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I AM WUTHERING HEIGHTS
A COLLECTION OF POEMS

presented by

Catherine Kaikowska

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Master's degree in English



Major professor

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I AM WUTHERING HEIGHTS
A COLLECTION OF POEMS

By

Catherine Kaikowska

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

I AM WUTHERING HEIGHTS
A COLLECTION OF POEMS

By

Catherine Kaikowska

This book is a collection of poems which deal with identity--both the search for and the flight from identity.

I Am Wuthering Heights was chosen as the title for the collection because the poem of the same title illustrates how an aspect of identity may be claimed by two people, but ultimately one has the greater claim. I Am Wuthering Heights is a reference to the movie Fahrenheit 451 in which people memorize books--taking the titles for their names--and all the books, except Wuthering Heights, are shown as people: she is named and pointed toward, but not shown.

All of these poems focus on some aspect of identity, whether it is the struggle against an imposed identity or the struggle toward an identity writing to itself behind a closed door; this last struggle is to open the door--or the book--and take the words for one's own.

This book is for Diane Wakoski.

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Thank you to Diane Wakoski, for everything.

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"...and it has been my task as a human being
to carve out a mind, carve out a face,
carve out a shape with arms & legs, to put a voice inside,
and to make a person from a presence."

--Diane Wakoski, "I Have Had
to Learn to Live with My
Face"

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I Am Wuthering Heights

While I'm discussing Fahrenheit 451 the film with a film-maker she lets it slip that SHE is Wuthering Heights and I say she is more A Spy in the House of Love anyway I am Wuthering Heights and entitled to be because I've been reading it every year since I was nine.

The film-maker says no that she is Wuthering Heights. "I AM Wuthering Heights" is how she puts it.

I say look you're a film-maker you can be the film version and let me be the book I'm the writer.

She says that I am a POET so I should be Emily Dickinson's Collected Poems I like to stay in bed so much.

I ask her then why not be Madame Bovary or Anna Karenina since she the film-maker stays in bed a lot for reasons different from mine.

She ignores my suggestion saying that I am Polish I can be Sophie's Choice or if I want to include other media Jadwiga's Dream.

I tell her I have no interest in being a painting and The French Lieutenant's Woman has also been spoiled for me so I can't be that either and I will NEVER see another film of a book I wish I hadn't seen this one tonight.

The film-maker says to calm down that we should be reasonable and since I was born in January and I love Henry Miller I should be Tropic of Capricorn it might do me some good.

This makes me angry and I say the way her sex life looks to me she would do well to consider Orlando.

She tells me she's noticed that when I'm NOT in bed alone I'm drinking in sleazy bars with inappropriate strangers so WHY NOT Good Morning, Midnight.

I say NO. I say REMEMBER. When Heathcliff goes brooding out over the moors he isn't howling "Cindy Cindy."

We open another bottle of wine and the film-maker sighs she looks at me sideways and says that perhaps I don't realize I have so much to choose from Cat on a Hot Tin Roof for example and Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats there's Catherine the Great surely a book MUST be called Catherine the Great and what about War and Peace the

Catherine in that gets to be "Catiche" the film-maker
finishes triumphantly. And A Farewell to Arms has a
Catherine. And SHE dies.

I say to her Cindy Cindy I say. I am Wuthering Heights.

It Happens

"I never said, 'I want to be alone.' I only said,
'I want to be let alone.' There is all the difference."
--Greta Garbo

You come home in the afternoon, the middle of the day, strip off your clothes and lie down in the bed unmade from the night before. You catch his scent, your own. You smell the way the two of you smell together, the peculiar and particular scent the two of you make. And you think you won't be able to live without it. You hear the woman next door making love with her boyfriend. You stare at the ceiling listening to her scream. You think that you won't go on, can't go on. You don't hear her screams anymore, though she's still screaming. You can't make yourself believe that it is over, the two of you. Everyone you know will be surprised. You try to think what you will say to them when they ask. And they will ask. You think you won't be able to live without him. But you will. Each time it happens it gets a little harder. But it happens. Has happened. It happens less now but it has happened.

You turn over. Your hand goes between your legs and comes away with the smell of the last-ditch lovemaking of the night before. Maybe you cry. Maybe you don't. But the smell is on your hands. The two of you. You cover your head with the sheets and breathe it in and breathe it in. And breathe it in. You won't change the sheets for a long time after he's gone. Weeks. Maybe a month. Then you will. You'll begin smelling other smells. It will get easier. You say it again. "It will get easier."

You've lost five pounds since the night before. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since he said, "Yes, I think so," to your "Do you want to leave me?" and already you've lost five pounds from the shock of it. At this rate you'll disappear in less than a month. You giggle. And then you remember.

How will you get through the winter. The next month. Tomorrow. You'll pull through. You always do. You're too much the coward to slit your wrists, too much the sadomasochist to do it any other way than slowly. Slowly. You. Torturing yourself. Recriminations. Doubt.

You are alone, looking around the room, your bedroom and his bedroom. Your bedroom. It didn't change much when he moved in and it won't change much when he moves out, except that there'll only be one pair of eyes staring at the walls. One body huddled up at night dreaming dreams inspired by cold stale sheets.

It happens. Has happened. It happens less now but it has happened. You think you won't do it again. But you'll do it again. You can't help yourself. You hate yourself for it. But you'll look up and see someone looking at you. And you won't look away. You'll find yourself having coffee, talking about each other's pain and mistrust, the whole pile of shit loaded up over the years and you'll decide, one or both of you, to put it aside, and you'll be in up to your neck again. It happens.

Kisskiss

many many weeks on these white sheets staring at white ceiling white walls picturing in my snowblind mind a certain kind of literary prince a white knight metaphor on a sleek steed we all know what that stands for I have been weeks in this dream my poet prince bending over to kisskiss picture it picture this I wake up to him and the sure knowledge of his wife and kids back at the castle surprise surprise in his eyes at bending over and over a neurotic creep like me my red-rimmed eyes take in his first question how did he get here never mind that I reply how did I is the question now what he asks perfectly happy home life wife and might well ask now what what now I have no idea merely the sleeping poetess princess pardon me kisskissed into life and carried away into one poet's fantasy is another's you know what so they say hey I only just sleep here myself picturing this this SOS prince bending over and over and

Art Object

-ion, Or

What I Did For Art

I tell people I was an apple in a previous life to keep them from being embarrassed that I once took my clothes off for a living. I was an artist's model as Anais Nin called it in her past. On this particular night in my past I put on my clothes and on the way home from the art school I sit down at a table in Orville's. A man hands me a drink but what is this. He says he knows me. Says he was in the painting class I just sat for. When I say I didn't recognize him with my clothes on he doesn't laugh. He says he'd imagined me all night long with a drink in my hand and what would that drink be. I take a flinching sip and it's whiskey. He says it would be pernod if we were in France but it's whiskey because he saw Garbo last night and she said gimme a whiskey, bebby. And that there's something about me.

But we wouldn't be in France because I wouldn't because you can't be an American really an American in France. Although someone once was an American in Paris. That was then. Now you can't be an American in Paris or France or anywhere else but America. Although you can certainly go

somewhere else and think about it. Which is what Gertrude Stein. Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson both did. Leave America in order to think about being an American and then to write about it. When now as a matter of fact it's considered chauvinistic to call this country where we are America since the entire upper and lower land masses are truly America and so what we can call ourselves now he and I except maybe Ohioans I don't know. And this is probably a blessing since we can't be the Ugly American anymore even though we also can't be an American in Paris anymore either. But the man's looking at me funny so I shut up and sulk like Garbo at him over my whiskey which I can't drink. Even if it were pernod. The man's dead wrong. I drink beer. Although finally I do drink the whiskey instead of spoiling his illusion. And Joyless Street suits my mood.

But it was Anna Christie he saw last night. But too late and I can only be Joyless Street anyway because Garbo still had her eyebrows in Joyless Street. He asks me if that's why I always wear black and I leap out of his illusion. Why does he think I always wear black he's not always with me maybe I only wear black when he's with me but what does he mean. Is what why I always wear black. Because of my eyebrows he says. A good answer. One I will always cherish. I return to the sullen Garbo over whiskey. He

says I'm such an interesting mix of Garbo and Marilyn maybe I should change my name.

But the only name I ever thought I'd change was to May Midwest. Somebody got there ahead of me. And I have no delusions of glamour like some of the art school models who say they pose nude who strut the studio in their nude suits gleaming with oil and redslicked toenails and ruby red lips they smack together. Even though they certainly don't want to be in Kansas or anywhere else midwestern and fingernails long like claws. Rings on their fingers. He says and bells on their toes. Well I'm not like that I tell him. I'm naked naked naked underneath my clothes. That's why. And when I take off my clothes I'm naked to the bone. And that's why. He says I am. And then some. So I ask him. What's his name. He says I can call him Art. Oh no I cannot. I don't believe it.

He says it's short for Arthur. I say Joe's a three-letter name too and he says fine. I get the feeling this man wants something from me so I can call him anything I like is how he feels about it. He excuses himself and goes off to the bar. When he comes back he hands me a Rolling Rock which is what I drink what anyone always drinks where I come from. He pulls his chair around and up next to me and I lean my back a way back against the

wall which I've always thought was the appropriate public position except that it begins to feel less like security and more like I have my back to the wall which I suppose is where the phrase comes from since he's leaning so close up to me I can't move. And he says he really needs. Me. I can tell by the look in his eyes he doesn't mean it in that baby I need your lovin' way. He needs me he says for a series of paintings he's been wanting to do but could never do until now. Until there was me. But I only work for professional artists. Art students in classes. Art professors in studios. He smiles for the first time. He says but he is Art.

Every night for a month I go to Joe's after I finish at the art school. Although I think of him as Art when he's painting. We don't speak a word when he's painting. Every night I sit for three hours and we talk at midnight when I put my baggy black clothes back on. Then Joe gets me a beer and lights me a cigarette and I lean back and close my eyes kind of drowsing off until I feel the heat of his breath on my face. I told Joe I don't sleep with people I work for. It comes from the same place as the baggy black clothes. He says as long as I believe that keeps me safe I'm not safe.

So we're down on the floor getting gesso and chalk all over my clothes. And I lift my shirt up over my head and hang it on the edge of a new stretched canvas reaching my arms up to his shoulders to pull him down and he's frozen over me staring and he says Jesus look at the definition of those chords in my neck and here do that again with my arm out toward the canvas and prop myself up with the other hand on the floor and turn just my torso toward him okay don't move. And he's Art not Joe and crawling like a crab backward away from me afraid to take his eyes off this most amazing thing the human form has conjured itself into. That he's never noticed before. Grabbing for a sketch pad. Charcoal. I never say a word. He needs me.

Another night a few nights later I get tired of the scenario. I turn out the light. He says but he wants to see me. He turns the light on. I grab the cord and pull it crashing to the floor. I want him to be a sculptor. And I'm clay. He says but a painter is his eyes and if he can't have me with his eyes he doesn't have me.

For the final painting the model stand is draped. White sheets. Heavy linen white. Joe. Art. The painting. Is to have the bright white surround the flesh and reflect color off the flesh. That's what he says his hands all

over me and I don't feel like clay but like the armature underneath. But for Art's sake. Art says to please shut up while he is working and then my clothes are off and Joe. Art. Is laying me down. And lying down beside me. For a quick breath of a moment I respond and then he leaps to his easel and begins to paint. After such weeks of intense work for Joe. For Art. I am exhausted. Lying down. Curved up on one hip so just a breath of light shoots through between my waist and the white sheet. Even though weight is solely on the hip and one shoulder on the same side and the force of the pose is shot from one foot to those points to give a sense of violent sensuality as Joe. Art. Had desired. Desired to paint. Still I am so exhausted I sleep. Discipline takes over and the pose is held though the brain sleeps. At some point discipline gives way. The pose breaks. The body relaxes into true repose.

I am aware of someone lying next to me at the same time as a hand cups my chin and I know from the touch it is Joe. And his hand slides to my collarbone cool and slippery down to my breast and across my belly and between my legs. Joe I say. He says Art. And when I open my eyes I see that he is right. We are covered with scarlet lake and cadmium yellow. Ultramarine and other colors too mixed for definition. And squashed and

flattened tubes surround the linen sheets no longer
bright white light but a kind of rumpled canvas for the
paint. This could get expensive. And my skin.

Find The Face Of A Poet

"She opened her eyes and stared straight at me, as though she had some faint sense of my presence."

--John Gardner, Jason and Medea

Anything. Anything to get you through the day. Find the face of a poet on the back of his book and make up conversations between you. Make up the intensity your life lacks. Look for his face on the street, through windows that mirror your face. Imagine that he is everyone you see and that he is looking for you with as much intensity as you are looking. For him. Imagine that he is watching. Watching you looking for him.

Try anything. When you wake in the middle of the night in the dark and alone, drink milk. Heat it. Turn on all the lights and go softly from room to room holding the cup, smelling the milk, picking things up and putting them down. Turn out the lights. Look. Listen.

You try anything. Anything to stop it, to keep going. Keep to yourself. Avoid faces. Eyes. Don't look in mirrors. Don't look. Don't. But lie in the dark and

hear your heart. Skipping beats. Keep time. Keep it to yourself. Lie in the dark and lie and lie and lie. In the dark.

You might try anything. You might imagine that you are not in a hole in the dark and alone. Imagine that a man walks toward you slowly, stops so close your head tilts back and the heat comes off his body and meets your heat. He reaches out to you and cups your breast in his hand. Lights are shining and music is loud. He dances with you. Hipbones grind together, thighs meet. Your skin and flesh slide off his skin and flesh. Imagine that you find the face of this man. You meet his mouth with your mouth. Imagine these intensities. And that you are not alone and crawling endlessly crawling out of a hole in the dark.

This Story Is Mine. I Want To.

"It's my party. And I'll cry if I want to."
--Lesley Gore

It's my story. Once upon a time there was a woman who.
And then she did it again. And again. And again. With
the same man yet. And THEN with the same other woman.
Too. Except that's not exactly true because sometimes
SHE was the other woman and the other woman was. I mean
okay. Once upon a time there was a woman who.

And then she went away and of course she didn't live
happily ever after. She went WITH the man. And because
these days we know about Nausea and existentialism and
philosophers. And The Psychopathology of Everyday Life.
Not like once upon a time.

Even if there is a time when you think you might BE
HAPPY somebody always comes along. Calls up on the
phone and starts your boyfriend plotting behind your
back. Loses the only copy of your manuscript in the
mail. Walks up to you in the supermarket and whispers
FUCK in your ear. Tells YOU to get lost for the weekend.

So that he can spend time with the other woman. Once upon a time there was another woman.

Who probably won't be the other woman much longer. If the future resembles the past. And what does the other woman. Want. Once upon a time there was another woman.

Hey it's MY STORY. Once upon a time there was. And she lived. Somewhere else. Yeah that's it. She went away. This time far away and she went alone and she watched. Eagles in trees. She watched a grizzly bear. Eat her cat.

No. She didn't go THAT far.

Once upon a time there was a woman who went away. She got on a plane. And fell to a violent and fiery death screaming as she clutched hot steel.

No no no. She didn't go like that.

Once upon a time there was a woman who. Got on a BOAT and went to a country. Somewhere. Over there. And she sat in cafes. Drinking espresso. Drinking pernod. Wearing a fur coat. And this woman was smiling. Munching a croissant. Not like a sandwich but really. And she

was sitting at a table on the sidewalk. In the sun.
She was munching and smiling. Like she was happy.
People came up to her. They sat down and talked. She
smiled. She nodded. Sometimes she shook her head.

Once upon a time there was a woman who went away. Yeah.
She went somewhere else. And she was happy. How happy
was she. Well she was happy. She was so happy she.
Smiled. And people sat down to talk to her. And she
smiled. She was happy. She couldn't understand a word
they said.

Once upon a time there was a woman who. It's my story.
And I want to.

What Do Women Want

"Unrequited love's a bore."

--Billie Holiday

1.

It starts with his voice on the telephone. He's saying something mundane and trivial. Well mundane and trivial because it isn't about me. And I am sinking to the floor at the sound of his voice. My name and his in almost the same breath. Almost. He says let me give you my number. Yes.

Yes give me your number. No don't. What will I do with it. I will I know I will call in the middle of the night and breathe your name and.

What do women want.

I don't know I don't know I don't know what women want.

I know I will. I won't be able to help it.

2.

And then. It's his face, his eyes. I can't stop seeing his face. Almost seeing his face everywhere.

That face that wonderful face and.

Those eyes.

Your eyes are not brown. I don't are what your driver's license says. Someone very stupid looked into your eyes and called them brown. Even in the dark. Even when you turn your head to keep from looking at me. I see them too too clearly.

What do women want.

Women want to see your eyes. Women want your voice speaking their names. Women want you. And I, I am jealous as hell. Who are all these women who want you. They are everywhere. They are knocking at your door. Waiting between your sheets. And reaching in your shower to scrub your back. They are running to follow you down the street.

What do women want.

I know I know. They want you.

3.

But do I know what I am doing.

Yes. I have been waiting for years for you, my teeth,
my.

No. Do I know what I am doing. This is crazy. Deal
with this rationally. What am I doing.

Be reasonable. I am obsessed.

4.

Obsessed. The recurrence of irrational ideas compelling
me to ridiculous acts. Yes. I ask someone are you ever
obsessed. Of course he says, all the time. Like this
I ask. Well I get obsessed he answers but it never
interferes with my life, my personality.

Obsession the word became obsolete early in the 18th
century, the age of reason; was revived in the 19th.

Of necessity I presume. OBSESSION is the mother of invention.

Classification of obsession: MISJUDGMENT/INSANITY/SORCERY/UNSKILLFULNESS. Immediately my eye skips to "presentiment...obsession."

Yes.

Then to correlative verb forms: "RUN AWAY with the notion...JUMP to a conclusion...BLUNDER, etc.,"

Blunder et cetera I know what that means.

INSANITY-obsession: "mania...idiocy."

From id undifferentiated energy I know what this means too.

"...frenzy...raving, wandering...obsession." SORCERY-obsession: "...black magic..."

That old black magic put its spell.

"...witchcraft."

And it's WITCHcraft he sings.

UNSKILLFULNESS-obsession: "...unskilled inexpert
incompetent bungling awkward clumsy unhandy maladroit
stupid ill-qualified unfit raw green inexperienced...

"...rusty out of practice." Exactly.

Obsession.

Exactly.

Obsession to Jean Rhys.

Obsessus to Nero.

Obsesja my father would say.

Obsession mother of my invention.

5.

He bends close to hear me speak. Never asking me what
women want.

Oh I want to tell you. You bend to listen women want
you not to walk away. Never to move from bending to

listen to say anything. You can say anything to me.
Don't stop.

6.

And I am doing it again.

But what can I say when you are there so. So listening.
Ask me what women want. Women want you to bend down to
them. To take their faces in your hands. Women want
you to turn to them on the street and look into their
eyes. To tangle their hair in your hands. Ask me what
women want. They want you to trace their bones with
your fingertips. Women want you to open the door. To
bend to them, look at them. Touch them.

What do women want.

Women want to love you. They adore. You.

7.

Obsession.

Who are all these women. I don't want you to know
what they want. I want these women to go away. I am
tired of keeping all these women from you.

Obsession. Is a tiring thing.

8.

I know he is not at home this week. I call him every night. Letting the telephone ring and ring. Imagining the ringing where he lives. Imagining. Where he lives. The telephone rings and rings. Don't stop. Please don't stop. If he answers I know I will I will tell him that I am a woman one of these women. The telephone rings and rings. Ridiculous acts.

You Said He Would

And he called last night you said he would. He called. To ask if I thought we should talk. ("What about.") He said he thought we should talk about how we're going to live in this town, this small town together at opposite ends of it. ("What. Want to draw a line down the middle.") He said no, not laughing, but the last time we tried to pretend that the other didn't exist it didn't work. ("I've changed.") He said oh, and that he'd been sitting around all afternoon after getting into town, wondering whether to call, or not. And that finally he decided to. But that's not true. Because you told me he called you first, asking should he. You said he should call me if he wanted to talk to me, and if he didn't want to talk to me he shouldn't call. And he must have asked other people too, because someone said as I was leaving Ray's Place, hey he wants. But I have nothing, there's nothing left to say. He said am I upsetting you. ("Yes. Yes yes.") And he said he's sorry. ("Of course I have a lot to say. But I can't say it to you. Even I know that. Even now.") He said oh, well I thought I should call. ("I can't do this.") What, he asked, can't you do. ("I can't.") Do you mean now, he asked. ("Yes. Yes. I

mean now.") I didn't know what else to say. You said
he would. ("Yes.")

She Said

I opened the door. You
were standing there.

Over the telephone
the conversation was
awkward, just a series
of questions and yesses and
noes. But when I
hung up I was glad I'd
called. You had told me
to stop by that after-
noon for tea. I said
I'd be there around 2
o'clock.

You smiled and I asked you
to come in. We both stood
for a minute, not saying
anything. You asked how
I was and I said fine. I
told you to sit down, and
you did and took off your
gloves, still smiling.

I walked to your house
and kept thinking about
your voice on the tele-
phone. You seemed
distant. I guess I did
too.

I sat down too.

I turned the corner and I
could see you in the
window, watching. There
were some children playing
kickball in the street and
you were watching them
intently.

We both looked out the
window and you mentioned
how warm it was for this
time of year. I agreed.

You saw me and waved. I
waved back.

I asked if I could make
you some tea. You said no.

You opened the door. I
smiled and you asked me to
come in. You didn't say
anything else, so I asked
how you were. You said
fine.

You coughed.

I sat down and took off my
gloves.

You said that you supposed
I knew why you were there.

You sat down too.

You looked surprised when I
said no, and you got up and
walked to the window. There
were some children playing
kickball in the street. We
could hear them laughing.

You turned to look at me and
we both laughed too.

We both looked out the
window and I made some
comment about the weather.

You said that perhaps you
would like some tea after
all.

You asked if I'd like some
tea and I said no.

You offered to help, but I
told you it would only take
a minute, the water was
already boiled.

We both sat looking at the
floor and finally I said
that I supposed you knew
why I was there.

While I was taking out spoons
and washing cups I thought I

heard singing. I stopped to
listen, and it was you,
singing some popular song,
the melody but not the
right words.

You said no and then I
didn't know what to say so
I said I'd like some tea
after all. And could I
help you make it.

You stopped when you thought
I was listening.

You said it would just take
a minute, so I walked to
the window and started to
hum some popular song I'd
heard on the radio that
morning. And then I
started to sing it, but I
didn't know the words. You
became silent in the kitchen
and I knew you were
listening, so I stopped.

I came back from the kitchen with the tea and saw that you were on your third cigarette. I was surprised because I'd forgotten that you smoked.

It didn't take too long to make the tea. Even so I was on my second cigarette by the time you came back from the kitchen.

You offered me a cigarette and I took it. We sat smoking and sipping our tea, and listening to the children in the street.

You said that you'd forgotten I smoked. I offered you a cigarette and you took it.

After a while you mentioned that you were

leaving soon. I said I was
sorry, it was such a nice
afternoon.

Neither one of us said
anything for a long time.
I found myself listening
to the children, who were
arguing over whose turn it
was, and watching a patch
of sunlight on the floor.

No, you said, I mean I'm
leaving this town soon.

I said that I was leaving
soon and you misunderstood.

I didn't say anything.
Just looked at the floor.

I said that what I meant
was I was leaving this town
soon. You didn't say
anything.

Well, you said, it does
seem rather futile to stay.

I said that it seemed
rather futile to stay,
now, and you agreed.

I agreed, and crushed out
my cigarette.

I finished my tea and put
on my gloves as I stood
up.

You finished your tea and
stood up, fumbling with
your gloves.

You asked when I was
leaving.

I asked when you were
leaving.

I said now.

Tomorrow, you said, and then
asked if I would drive you
to the train station.

No, you said, I mean when
are you leaving. Oh, I
said, I'm leaving
tomorrow. I turned to
walk to the door, then
turned back and asked if
you would drive me to catch
the train.

Of course I said yes. I
opened the door for you.
We said good-bye and I
said I'd call you in the
morning.

You said yes and walked me
to the door.

You smiled.

You said you'd call in the
morning and I said good-
bye again.

Chicken Soup

There was the knock at the door.

All day long she'd been simmering the chicken
drinking vodka
smoking cigarettes.

Early in the morning she'd gone out
to buy chicken
noodles and onions
mushrooms and celery
vodka and cigarettes.

For most of the day she'd sat
drinking the vodka
smoking cigarettes
waiting for the chicken to boil down.
Waiting.

She'd pulled the meat from the bones
chopped the vegetables
drunk vodka
smoked cigarettes.
Waiting.

And now the knock at the door.

She slid the chain off.

He pulled the door open

held her close

smelled cigarettes and chicken

in her hair.

Identity Crisis

"You know the nursery rhyme, I am I because my
little dog knows me."

--Gertrude Stein

I have been in this city for a week and already where I
have lunch the waitresses real career waitresses who
call me hon and crack their gum and talk to me about what
I'm wearing know that I will order chicken noodle soup
coffee black and sit for two crossword puzzles over one
cup of coffee no refill. Today Emma who likes me best
brings my soup and says Stasi wants to know where did I
get my dress. Stasi at the cash register smiles shyly
under her wheatgold bangs. She'd ask me herself but it's
her mathematics studies at the University of Warsaw that
got her this job not her ability to chat up the customers.
I tell Emma the dress comes from the factory outlet on
Washington down from Wabash. I found it balled up in a
corner under a rack. The clerk said it wasn't one of
theirs but it was the only thing I liked so she sold it
to me for five dollars. Emma laughs out loud hipslings
away and I take a first spoonful of soup chicken noodle
soup which I believe in. I know if I eat enough chicken

soup I will have no more colds no more headaches not get cancer and maybe even fall in love. A voice over my shoulder says excuse me but don't I know you. I am about to politely and courteously explain this is not possible because I have been here only a week when a face peeks around and a woman leans close and she says I knew you when. First grade all the way to high school graduation. This is hard for me to believe but I put down my spoon and say to her oh yes Ohio. It's been what fifteen years she says and I say fifteen years! hard to believe! oh yes! As she walks out the door with her husband and I pick up my spoon I think well then. How did she know me.

On the bus home I am standing and it is so airless and hot I would fall down in a faint except there are so many people leaning against me I wouldn't fall if I did faint. The windows on the bus can't be opened because the bus is supposed to be air-conditioned and open windows would interfere with the delicate mechanism which cools the bus and of course that makes sense. It makes sense from the perspective of the German engineer responsible for this mobile sauna. The German engineer even now counting his gelt from the sale of a cooling system which in the best of all possible worlds where people sit two by two on the bus and chat comfortably about life and art and politics, would work. But not in Chicago mid-August where it is

hot. Wet and hot. And not from the perspective of those of us who like some strange breed of lemming-sardine pack our own selves into the bus at five o'clock. And who now close our eyes murmuring under our breaths be home now, be home now. A voice in my ear giggles self-consciously and says we've met somewhere before. Deja rendezvous. She says you probably don't remember me and I open my eyes and I don't. But for the half hour it takes to get to my stop I listen to this woman in her fashionably wrinkled linen suit accessorized accordingly even in this heat until she gives me her card and says lunch. But I couldn't be happy even in an air-conditioned restaurant over chicken noodle soup talking to L. Mattie Johnsen about grass roots politics and citizen responsibility. Okay L. Mattie we were at the same liberal arts college when you were Louise but still. And you don't remember me either.

Off the bus I am walking by the Picasso everyone meets under dances beneath crawls over when a Checker cab brakes beside me with the driver blasting the horn. Someone calls Tania, Tania. Because it is rush hour I am carried away in the crowd of commuters some of whose hands tug at me. Tania. Your friends in the taxi Tania. My name isn't Tania but for some reason unknown to me or to anyone around me I take off running and just by inches miss the front of a bus headed back where I came from.

The cop at the corner gives chase because I've disrupted her careful traffic orchestration. In the next block there is an alley I dart for which becomes a cul-de-sac. Back to the wall I face the cop and some curious commuters who have pulled out from the crowd and stand staring saying Tania before they shrug and move off. The cop points her finger at me and she yells. Who do I think I am.

Pathetic Fantasy

Nearly irresistible urge
to curl up in the arms of the man sitting next to you
on the bus.

Feeling him edge closer
you are not disgusted or alarmed.

Your body responds to the past
when you were young enough to pass as pretty.

Look out.

You're being terrorized by your past. Your own body.

But your brain

your brain hits the ground running. Some facts
come clear and fast:

You are on a bus in downtown Chicago;

the woman asking you directions looks like

she knows how to get anywhere

she wants to go; and

you have your last ten dollars in the shoulder bag

between you and the arm of the man

you've been making a past with.

He isn't in your fantasy.

He doesn't care whether you're pretty.

He thinks you have money. And

he doesn't think you have much money

or what would you be doing on the bus.

You have just enough money

to break him

out of your fantasy.

You stop giving directions and turn to him.

You smile and he gets nervous, but he does smile back.

You tell him you know what he has done.

He stops smiling.

He says he doesn't know what you're talking about. And

he tells you you're a white honky bitch.

You say that may very well be,

but he does know what you are talking about.

He is not happy about this and he stands up,

his hand goes to his pocket,

pulls out your five and five ones.

He throws them at you.

And then he sits back down.

Even if you are a white honky bitch, the bus is full.

You are so humiliated,

you suggest he find another seat:

He isn't in love with you;

he's not taking you out to dinner; and

he isn't going to marry you.

You stand up when he stands up and you stare him down,

tell him to get off at the next stop.

This he can't believe and you're a white honky bitch

all the way down the aisle and one last time at the door
before he does get off at the next stop.

The people on the bus are laughing
and clapping. Your hands are shaking
as you fold the five and five ones,
put them back in your bag. You are afraid.

You are not afraid because he could have pulled a gun
or a knife, or clenched his fist to hit you.

You are afraid
because this is the future. Now
when a man moves close, looks at you with interest,
he's thinking money.

The Metamorphosis

I kill cockroaches
and I think about going to bed in the dark
how in Boston I slept with the light out because the cat
ate the cockroaches
how in Chicago I slept with the light on because the cat
was still in Boston

I kill cockroaches
in this new apartment in East Lansing, Michigan
and I think about cockroaches following man to every
part of the earth
and I not knowing whether these are Boston cockroaches
that came with my books
or Chicago cockroaches that came with my clothes
or a pure prairie breed that comes with the apartment

I kill cockroaches
and I think of Jean Rhys lying in bed in the West Indies
praying
to the cockroach as big as her hand
to the cockroach on the wall near the ceiling
praying to it not to fly

I kill cockroaches
 and I think of Robbe-Grillet's cockroach and life
 from the point of view of a cockroach watching
 women put on red lipstick
 from the point of view of a cockroach watching
 tight-lipped men drink gin

I kill cockroaches
 and I think of the night before I left Boston for Chicago
 how you tried to cheer me up with a fifth of Beefeater's
 and a lemon
 how the sight of a cockroach
 set you off
 a frenzied rage against America
 and you were so sorry you had come back here
 from your dozen civilized years in Germany
 you kept saying,
They don't have cockroaches in Germany
They don't have cockroaches in Germany

I kill cockroaches
 and I think of what I didn't say to you
 that these cockroaches are 350 million years old
 that these cockroaches are called the German cockroach
 but that finally I did say,
Then what was it Kafka was writing about

I kill cockroaches
and I think about you tight-lipped
gin-drinking
and I knew my lipstick was worn off
and I knew I should at least be praying
when you said,
I don't believe you understand the nature of metaphor

A Midwestern Erotics Of Literature

"Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea."
--Ezra Pound, "Portrait d'Une Femme"

Not that it had to have happened there
but I was living in the Midwest that summer
with KD in her rented two-story Victorian house
Resident Madwoman in the Attic
she called me. But KD was an English professor
so I was used to her saying
things like that.

We'd been sitting around the kitchen table
in our underwear and eating a late afternoon tuna salad
what KD liked to call salade Nicoise
although she was pretty sure that had to be fresh
and this was Chicken of the Sea
my favorite because of the mermaid but still
not fresh. The telephone rang and KD groaned
and hauled herself up against the heat.
By the tone of her voice after hello I could tell
this was one of her colleagues. I'd known KD for years
so by now I was aware of her different voices

one each for colleague student family ex-husband
lover friend.

KD came back into the kitchen
pulling her sweat-damp bra and underpants
away from her skin with both hands.

She said we had to get dressed because that was Sid.

He was on his way with Tanqueray and shaved ice
and lemons and limes. And Schweppes
she added after a breath and snapping the elastic
of her underpants against her belly.

Sid wanted to sit in the back garden where it was cool
cooler because of the river.

I asked did we have to get dressed
and she said she didn't know Sid
that well and anyway the neighbors.

I said I'd just as soon go up to my attic with the fan
at the foot of my bed. But KD said no.

Sid wanted to meet me.

I walked out alone to the back garden
after changing my underwear
for my only summer dress, obviously off-the-rack
Goodwill but 40's and flattering.
And I sank myself full length onto a lawn chair
no shoes no stockings no underwear

but still sweating like a pig
in the 90-degree midwestern midsummer heat.
I heard KD and Sid on their way down from the house
talking the latest departmental talk
his voice that New York-quick-intellectual
that always intrigued me
before I could even tell what the words were
and punctuated by KD's flat midwestern vowels.
And then there Sid stood at the foot of my chaise longue
extending his hand and making the introductions himself.
I said absolutely nothing after that. Except once
KD and Sid were arguing Northrup Frye against Derrida
and Sid asked me what I thought. I thought Sontag
had not gone far enough in calling for an erotics of art
and I myself wanted a sexual theory of literary criticism
whose overriding question would be "Can you fuck
this book?" And that's what I said.
After that they let me alone
so that I sat listening to the music of their two voices
we all drinking gins and tonic while sucking on lemons
and limes and I smoking an occasional cigarette
whenever Sid would get up to light it
with his silver Ronson. Sid was extremely thoughtful
even bringing chilled glasses in a red cooler
with the gin and tonic and lemons and limes and ice.
So there was no reason to get up for anything

until dusk the mosquitoes by the river were so bad
KD said she'd go back up to the house
for citronella candles.

As KD got up she sighed big
and she said it sure was hot. I said it was too hot
for literature but KD said no
that books burn at Fahrenheit 451 or anyway paper does
and it wasn't that hot.
I said I wondered what the melting point
of literature was because if I was a novel
I'd be about to be lost forever. KD laughed
and went on up to the house and I laid my head back
and closed my eyes. And then Sid's voice at my ear
asking and what novel was I
his breath hot across my face. I said Wuthering Heights
not even opening my eyes
and he said he would have thought Jane Eyre
and I said only if it had been called The First
Mrs. Rochester. Sid's hand up under my dress and up
and spreading my legs
as he said then I was Wide Sargasso Sea
wasn't I.

When KD came back with the candles Sid lit them.
They two went right on deconstructing literature

until the gin was gone and the Schweppes was gone.
KD said she'd walk Sid to his car
and then they were gone.
I fell asleep until the last citronella candle
burned out
and the mosquitoes came back.

It was beautifully cool at last
walking through the ankle-deep grass to the dark house.
At the top of the first flight of stairs
on my way to the attic
I heard the New York-quick-intellectual
and the flat midwestern vowels together
coming from KD's bedroom. Signifying something.
The anatomy of criticism
indeed.

Tuesday Morning With Robert Duncan

"Many words to me have seemed English."

--Gertrude Stein

Excuse me but do you speak English was the question. And I was surprised because sitting right here in the middle of America it seemed an odd question. I looked up from my book obviously in English you could tell by the cover and I said nothing. Just looked into his eyes.

An early spring morning wet and Ohio grey. I was sitting in Orville's my favorite bar my favorite because it opened at 6 a.m. to catch the night shift from the grain elevator next door and the paper box factory across the river. Students from the art school came in to sketch the night shift and the night shift let them when the students bought the shots. And there were poets. Robert Duncan poet-in-residence up on the hill as we who lived in the town called the university. He often swept in caped and smoking his pipe to stand at the opposite end of the bar from the night shift and listen to the young men following in his wake. It was one of these young men who stood now looking into my eyes while I said nothing.

He repeated it more slowly and with more room between the words. Do you. Speak English. Over his shoulder I could see Duncan watching so that I put on my best generic East European accent and said not unless I had to. That I preferred to read it.

The young man went back to the bar and Duncan drank down the shot the young man bought and Duncan said I told you she didn't belong here. And Duncan winked at me. One of the guys from the night shift sent me over a shot and a beer.

No Uncertain Terms Of Endearment

He calls me honey if you can imagine

and even though I'm afraid I don't
understand the impulse for such
endearments

I must admit that something does weaken my knees
when a man calls me honey

not because I'm his waitress.

(I Shouldn't Be Writing This Way) And I Do--A Country
Western Meditation

"You think you love Sue
But when I get through with you
You won't ever look at Sue again."
--Patsy Cline

I come home after meeting you and look up your name with
a double internal consonant in the telephone directory.
You're Not There. I think well at least I don't know
for sure you're married. And then I look you up with
the single consonant and you are there. And with your
wife. With Sue. So I tell myself I couldn't possibly
be falling in love with a man who can't spell his own
name. And I tell myself that even if you have Blue
Blue Eyes I couldn't possibly be falling in love with
a man who has even that faint cast of red in his hair.
Lord Knows. I need stability in my life.

The next time I see you you're at a poetry reading I'm
giving and you're wearing a black shirt. I think ooh
yes. Johnny Cash-like. And then that you're wearing
my colors because I'm wearing black. And I have blue

eyes too. I stop thinking then. I Walk Away. Later you're talking with someone I know so I come up to you Brave with the Beer I've been drinking brave enough anyway to ask will you go with "us" to the Riverview and hear the country western band. You say yes and I think well you could have come out with your wife tonight but you didn't. La la la. And. Because I want you and need you so. Poor Susie will hafta go. And then I think How Cruel. And She's Got You. When I say as we all sit down together that the last time I was here I danced all night long to Patsy Cline songs you say you haven't danced in years. Or much ever. I'm thinking I want Your Cheatin' Heart but that first you've got to have one. And then the band plays. You Made Me Love You. You stand up and take my hand and we're putting our arms around each other. I'm thinking Strange. If I asked a man to put his arms around me for three to seven minutes people would think it was Crazy. But that you and I can be out on a dance floor locked in an embrace and it's perfectly fine. Socially acceptable. Even Sue couldn't object.

I see you one more time after the night we dance. Later I'm telling this other man about you. That's My Desire I say. But how I feel so morally corrupt. So Wrong. But that never mind. You probably aren't

attracted to me anyway and this other man asks why not. I say I'm not the kind of woman men are attracted to. This other man says but he himself is very and extremely attracted to me and I say well he himself can say that, he's safe. He's married. Then this other man says but that you are too. I say yes. You are. I say that you would make the perfect husband all the sweet romance-y things you did for me the last time I saw you. Giving me a Patsy Cline tape. Telling me how you like what I do and not just the way some people say it who mean how I write. But you like what I do. How I move, how I smell. I say yes you would make the perfect husband. And then I laugh. Well you are the perfect husband. Well not the perfect husband if you would want to be with me. And this other man laughs.

That night I play the tape you gave me. Patsy Cline sings. You think you love Sue. But when I get through with you. You won't ever look at Sue again. And what does this mean but Sweet Dreams. Because You're Not There. And so What Does a Woman Do when it gets dark and across town the man she wants in her bed is getting into bed with his wife. Well this woman gets into bed too. Turns over the Patsy Cline tape, grabs a beer, a notebook and a pen. And this woman gets into bed. (I

Shouldn't Be Writing This Way). But this is the kind of
woman who writes. And I Do.

I Have Been Thinking About The Man Who Sells Flowers

Once the man who sells flowers
gave me a bouquet of roses and tulips
and baby's breath
and irises and carnations.
And he smiled at me.
Another day he wanted to give me
the perfect red bud of a rose
and I asked him to pin it at my lapel.
I asked him to do this so that I could look at him
closely.
His eyes are blue.
A week later he gave me a small carnation
which I held cupped in my hand
until I could take off my coat and pin it myself.
That evening
I noticed a few others who like me
had carnations pinned at their lapels
or on their collars.
I wanted to ask them
what does this mean.

I have been watching the man who sells flowers.
And I say something to him

when I can think of anything
to say.

And sometimes but rarer I buy flowers
when I am feeling less shy than I am
and I can buy a yellow rose and blue iris.

A woman with flowers draws attention to herself.
I gave the bouquet with the baby's breath away
because everyone asked
who gave you the flowers
and I didn't know if I should say I gave them to myself
or the man who sells flowers
had some he didn't want.
I should have said I don't know.
Because I don't know the man who sells flowers.
I know he sells flowers.

And he has a dog.
When the dog was a puppy
I would stop and kneel down and let him chew on my hand
with his sharp puppy teeth.
For the rest of the day I could feel his teeth
on my fingers.
As the weather got colder
the puppy chewed my gloves and the hem of my coat.
Once he followed me for a few steps

and the man who sells flowers called him back.

As he went

one of his teeth caught in the lining of my coat.

A silky tear.

When I looked at it later I wondered what had happened

and then I thought

yes

I was there.

During the summer the man who sells flowers was gone.

Toward the end of September

I came walking down the street

and I saw the flower cart

and the yellow

and white parasol

and as I came closer I thought

I will stop and buy flowers.

A man was selling flowers.

But it was not the man who sells flowers.

I have not walked down the street

where the flowers are for some time.

Today I saw someone with a carnation

pinned at the lapel of his jacket,

I turned the corner

in the other direction than I would to go home

and I could see.

The man who sells flowers is there.

The weather is cold.

The dog still chews like a puppy at my gloves.

All the way home

I think about the man who sells flowers.

When I take off my coat

I see the three-cornered tear

and I think yes

I have been thinking about the man who sells flowers

and he is there.

I Will Tell You

"Who is he who has no companion among the ten thousand things of the world?"

"When you swallow up in one draught all the water in the Western River, I will tell you."

--Zen ko-an

The other day my landlady came by with a man
who introduced himself with his first name
saying he didn't believe we'd met
and when he took my hand in his
held it
just a breath longer
than I'd expected
my knees went weak.
I thought to myself Jee-sus
I have been untouched for too long.
When my landlady said
that this was her husband
I took my hand back.
I smiled at her.

We three then stood staring up at my ceiling
the water marks on my ceiling

which was why I'd called my landlady
because it looked like water was seeping through
right around the light socket
in the center of the ceiling.
I told her I know nothing
about plumbing or about wiring
except I do know water and electricity are dangerous
together.
My landlady's husband asked me if it was wet
up there
and I said that I didn't know.
I only had folding chairs,
hadn't been willing
to take the risk to find out.
He said I should step on up,
he'd hold the chair
but instead his hands
took hold of my hips.
I thought uh-oh
and tried not to think
about lying in bed alone
watching these water marks appear
and tried not to think
about how the two people
who live upstairs
had made them while fucking in the bathtub

spewing water recklessly heedlessly heatedly
two slick skins all over each other
while I lay in the room below
alone in my bed
alone for three years and counting
watching brown water marks
spread themselves out around the light socket
and worrying about being alone
and worrying about being electrocuted
and worrying about being satisfied by this kind of death,
quick probably,
and somehow not so horrible,
a vicarious thrill made shockingly real.
Their little death
my big one.

I jumped down from the chair
away from my landlady's husband's hands
and I said that no it was not wet.
My landlady went on upstairs
to check around the bathtub in the neighbors' apartment
and my landlady's husband asked if I was alone.
I said I am.
And when you swallow up all the water
in my neighbors' bathtub
I will tell you

to put your hands on my ass.

That's what I said to myself.

Black Iron

The first stove I remember
was gas. My mother wasn't suicidal
so that wasn't the problem.
But I couldn't light the oven by myself.
I inherited my mother's fear of fire
so that I learned to cook by lighting the top ring
standing back and throwing
wooden matches
into the sweet smell of gas
until the ring caught
and I'd lift the black iron skillet
with both my hands
onto the little circle of fire.
I was seven years old.

Our second stove was electric.
I was sixteen when I discovered
black iron doesn't cook right
without fire
except for cornbread in the oven.
With great satisfaction my mother bought
aluminum pots
and fry pans

and for the rest of my life at home
I overcooked butter beans and pork chops
and ate them tentatively
imagining millions of tiny flakes of that metal
light and silvery
through my veins.

My married stove was gas.
The rings caught
automatically.
My aunt and cousins bought me stainless cookware
with a thin film of copper
for better heat conduction. But it still
wasn't right. Nothing was.

Last week in a secondhand store
looking at quicksilvered mirrors
I saw a black iron skillet on a bottom shelf
across the aisle. It was caked with something blacker
than black iron on the outside.
When I picked it up and looked inside
it was rusted sad
which is what my grandmother used to say
and I never understood until I held that skillet
in my hands and felt
the sadness.

I took it home
stopping on the way to buy steel wool
and heavy oil and requesting a paper sack
to put them in instead of plastic.

That night I cut the caked black off with a knife
and scraped steel wool and salt
over the sad black iron. I rubbed oil
into it with the brown paper sack.

My grandmother told me there had been arguments
in her family forever
over which was the better rub
brown paper sacks or newsprint.

I use vinegar and newsprint on mirrors
and like my grandmother

I just feel
that brown paper is right
for black iron.

I have had to give up my fear of fire
because my grandmother can't come from next door
to light this oven
and my husband is no longer
married to me.

My hand shakes

but I hold the match to the hole in the floor of the oven

thrilling at the intake
before it swoops into heat and I am certain
the whole thing will blow
and me with it.
That night I weighed the risk
and baked the skillet
while I slept.

In the morning it looked like the black iron skillet
that sat on our stove for years
ready to bake cornbread
the one we kept even after
the aluminum pots
and fry pans.
I let the skillet cool down all day
and early in the evening baked cornbread.
My grandmother would like to die
to see me use whole wheat flour
although she used unbolted cornmeal
way before it was the natural thing to do.
She is the one who taught me
to use buttermilk but she would hate the basil
and olive oil and garlic. The cayenne pepper
would make her smile.

I thought about what a doctor
had told me
that I should cook in black iron
because it would be good for my blood.
He called it cast iron cookery.
Yet his idea appeals to me.
Black iron in my veins.

I'm Home

I keep dreaming I've come back home.
Night after night
I lie down in my own bed
hundreds of miles away from you
to find myself standing on that stone doorstep back in Ohio
and you smiling into my face
my face which is your face after all these years
so much so that I have had to give up looking in mirrors.
You always said to me I was so much like my father
and you said it with such bitterness
that I imagined a kind of marking on me
like the mark of Cain
proclaiming "her father's daughter."
But God you were wrong.
You were so wrong.
These eyes are your eyes.
And I never did like
how they looked at me.
But in the dream
you look at me like I always wanted to remember.
Like you open that door
out in the middle of all those fields and woods
and it is just me standing there.
With you.

You walk me upstairs to my room
following behind with the suitcase you won't let me carry
silent up two flights of stairs.
Each time I turn to look at you
you nod and smile.
By the time we get to the top of the stairs
it is dark.
No moon
but the stars are so close
and the air is so sharp
I'm scared to breathe.
You switch on the small lamp by the door
and put the suitcase on my bed.
When you open it your blue flannel nightgown
as blue as your eyes I used to tell you
is folded on top.
You lay it out on the white chenille spread
and when you kiss me good-night
you are what I wanted to remember
and how many years ago are not for counting.
Those years were not for you
so that in my dream
you are not any older
than I am
now.

The nightgown fits
and even though the sheets
are ice against me I sleep
until a noise in the hall and it is morning.
When I open the door I see Black the cat
hightailing it
down the stairs.

At the top of the stairs is a mirror
reflecting light from my windows
light through old glass weeping toward the ground.
Facing straight into the mirror
your eyes are not what I can see.
I see light through the old glass windows
white paint cracking off the wall
worn patches on the bedspread
and sheets strewn across the floor
and I call down the stairs and I say
Mama
I'm home.

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