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LEARNING TO READ

presented by

Doreen Lenora Fitzgerald

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

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LEARNING TO READ

By

Doreen Lenora Fitzgerald

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1993

ABSTRACT

LEARNING TO READ

by

Doreen Lenora Fitzgerald

These poems relate to the author's experience of human connections, dislocations, and survival. The author uses open form, autobiographical detail, and conversational language. Through the discriminating use of detail, patterns, and sound, the aim is to distill essences from the personal that can be significant to others. Most of the poems have a narrative element, because the author is interested in the stories humans make and remake as they explain the world and self to themselves and others. The process of association is also of interest: how the word is invested with images from one's own experience; how poetry uses association to redefine words and experience; and, how the processes of writing or reading poetry itself is an experience that alters the individual.

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1993

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1944

Uncle Kenneth came home
with sandals and dragons.
Daddy was smiling,
Mother cried.
The robes with dragons
fit the children
like old tears.

Down Home

Uncle Narm played the fiddle
in his overalls, until one night,
he walked to Swannanoa
on the tracks, and someone
knocked him on the head,
taking his two dollars and ten cents,
leaving him for dead,
but he didn't die.
He has a mule that smokes cigars.

Latt Mac lives on the side
of a mountain and never looks
when he drives up and down.
He has a rattlesnake
stuffed for fun and a black snake
alive for catching mice.
He keeps a black bear skinned on the wall
and the grinding stones from old mills.
Aunt Annie works at the new mill,
where they make blankets, not flour.

Great Uncle Robert tamed the bees
and built a pool for the finicky trout;
the water cooled the springhouse too.

When he moved to Nebo, he took the bees,
but not the trout; it's flat in Nebo,
real hot in the summer. One summer,
when he was dying there, we drove down home
to say goodbye, with a case of Vernors
Ginger Ale, because that's what he liked,
and they don't have Vernors in North Carolina.
Chew Mailpouch Tobacco, the barns say.

Aunt Margaret chewed, but Grandma took snuff,
until they gave her a hospital bed.
She'd never been to a place like that,
where they take all your clothes
and your snuff, and they had to keep her
a long time before they decided
to let her go.
Then someone gave her back her dress,
a plum-colored dress
with a lace collar and her best pin,
and they stuffed her so she wouldn't look
shrunk and painted her face,
and someone put flowers in her hands,
but she was still dead.

Mattie never painted her face
and always asked what I wanted for lunch,

ate all my egg white, gave me her yolk,
keeping the secret to herself.

The Wind in the Willows she read out loud.

Her egg money slept on a cupboard shelf,
where she kept and dried the orange peel,
liking the tang of its western smell.
She could peel the skin off an apple
into one long curl.

1947

In the undeveloped fields of Fairview Street,
we fought the second war,
crawling through the summer grass,
hiding in gnarled clumps of sumac,
surely poison, rising suddenly to shoot.
It wasn't tame, that war beyond the bungalows.
We died abundantly and well.
Animating weapons
with our tongues, we rose and fell,
or after someone's sneak attack,
hotly denying death,
we fought along the diplomatic front.
Sometimes we broke for lunch,
or called a truce, when some insistent mother
raised her voice. Sometimes the war
was called because of rain,
or couldn't start, held off by a discussion
of what's fair--who played
the German last, whose turn
to be the Jap. It was a game the grownups
knew by heart, as we would too.

Defining Matter

GENUINE LEATHER, the wallet said,
stamped in gold
between the coin purse
and the identification blank.
I was only seven,
and thought quite hard
about the creature
who'd lost its hide
to cover my paltry sum.
Picturing a tiny pig,
small and valued for its skin,
I thought there ought to be a law,
against the slaughter
of genuines.
Laws, I knew, keep people straight.
But when I learned to drive,
I swerved
to miss a genuine in the road
and hit a tree instead.

Entrepreneur

Christopher Columbus Wheeler,
everyone called him C.C.,
handed out silver dollars
like he owned Mt. Mitchell,
but he just sold melons
over in Asheville, when he was old.
In lumbering days, when land
was cheap, he'd traded his
for a strong ox team,
muscle needed for hauling logs.

When Yancey County needed phones,
he planted poles and strung the wire
across the mountain,
into the gap.

When folks paid up in hens and pigs
that winter there was lots of meat.
Then he bought the widow's cabbages,
because they were so green and fine,
the whole field,
and the table groaned all winter
under sauerkraut to eat.

Book-learning was Great-grandma's bet,

but she sliced
the cabbage and kept the store,
while he took up selling
buggies as the first car
rolled off the assembly line.

He was a big man, standing in his tent
among the pyramids of fruit
that must be sold
before it gets too soft.
When he reached in his pocket,
he'd look surprised
to find two silver dollars there
just waiting for our open hands.
He was prince of the market,
king of the Christmas orange.

Teeth

Wanda keeps hers
on the mantle,
because they don't fit.
Grandmother's leer
from the glass.
Lou doesn't have any,
he works with his hands.

Elementary Music

Grandma Grunt said a curious thing,
"Boys can whistle, but girls must sing."

Until we learned this fourth grade song,
I thought the difference only sat
between the legs and on the chest.
They added lips, the lungs, the throat,
beyond appearance of the body parts.
The song had parts, and we were told
to sing the part that fit the sex.

Our voices rose in unison, until the chorus
came around with its quaint permission
for boys to make a puckered kind
of whistling face; for girls,
a strict imperative to sing. Our notes
went "Tra-la-la-la-la," a dainty line
of dainty skips and smiles.

I'd never taken to the word must, preferred
can, and after school, defiantly did
both parts. Inside the school, I whistled
to myself. Soon, I resolved to climb trees
forever, higher than my brother,

and wore skinned knees like a twin badge,
proving something I didn't know.

In the song, it's Grandma Grunt who cuts
the human voice in two neat halves.

Disgruntled, I wondered who she was,
quite certain there was no such rule
for singing in my grandma's house.

I couldn't see how it foreshadowed
things to come:

dish soap and soft hands,
the absence of water stains on glass,
doors you must not open for yourself.
Complete instructions are enclosed,
preventing problems later on.
Problems, of course, are not without interest,
much like climbing down from trees.

Later, I always sang out loud, in my car,
avoiding the tremulous "Tra-la-la,"
as I drove across the U.S.A.
and the midcentury blues. I warbled my way
through all the trouble I caused,
thinking, at least I made things happen,
and I still whistle whenever I want,
often in the dark.

The Man Fishes, the Woman Waits

An old man, reduced to fishing for life,
magnified by fishing in the stream,
finishing his time with a bad heart,
goes often to the bank for trout.

His woman, keeper of a well-swept house,
goes too and waits there by the road,
so someone can be called, in case
he dies, to pull him out.

She sits in a well-kept Pontiac,
piecing a quilt, patterning remainders
of her past--curtains, nightgowns,
aprons, pants and other quilts.

He's casting into his favorite pool,
deep behind a tangle of trees,
mostly fallen cedar, two birch,
limbs swept down by the spring melt.

She keeps her stitches even and small,
matching triangle edges to squares,
alternating light and dark. His lure,
flashing, scatters light across the dash.
Leaving the car, she quietly shuts the door

and walks toward the bridge. Looking,
she says, to see if the berries are ripe,
looking to see if he's still there.

She did this every sunny day
until she died, and he forgot to fish.

Spain

Red as the blood of bulls,
dust rising
on the Mediterranean coast,
staccato heel on the bare floor,
framed by a mantle
of black lace,
horned rose pricking
the dry mouth
in the middle of Algebra II.

Ready or Not

The poem she didn't write in 1958
sits in an all-night diner,
drying its wings.
They open and close,
open and close
to the sound of crockery and spoons.
The head moves slightly,
left to right,
its leafy camouflage, a book.
Rising and falling, the dappled eye
flirts with the nectar between the lines.

Under the table, thin legs twine
around each other, holding down
the emergent body's tensile form.
Flesh winks between the shoe and hem,
all of the white space
dressed in black,
part nun and part bohemian.
Cream spills over the pitcher's lip,
a whirlpool in the scalding cup.
Smoke mingles with the rising steam.
A lepidopterist steps in.

Speed

Richard A. Ballentine, 1940-1961

What about steak, inch thick,
heaped with mushrooms
grown by Pennsylvanian elves?
I've got no time
to heap my sirloin with morels;
soybeans fall into the grill
and the wild greens wilt
before I get back home.

And my accelerator--
man, I get behind the wheel,
I tell myself I will,
press that baby to the floor
and burn up the road.
Which road?
"I don't know, but I can't stop
until I get there."

Dick said that, right before
he forgot to stop
and stopped his head
on the steel of the other

automobile, and the priest
said, "You'll all go to hell
if you don't slow down,"
and some of us are burning still.

The Foragers

All spring we combed the roadside
for free food--the young
shoots of milkweed,
asparagus before it bolts,
the fiddlehead coiled like a green fist
thrust into the air.

Often there was no meat on the plate,
and flavor swam in an ocean of gravy
poured on biscuits,
as both of us whimpered, meat to cut.
Dandelions bit the tongue,
the berries fought back.

We once ate the flesh of a startled deer
thrown skyward by our moving car.
Knowing enough to let it cool,
we hung it first from an acorn tree,
but never thought of using hide
to make new coverings for warmth.

The bittersweet I found and bunched,
each orange berry in a sprung case,
was not edible at all. It hung that winter

on the whitewashed wall like a hand,
the small tendrils, stiff and curled,
remarking how it gripped the fence.

Sometimes we fished for a meal
through the ice, chipping our way in
like burglars, keeping still.
We sank the bait and jigged the lines,
luring the prey we couldn't see,
a fish that may or may not bite.

When the ice thickened and the car wore out,
because we could not eat the wall,
and the months of gathering by the road
are far too brief,
one of us must leave, I said,
and when he didn't move, I did.

Sisters

Two girls went riding in their father's car.
Red lights were flashing
at the railroad crossing, so the car stopped.

The girls were counting the cars of the train,
when a long girder from a loaded car,
the sixteenth car, pitched from the load
like a javelin thrown on the field,
piercing the car front to back,
windshield to windshield,
taking the children's arms: the right arm
of Mary, the left arm of Margaret Ann.

As the stumps healed, the girls discovered
they could read a book,
sitting side by side:
the left hand of Mary holding the book,
the right hand of Margaret, turning the page.
They're often seen together,
I saw them once.
They were standing at the table,
opening up some presents with both hands.

Oh, That David

David R. Wilson, 1944-1968

When I talked to mother on the phone,
she mentioned that David
was killed in the war,
and I said, David Who?
I'd not seen this
particular David for twenty years.

Yes, I remember hearing
he was chosen for the Point;
another year, he took a wife.
I can't find his face,
we talk of other things.

It doesn't come
until the middle of the onion soup.
He floats by standing
in a proud pose
struck for my first camera,
smiling summer in short white pants,
finally allowed
to pull his wagon to our yard
all by himself.

Morning Tic

Balanced on the wire
between sleep and light,
the body reaches out,
the right foot slowly
inching
to the right,
only to find the sheets
stretched tight and clean.

Now You See Her, Now You Don't

The clock measures a catatonic hand,
at the table drinking coffee
over men, a man, and secret wishes.

Someday I'll go to the city
and take a taxi to the ballet.
Sometimes I need help guessing
where he dropped his left shoe.

Silence in the living room,
the soup half done,
nothing stirs.

Sometimes I think I've forgotten
to cook, but the spoon is there.

A turkey trimmed in half an hour,
company table, better wine.

I'm right here sweeping up the dirt
tacks, wrappers, and rubber bands--
you don't have to shout.

In a room where the carpet
is holding its nap,
she sees a Yellow Cab pull up.

A woman leaps and lands on her toes,
on a street where bluegrass colors
the lawns and ornamental trees abound.

Looking for Dad

Driving north,
a low sky holding rain,
red-tailed hawk careens
beneath an out-bound
plane, streaming
from the runway at O'Hare.

Sprung from the radio
into the car, Maynard
Ferguson's trumpet blares.
Music rises
from a Monon church,
washing the face of an unlit bar.

My father drives
with broken hands, holding
his credit between his teeth.
This Sunday jazz propels me north,
scanning the ditches
for his song.

July

The cuckoo, the rain crow,
calls across the field,
the sky is heavy,
the barrel dry.
Flashing the stripe
on his fat tail,
a young skunk bluffs a truck.

Guarding the Radishes and Beans

The farm wife's gladiolas
fence a garden tended
for the table's sake--
gladiators defending color
against the tint
of cattle and grain.
The earthy collesium boasts
a host of strong-legged
specimens, standing up
to summer heat, green swords
ordered on long stems.
Their ruffled blooms
like vibrant flags,
they show themselves
to passing cars
in colors he would never grow,
and she would never wear.

Learning to Read

Reading everything since the first grade,
boxes of Wheaties, Cheerios, Tide,
the side of ketchup bottles, Robert Burns;
finding letters of the alphabet on the side
of a Noxema jar, in the john on the can,
I think I need a new library card,
but the phone rings.

Pornographic Nancy Drew hidden under the bathroom
towels, Shakespeare as Literature, Sonnets
of Ecology, Freudian Grease in 20th Century Soap.

Dead at the age of 86, Thomas Hart Benton said,
"You've got to take the warts
with the good stuff," as he painted
the Klu Klux Klan into the statehouse wall.
Sign on the wall of my apartment house:
No Deliveries Made To An Unlocked Box,
so I carry my key and use it daily,
hoping someone will steal my mail. Stolen mail,
and I'd feel like a solid citizen crying
Thief!

Locked doors, taking the cure, Norman
as in the hit song, Mailer.

Now he comes back to visit with nine avocados
 stuffed into his case with the clean shirts
 and classified papers: Missile, Missile Guidance,
 Guidance System, one for each avocado.

The banjo turning red, white, and blue--
 swimming pool red, trumpet blue.

Oh the brass, the brass of that early band,
 sharp as the intent to dance
 around the concrete kitchen, into the trees.

A poet sings on the attic stair,
 gnawing a loaf of stale bread.

"Stop killing yourself the slow way," she says.

"No problem, kid," he says,
 killing himself the slow way,

jazz

jazz

jazz.

Slicing it thin on Friday afternoon, stoned
 on the idea of no idea for two whole days,
 call the sax man and the druggist,
 play it like it is.

A little red hen runs down the street--
 the spiders are loose,

and Nancy's tied.

The drummer murders the alphabet;

a thief is robbing the mailman blind.

Near the avocado kitchen sink,

the telephone rings off the hook,

while the trumpet courts the saxophone

and they run to sea in a vegetable boat.

As the cereal box

gives up its prize, Freud runs away

with a greasy plate,

and Nancy fingers the loosened rope.

The redbud blooms. We celebrate,

not going hog wild,

because we know it's the chickens

and the cows, listening to the wolves

and Taj Mahal on stereo long-play,

talking to each other

under a full-blown moon.

Linc and Bernie

I know a man so wild he throws
his knife across the room
so hard it sticks in the wall,
quivering like an arrow.
He keeps a big ax in the city,
for firewood, not people,
only chopped up the chair,
forgetting there wasn't
a fireplace, only burned it
in the middle of the room.
He is my friend and doesn't
frighten me, although
I worry he might dislocate
his shoulder or his heart.
My other friend sits
on the radiator,
reading books of anarchy
to cans of tuna fish and
sometimes me. I hope he finds
a more comfortable chair.

Projection

If, when you're in Tulsa,
cradled on the edge of 5 p.m.,
nursing a cold beer,
and the waitress
leans on the Formica and smiles,
when I'm in Chicago
having gyros and wine,
if a voice from the table
behind me scatters the mind,
it doesn't matter now.

If wavelengths in the underlight
can break the resolution
of a year and a thousand miles,
it doesn't matter
yet; you're not in Tulsa now,
and I've already eaten
at the Parthenon.

Connections

If you win her heart,
be good to Geraldine,
she knows a hit man
in Skokie. He lives
with his mother
on a townhouse block,
drinks Drambuie
on the rocks,
and always wears a hat
for the kill.

Geraldine's cousin,
once removed, he loves
her twice-removed and once
removed a quarterback
who left her in the lurch.

If you win her heart,
be good to Geraldine;
a hit man's waiting
for the phone to ring.

Bouquets

If someone sends you flowers,
or brings them in,
swinging through the door
in a gust of February
and pipe tobacco,
they will be beautiful
and quick.

Press the memory
and save the wires;
a day might come
when doors don't open
on a smile.

You'll have the wires,
the pot, the holding clay;
in May the woods
are laced with bloom.

From the Far Side

I like to think I'll find
you again, when we grow old,
our circumstance faded
in books of dry photos,
raising no eyebrows
on my street.
I'll give you tea, I'll have
some too, we'll talk.
You'll tell me
how you went back to Montana
to chase wild horses.
I'll tell you
how I finally got over the habit
of crossing
and uncrossing my legs.
We'll trace
the lives of your children
in the lines of the carpet,
then we'll trace mine.
I expect to have so much to say,
after my hair turns blue.

Vows

Cross my heart and hope to die,
stick a needle in my eye.

Crossing the heart with a certain x,
needle sworn to pierce the eye,
a finger sings the hide-bound breast.
The tongue ties into a double knot,
wrapping in better a box of worse,
only the index finger crossed:
I never really hoped to die.

The binding loosens over time,
a leveler of hills and words,
the wrong identity inscribed
around the finger of one hand.
Standing with the undone box,
I shuffle through a pack of lies,
one scorched into the wooden chest.
A lid shuts on the wounded eye,
salt drops kissing the reddened tongue.

Sooner or later, the fingers itch,
and the index crooks toward the chest.
I'm lying now upon this bed,
where only a few mistakes were laid.

You too could lie among these ferns
with my learned finger and chastised
tongue, both cured and still, I swear.

Eats

Somewhere between Sioux City and Joliet,
I can't decide
if I'm the trucker,
the truckstop, or the truck.
Sometimes I'm the waitress.
My name is Betty Lou, and
I love you because you go
to places I can't pronounce.
You love me
because I smile.
Sometimes,
I only wish to hit the road.

Composure

for Libby and Scott

So I talk too much, nervously twitching,
going on asking impossible questions,
asking my friends when I know they can't
answer and it's not fair but I can't help
it and say I'm alone, I mean whiskers and
toenails, it's not taking care of itself.
Tomorrow I'll go to the Elk's Club, or
down to the Pub and be lonely together and
come home later and probably take the grape-
fruit rinds to the compost pile. On the way
I'll meet this jay, not a terribly attractive
bird, habit-wise. But it will be indelibly
blue and will fly up across the back fence
in a certain way, and I'll be lonely and
happy, a contradiction of popular magazines,
but I will be. And then I'll be able to tell
my friends the bluejay flashing in my yard.

Bean Blossom Bluegrass

I'll tell you the music I saw
being made in the summer,
under the high notes of a hot sun
and the low notes of a full moon.
There was even music
in the moment before first light
and it pulled the sun onto the stage.
Everyone mixed together,
all mixed up,
some going to bed, some rising,
performing their acts to music.
People were laughing,
people remembered,
people came home.

Simplicity 1976

There was once a woman who sewed
herself a husband with French seams,
a skin of chammy,
and various woolly parts.

He kept her warm on winter nights
and sitting in the second chair
was easy company.

He didn't require much care,
occasional repair.

Blue eyes at first, she tired of those
and gave him crystal green.

He always smiled; the embroidery
was exquisite. She got the idea
from Jamie's rabbit.

His only fault, he didn't work,
but then, he was so huggable and ate
so very little.

Feature Shot

Everyone hunts mushrooms
in the spring,
morels in the city,
five dollars a pound,
found in the same secret place
year after year.
Jack has time
and brings them in,
arranged on a plate.
My lens for an eye,
his hook for a hand,
together we plant mushrooms
on page one.

Filler

MAPUTO, MOZAMBIQUE--Even the tallest man fell down, on January twenty-first, the tallest in the world, he was, walking toward a normal lunch, slowly in his simple house.

Gabriel E. Monjane was eight point zero seven five feet high, but after all, after the fall, the coffin measured eight feet long.

What was he thinking on the way back down? What happened to the fraction of an inch?

Cake

**They say you can't
have it
and eat it too,
but then,
while you're chewing,
it's all yours.**

Birds

Here is a man with one sock,
a restless owl
with a gold band.
The ankle glares above his shoe.
Here is a man
on a long rope, waving one foot,
one hand,
he is not a swan.
A thin boy on an orange kite
is sniffing the wind,
his back to a dune.
Antic in the window frame,
they move across
my straightened room.
Children call across the lake,
echoing the loon,
the loon replies.

Change

Living on Richard Tuttle's couch
is not large.

A cactus wanders through the room
playing the Mexican dance
on a brass flute.

A vine grabs the window frame.

Living on Richard's couch
is not the street
with no place left to park.

Tuttle's rug is red,
his thumbs are green.

Unseen this week--his empty
cup by the hot air grate,
an unwashed plate,
swelling in the sink.

My directions to the lake,
like a one-way street,
left in my lost jeans.

Neighbors in this dream
knock on the open door
to borrow salt.

Liberation

Black as the night is long,
white hot lightening,
hot sweet jazz,
finding a corner in the back room,
climbing the spine.
The downbeat punctuates a glass,
a trumpet stares,
the sax replies,
we shine.
The keyboard rises from the floor,
and all the doors fly open
one more time.

A Gold Star Mother, Schooled

She doesn't see enough to churn
or bake the biscuits anymore,
but on the table, still she keeps
a honey dish of angled glass.
The table bears the muted scars
of boys who dodged their vegetables:
one who skidded to a stop
to battle every lesson plan
and one who loved to model planes
with little knives and pungent glue.

Across the plane of polished oak,
she spread a European map
and learned to follow, inch by inch,
the stain of footholds gained and lost.
The second map she bought would show
a spreading ocean, west to east,
where smoking islands dot the blue.

She even marked the rosy place
that holds the loosened bones of one,
but had to dream the healing grass
to fall and weep, not knowing
if the grass could grow. The other,

in the unmarked ocean moves.

Eight pillows anchor down her room,
a fringe of gold around the silk
that frames her red geography:
a litany of islands strewn
like pearls across a wooden chest;
Paris on a rosewood chair,
the Tower of London by her head,
Rome, the footboard of the bed--
index to the known and parceled world.

Jack + Judy

She was stuck on him like a three-cent stamp
on a postcard showing a roadside
diner shaped like a hat;
stuck like a stool on a chrome stem
waiting to swivel a customer,
or the naked thigh on a summer day
clinging to a vinyl seat.

He could read her like a two-bit cook
reads a scribbled order
jammed on a spike,
fluttering under the greasy fan;
like egg on a fork,
between the tines,
or a hot beef sandwich between the teeth.

Together, they're waiting on the night,
halfway between Peoria and Baton Rouge,
where the word OPEN,
in red block letters,
hangs under the words, EAT HERE,
spelled out in neon blue.

The City of Angels Accommodates Simplicity

Among the others in the alley
of packed red dirt,
a tall man, bony and dark,
lives in a cardboard coffin.
It is perfectly shaped to his frame,
the corrugated boxes taped,
as if the nails ran out.
The flap at the head is folded back,
like a visored helmet after war,
the knight relaxed.
It isn't raining and he isn't dead.

The unpaved alley holds five properties;
there are no taxes on the lots,
the lot lines shift.
By virtue of possession,
a family of four is holding title
to a slumped car; there is no key.
Dust has settled on a white appliance crate,
the home of Miss Agnes.
She has pretensions
and a blanket of green wool.
She wears them when she goes downtown.

A man in soft white shoes and clean pants
hands out leaflets from door to door:
religion, soup, prevention.
The man in the coffin raises his arm,
takes the literature, brings it in.
He hasn't any room for books,
his room arranged to hold the body heat.
You just can't live like this
where I come from; it gets
too cold, we have so many books.

Cincinnati Blue

In the asylum on the right side
of the brain, where we line up
the dead cats next to the little birds
they ate and decline the fur coat,
where we keep close count on our ammunition,
the ten best kisses, ill gotten gains,
and lottery numbers that can't win maybe;
there, a lady of perpetual motion
walks toward the curb, pushing
her chrome cart with its tiny wheels,
wearing five sweaters at the same time,
all of them buttoned wrong.

On the bus to the asylum,
the smell of old sweat and wet wool
mingles with the odor of burnt tobacco,
Wild Irish Rose, and unhealed wounds,
under the fragrance of false scent
splashed on faces, neck, wrist,
in the frantic orchestration
of unrelieved hope, or the calm
despair of a bad shoe. When the picture
rolls behind the eye and you listen
for a message from your radio teeth,

you might forget to breathe.

On the soft wall of the asylum,
a small flower begins to grow, weeping
its own leaves. A dog walks over
and claims the spot, a bird comes out
of its hiding place, a bird revealed
on a field of stark blue sky,
as if the wall was mental only mental
after all, somewhere between the two
sides of the brain, and anyone can climb it
anytime you remember to breathe
in deeply the dog, the bird,
the flower, and the exquisite faces
on the unrelenting bus.

Titantic Lessons

Chance floats on the water,
hidden and cold,
waiting to show us how the sea
can swallow assumption in one gulp;
how space in a life boat
grows too small
after the warning whistle shrieks;
how the music skips
when it hits the water,
and a wallet gurgles on the downward drift;
how calamity beckons
as we skirt the edges,
sniffing for underwear and jewels;
how flatware on the ocean floor
forgets the order
of the knife and fork; how long
it takes to find a spoon;
how soon the bones of contention rise
over rights to salvage
and exhibition;
how grave goods always come up
for grabs, and it's sometimes
lucky to miss the boat.

The Cutting Room

We wait by the sea as a stranded urchin
waits for another tide.

The split moon is pulling the sea
back and forth, forward and back
like a black piano on wooden wheels.
We walked all night to reach this place,
the rocks as big as moons.

They were never round,
but the falling sea is wearing them down,
grinding them up,
spitting them out, like a necktie
thrown from the seventh floor,
through the open window to the street below.

Last Rites for Dad at Summer's End

It was a hot day.

Graphite grease leaked onto my suit
from the window crank in the long car.
Everything stuck to us, but Dad.
He'd up and left the weather behind.

It was one of those hot fall days,
when you want to be out
on the lake, driving his boat
straight into the wind,
cross-wave, waving at other boats.

It was so hot, I wouldn't
want to be a grave digger
out in the sun,
making a hole to hide the skin
of somebody's father about to melt.

A real scorcher, the kind of day
you need to ask
to borrow his car and go for a drive,
crank the windows down
and the music up.

It was humid, too.

The air shimmered in waves.

Even the flowers could hardly breathe.

The hair uncurled;

the tears burst into flame.

What's New?

Over the heartland, a mongrel dog
is driving a pick-up
around the block
an old bandana around his neck.
He has learned this trick
from an ordinary man.

Nearby, on an even plain,
a calloused Scandinavian,
pagoda planted in the brain,
has raised one seven stories high,
inviting wind-swept people
to look out.

A woman of substance, farther north,
has snipped the thread
on the final knot
of a Gainsborough painting
reproduced in five-thousand crosses
of measured silk.

Another, on her hands and knees,
disturbs the earth
to set the stage for cosmos

blooming on a hill,
arranged within a neat but
ragged ring of broken schist.

Across the Mason-Dixon line
a house of bottles once took shape,
the heavy bottoms facing out
and plainly set in concrete
so each circle snares the light.

These givens, like old bathtubs set
to keep a virgin in the yard,
a wagon wheel to get the mail,
get used for making something,
making something of the will.

Wintering Over at Spinach Creek

A tiny beast, the vole,
goes about this business of life
so low to the ground, etching
a delicate trail in the snow.
My own thick boots,
the lugs I wear for traction
on the steep slope,
leave a different mark.

The dahlias, frozen
in their summer bed, roots undug,
will never bloom again.
Sacrificed by my neglect,
they bloom as separate
humps of snow.
Food for the vole, perhaps,
on February third.

Up in the house, in unison,
the green plants lean
toward the pale sun
already low above the facing dome.
My own ear strains
toward the first faint sound

of water moving
under the earthbound snow.

The vole just goes
where he always goes,
burrowing,
burrowing through a frozen maze,
using to the best effect
this clean and muffled arctic world.

Cornered in Town on the Brink of Spring

The stalled mind gropes
like a wrinkled sail, fumbling
for another lift.
Tube worms dance on the perk and steam,
where hot spots open the ocean floor.

A slit appears
in the concrete walk, flashing
a strip of packed earth.
The shifting tap root sinks and holds
its green intention to the cracked light.

Like a whale drives up
from the underworld, nosing
toward the mottled sun;
one corked bud on a milky stem
carries the spume of ripened seed.

Mother Marries at Seventy-Three

They enter the church through separate doors,
each trailing a familiar past,
like old shoes tied to a wedding car.

Thad at the altar, creased in a suit,
seems solid and close, like a sweaty palm;
mother, a blossom in peach chiffon.

He's not my father, I can't say dad;
his daughter watches, her mother's gone.
Our brothers stiffen their formal arms.

Five separate children of middle age
our wagons circled round different fires,
have fingered this loose change of heart.

The groom is nervous, he cracked two jokes.
Mother forgot where she left her key--
their modest holdings are rearranged.

Both versed in the loving that cannot stop
the failing body's downward slide,
they already know how the hands must part.

The pews all rustle as we crane our necks
to see the promise that they make,
as if their future was our own.

Sister Mole

Under the breathing carpet,
beneath the earthen floor,
a small and sightless neighbor
is opening a door.

She concentrates upon the smell
of beetle's acid track,
the notes of snake's brief lullaby,
the pale grub's ghostly act.

Beside a driven tree root,
between the frost-heaved stones,
she penetrates the darkness
among the fallen bones.

This subterranean mistress
seeks not a human breath.
She's feeding on the underside,
an intimate of death.

Food Groups

No matter how you flesh the story out,
the bones say life eats life.
There is a ham hock living
in my right foot,
a moose haunch walking in my other shoe.
Tofu is no exception, everything feeds.
A tree climbs onto the backs of the dead
for a better view.
The beanfield kills the tree,
bread kills the wolf.
Some cows live on in service
to strong bones; the grass, to cows.
The pasture, like a picnic spread
calls out the bug, the mouse, a hawk.
Potatoes died to feed the blight;
one stalk grows tall
expending something else.
A simple caution gripped within the seed,
loose on the breath--
be careful what you eat today,
consider what you feed the earth.

Planning Ahead

My husband has named the goods
for his grave, the stuff
he wants for the long haul.
We were having coffee, the subject came up.

Spinners, an artificial bait,
rainbow scale, number 1 aglia long
by Mepps; in the water it looks
like a small fish a bigger fish will bite.
A Super Duper, brass and red,
(number 501 or 503), which looks
like a wounded minnow for the same reason--
the fish: they way they take the hook
and rise; the way they give themselves up.
Catch and release, he says.
A fine idea, though I usually ask
for some to cook, because
my hands are linked to the stove.
Grayling, of course,
are better eaten by the stream.
If you keep them, they will not keep.

He remembers the numbers of many lures;
the date of our marriage escapes his mind,

although he studies the American past,
and we did it there,
in the yard,
where Stoney made the barbecue
and vows were almost an afterthought,
a promise to do the best we can.
Now I promise a spinning rod,
only the best for eternity, reinforced
with graphite; the reel,
a Mitchell 300, made with real metal--
cast farther, won't break.

Put some dog bones in. Not the bones
of Mariah, his old dog,
who feeds the blue delphiniums
by our northern house.
He wants some bones for the working dogs,
a treat in his pocket when he arrives,
before he hitches up the sled.
He's certain their trail
will be the same. Why else would he turn,
as a dead dog leaves,
to wipe the salt from his damp beard?
A grown man weeps for few things.

When the bike won't fit in the travel case,

he says shirts: Shit Happens, Live to Ride,
flags of the all-American scoot.

He has not named her,
the inflatable doll, a Bimbo
he can take along. Maybe he knows
his other goods
will attract some dame,
one who will follow the flash of the lure,
or the slick odor of motor oil
and the scent of dog hair wet with rain.

Maybe he knows, if I get there first,
I'll stand in the trail
in my warm gown, talking with the dogs,
holding the pan,
waiting for some fish to fry.

A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bike

A bicycle, that is, one she can
peddle with both fins,
the ones that center
her scaled form,
which he likes, of course,
in his own crude way,
with his chain-linked feelings
and geared-down tongue.
You can move water
with a turning wheel,
once you get the balance right.

New Real Estate

We scuttled like hermit crabs
from shell to shell,
each borrowed house a ready-made,
our flesh the only furnishing.
Often it was a tight fit,
backbone curved against the will,
a foot in Cinderella's shoe.

Some shells look like small boats
unsuitable for anything but drift--
"Si si, she wants a sail."

Can you hear my skin?
It bristles when the chalkboard
scrapes the beach;
Virginia Beach in 1969,
when mother forgot to go to Mass
for three days running
and the beads went limp;
when the children buried themselves
to the neck, their little heads
on the white sand like lumps of sugar
in the bowl of time.

"You can't get here from there,"
they said, "the only bridge
has fallen down." London!
Do it in the spring.
It was a town where all the doors
wore lions with gold rings
and we had to knock before we reached
for the brass knob.
It turned in our hands and slipped,
like jellyfish, greased at low tide.

Of course, we had other homes--
small pockets in library books,
a hole in the ax,
space between mothballs in the chest.
In the desert we lived in Saguaro's arms
like birds. It was a way of life.
The spikes will tell us what we do not know:
the sound of midnight falling
on a rock; how many moonbeams
fit the ear; the ratio of sand to glass.

"C'est la vie," we declare, to find out
things like this, after
we've boiled the blue crabs,

eaten the best parts,
and dressed the berries in cream.
How sudden these facts.
We swallow the grit and hope for pearls,
shifting in a narrow room,
until we grow too large for the dead
and find another place to live.

Primary Color

Blue rocks are hardly ever blue,
blue eyes are sometimes almost green.
Blue hounds are kept for chasing coons,
I choose blue spruce for Christmas trees.

Blue in the face, she sang off key,
"Blue Moon," the most done song we know.
The blues run in some people's veins,
blue blood in others, we've been told.

Blue ribbon panels put things right.
Blue in the laundry makes things white.
Old Bluebeard's hands are stained with red.
Wear something borrowed, something blue.

Blue tears will quench unmet desire.
Blue lips remark this growing old.
One blue reveals the hottest fire,
a clearer blue, the coldest ice.