittens
didn't realize even little snot-faced kids
would eye me with disgust
for spoiling the scenery
mortified, I fled to the nearest department store
and bought the works:

hot-pink ski coat
navy stretch pants
skis
boots
poles

It wasn't enough.

my new skis, although lacking the words

RENTAL EQUIPMENT in neon tape

had chintzy cable bindings

the obvious mark of low social class

and my boots had laces

the real skiers wore buckle boots

I sold back my tie boots at a great loss

and bought the cheapest pair of buckles

let them jingle when I stomped through the club house

didn't know the real skiers were trained to tell

the make of a boot 10 feet away.

and right after I bought those lousy stretch pants

that shaped me into a valentine the industry

came out with bell-bottomed ski wear

then zippered warm-up pants and matching jackets

While I saved up money for new bindings

the list grew longer

before I could hope to be accepted I would have to own:

a boot tree, tinted goggles, ski mitts with those useless

metal clips on the cuff, color coordinated suspenders,

a ski rack...

and in the lodge a mild outbreak of the latest invention--

molded foam boots--

had quarantined the real skiers

from the hordes of riff-raff

Finally, my skis hit a patch of mud
I packed up my gear and waited for spring
during which time I exhumed Screamin' Demon
from the crawl-space
he sustained two flat tires and a bent
kick-stand

but was otherwise in good shape

We have become inseparable friends
He takes me everywhere in spite of a sluggish chain
still clogged by bits of crepe paper streamers
some 4th of July parade years ago
I ride along proud and straight-backed
because the handlebars do not curve down like
the ridiculous horns of a mountain goat
and I tell everyone how I dumped a paper sack
full of pennies on the counter, totaling eight bucks
it was my life's savings at age 7 and some poor
bike dealer had to count it
the pedals didn't even reach my feet for almost a year
but I loved that shiny red bike
and when my husband, veteran of a 2,000 mile bike expedition
crudely suggested we junk it
I almost ran over him

TO THE THREE SEÑORITAS

If I were literate
this is the poem I would write
for you, Señoritas

whose terrazzo floors I scrubbed each day
for whom I kept curried shrimp and guisquil
waiting in the oven
I bargained for your fruits and vegetables
then carried them home on my head
washed three sets of sheets
and towels each week
slapping them against the cement
until they were purged
your dresses panties slips and bras
I washed ironed folded and put away
touching the lace
and because you were fresh out
of middleclass America
you couldn't bear to see me work
weekends so I went home to my village
most Saturday afternoons
you gave me old dresses and sandals
with broken straps
occasionally some eye shadow or lip-stick
you couldn't use

you knew nothing about keeping a servant
at first
my cramped living quarters appalled you
the thin mattress in the corner
a wooden crate
toilet with no seat
and you thought I should eat in the dining room
you never guessed that maids
are not allowed to eat
the food they cook for their masters
and that maids have their own plate
cup and fork
washed and stored separately
from the master's dishes

you even cleaned up the kitchen yourselves
after those midnight binges
where you rationed out chocolate chips
sent over by your families
and made cookies to stave off
homesickness

and when someone shot my husband
father of six children
in the head
you wanted to have him moved

from the poor hospital
to the real hospital
but you couldn't take off work
to arrange it
I understood
I know that the life of a campesino
is not important

yet you loaned me two-hundred dollars
to build a house made of corrugated metal
for my brother's family
agreeing to deduct a portion of my pay
each month for a year
you worried that without the money
my children would go hungry
so you wrapped up left-over bits of food
and sent them home with me
on Saturdays

when your toaster oven burned out
you gave it to me
my friend repaired it for a few centavos
you wanted it back I could tell by your eyes
but you told me to take it home

every maid on our street despised me
because of your blonde hair
and your men coming and leaving
but I endured you, Señoritas
because you offered the best life

if I could read and write
this would be my poem to you

I ALWAYS MEANT TO CALL

For Aunt Kate

I always meant to call

but each time

I stalled by the phone

searching desperately for

some small peg

on which to hang my attention

for the moment

so, I scoured the months of yellow grease

off the bottom of my electric skillet

watered my two brittle ferns

sorted wool skirts and pants for

the dry cleaners

and all the while that

lemon-sized tumor in your throat

pressed against mine until

I couldn't breathe

I pictured you
out in the garage
paint-stained bandana wrapped
around your faded copper hair
scraping the varnish off an antique table
like a tireless scrubwoman
always working
always taking care of everyone.

When I was so sick that time
you tied a bulgy heating pad smeared
with Vick's jelly on my chest
until I stopped coughing.
It felt so good, at age 24, to be tucked in
between flannel sheets
my lungs glowing white from hot menthol fumes

And yet, each time I stopped by the phone
wanting to just simply tell you
how much you meant to me
that tumor swelled in my throat
and I found something else to do
until finally
you called
me.

Could I use any green beans or tomatoes?

you wouldn't be canning
anymore.

This fall.

I tried to explain, then
how I always meant to call
a faltering string of clichés
fake as dime-store jewelry
which left me feeling more ashamed

so today, you lie in a
strange city
in a strange bed
curled in spasms of nausea
reliving an earlier time
when you were younger than I am now
and they hacked at your lungs

the bull-frog throat is
sliced away
you
wrapped in white gauze

I study my living room wall
studded with artwork/souvenirs
Guatemalan ceremonial mask
carved gourd
woodblock print of two Mexican peasants
bloated violin-like instrument
from a market in Istanbul
etcetera
my treasures which I proudly display

Suddenly, I am angry with all of them
they have become my own cliches
gaudy and crowded there on the wall

I rip nails and picture hangers out
of the plaster
dab putty in the cracks and holes
paint the wall rolling up/down/sideways
it looks clean and fragile
as eggshells
and frighteningly naked

I think about you, Kate
more often than you would ever guess
and if I could ask for just one change
I would have the gift of being able to
saying I love you
to those I care about

BLOOD RELATIONS

I look down in dismay at the heavy veins
pulsing like masses of blue earthworms
on my white legs
legs swollen with clotting blood
blood which kills the women
in my family

I think of my mother
whose purple legs we rarely saw
hidden beneath flesh-colored elastic
unable to walk at age twelve
her left leg thick and heavy
as a tree trunk
central vein blocked by
stagnant blood

I think of my mother's mother
who raised eight children and still
died young
bloated leg too tender even for
goose down
blood thickening like
syrup

I think of my grandmother's mother
struggling up hours after childbirth
to milk the cows
dragging her heavy leg with its
tangled clotting veins
she died that night and left
three babies

I look down at the frozen blue veins
surfacing like the roots of a tree
along my wrists and hands
and I am reminded of the heritage
passed on to me.

Four generations has not diluted
Our blood.





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