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HIBISCUS

By

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A THESIS

**Submitted to
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

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ABSTRACT
HIBISCUS
BY
REBECCA SWAIN

This is a collection of sixty-three short, free verse poems dealing with such subjects as blindness, love, depression, and the trials, triumphs, and silliness of life in America in the late twentieth century. The poems are simply constructed but emotionally charged. Many are autobiographical; others are attempts to understand experiences I have not had.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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HIBISCUS AND OTHER SEDUCTIONS

Call me Chagall, Scorsese, Delilah.

These are names I like.

It has nothing to do with meaning,

the myths they are freighted with.

The sound is the only requirement--

the shape of your mouth,

the play of your tongue.

Call me bunny or biscuit,

waffle, snapdragon,

charmed quark, Kyoto.

Not after things merely beautiful--

rose, springtime, snowflake, ruby

leave me cold.

But whisper hibiscus

and I will be yours forever.

WORLD BEING VARIOUS

I remember walking in October snow,
thick and bright,
and coming upon yellow leaves lying
at the feet of startled trees,
looking incongruous, mistaken,
a little ridiculous,
beautiful.

The sky was dimming toward five o'clock
but the snow and leaves
had the brightness of mid-afternoon
as I stood and marveled.

There shouldn't be snow in October,
and when it comes it should cover the leaves,
not be covered by, decorated with.

Not the first time this has happened,
not as unusual as I would like to think,
but arresting,
unexpected,
as if for a moment the kaleidoscope turned
to a different pattern
just to see if anyone was watching.

ANONYMOUS GIFTS

I don't know who sends them--
God, my id, or just
random neurons firing
as my eyes move--
but they come every night
like Christmas gifts sent to a child
with no return name on the package,
cryptic, unsettling picture books
with an infinite number of pages,
like the ones you can buy at the mall
where someone else writes the story
and sticks in your name and face.
Some of them are quite pleasant
and some of them are quite horrible,
but all of them are quite interesting,
and every night I settle myself
in a comfortable viewing position
and wait for them to fall open
as my eyes fall closed.

I MAY BE DREAMING THIS

The three or four strands of Christmas lights
are blinking alternately,
red, green, yellow on,
purple, white, blue off.

I have been watching them now for an hour,
thinking of James Joyce or St. Luke,
depending upon which lights are on,
and I think I have intercepted a message
from Moscow.

The Russians are surrendering
all nuclear weapons to Bethlehem
and coming en masse to eat at McDonald's
on Christmas Day.

Lucky for us I was watching the lights
and intercepted their pretty code,
or we might have thought we were suffering an invasion.

OXYMORONS I HAVE KNOWN

The shy girl who wore no underwear;
the peace marcher who bit his nails to the quick
and ground his teeth in his sleep;
the gentle man who shot clay pigeons
for the pleasure of watching them shatter;
the blind woman who collected Picassos;
the materialist who sent his life savings
to a fund to save the rain forests;
the patriot who didn't shoot
because her enemy's back was turned--
the little things I remember about people
after the larger picture has faded,
the faultlines that were the ruining
or the saving of them,
of me,
or that didn't make any difference
but made them fascinating
and surprising
just when I thought I knew them.

JENNIFER

When troubled by the importunings
of some mortal god,
she turns herself into a stream,
cold and deep,
no part of her containable for long.
Let Narcissus bend and bend,
seek his own reflection
till he drowns.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Bony, biscuit-haired Venus
used to be Lori
until she renamed herself,
the reverse of naming a spotted dog Spot,
drawing attention to what she was not
in order to focus attention
on what she was,
not insatiable or capricious or symbolic
but energetic and curious and definitely
in existence.

AT MY PARTY

I found him in my bed,
lying on top of people's coats,
laughing,
banging his head against the headboard,
because he'd finally met someone he loved,
the only person who'd made him feel
he wasn't falling into a bottomless well,
and it was another man.

ON HER NINETIETH BIRTHDAY

If beauty is truth then I must be believed
for I was a lovely girl,
dancing like wind over water,
squeezing the days like oranges
in my sticky hands,
celebrating the frivolousness
of octagons and chartreuse.

I knew the power of beauty and uselessness
and I took what this knowledge entitled me to,
lovers and irresponsibility,
and I never knew what to do
when something was required.

During the wars and the Depression,
when other women were taking hold,
my hands hung limply, never having held anything
but a ribbon or someone else's hand.

Unfashionable as it may be,
I look back on those as the best of days
and wait for sleep when once again
nothing is required.

NOT ANOTHER JULIET

She spoke to me in earring language

I never understood.

When I asked her what she felt for me

she stopped in a doorway,

took an icicle out of her left ear

and put in a pack of cigarettes.

When I demanded she make a decision

we spent the afternoon moving from shop to shop,

bending over red velvet trays

of silver and gold flowers and flying things,

comparing hoops and dangles

hanging from stiff white cards on metal arms,

frowning at clip-ons and stick-ins

and cheap ones and art ones--

oh, she reveled in choices,

little hand-held ones,

choosing the eccentricities she was prepared to live with

and those she wasn't,

and she didn't want another Juliet.

When I put my arm around her

she coiled away and answered no

with bags of french fries swinging from her ears.

SOME STORIES I KNOW

He stood in the doorway,
his gypsy eyes wandering the windswept road,
his head tilted slightly, listening,
but not to the love songs the radio played.
His lion-gold hair hung thick to his shoulders,
too long, and I wanted to cut it
as if he were Samson,
but he didn't know the story
so it wouldn't have worked.
He didn't know Odysseus either,
and when he closed the door behind him
I knew he would not return,
weave what I would.

THE LAST TIME

White roses and the moon combine
to make this room like last time
you were here.

At first it was you loving
with your eyes like Hedda Gabler's
and your laugh like snapping twigs
in some high wind before the thunder;
then it was you crying
with your face against the door
and your hand against the knob
as if to keep the door from opening in against you.
In the end it was you leaving
and me lying in the moonlight
with white roses
and the silence of one person breathing.

AUTUMN

I walk beneath the rusts and browns
and stare up at the hardening blue
while autumn rustles past my icy cheeks.

I left you standing by the car,
half-laughing.

I turned and ran into the woods,
half-crying.

Sometimes the things we've almost had
hurt more than what we've lost.

SOMETIMES IN SUMMER

Drifting down the streets on summer evenings,
your boom box in your hand,
seeking out green places in the city,
picking red tulips from public gardens
because we thought they were roses,
feeding ice cream cones to the squirrels,
standing by colored fountains as darkness fell,
watching them turn from red to blue
to green to yellow to white.

Avoiding the drunks and pushers,
claiming a bench of our own in the park,
your smoke-and-sweat scented jacket around my shoulders,
you tell me we won't see each other again.

You love me but your friends would hate
my college clothes and fastidiousness,
my parents would hate your ponytail and LSD,
and you say that in real life things like this matter,
though sometimes in summer
we convince ourselves they don't.

BLESSINGS

May your bagels never mold.

May you always find emeralds
in your soup bowl.

May the sun never set
on your snapdragons.

Surely these are legitimate blessings,
only a little more unlikely
than wishing someone health or long life
or that most elusive of desires,
happiness.

BY THE RIVER

You played your flute by the river
while I lay back and looked
for the Sea of Tranquility.
The grass pressed cold and wet against my skin,
the wind blew chill for August nights,
but I was lonely for a song
so I lay in shivering stillness while you played.
I don't remember all your songs--
Vivaldi and a tune you wrote yourself--
but I remember you played well
and that the night sailed blithely by,
the crickets and the katydids uncaring
if you missed a note or two,
the stars unhearing far above
and mine the only listening ears for you.
We stayed for hours beneath the moon
and I forgot that I was cold
and that the grass was wet beneath my head.
The night slipped by as carelessly
as water sliding past the riverbank,
and I, content to let it pass,
released it freely while you played.

THE BED RAFT

Once in a while a Sunday streams with incessant rain,
is so dark we need the lights on all day,
so heavy it is an effort to stand up.

These are bed raft days.

Without discussion we wade through the shadowy house
gathering supplies--Pop-Tarts,
mystery novels, Scrabble--
then flee back to the bedroom,
pursued by the sharks of necessity.

We huddle under the covers,
our salvage strewn about us,
turn on the early morning jazz show
and sail away.

SUDDENLY KNOWING

I take your arm
and it is live beneath my hand.
I touch and think of blood
coursing warm beneath your flesh,
the skin so cool and smooth
on the inside of your arm,
your inner elbow vulnerable with veins,
a childlike place,
the outside warm with sun,
rough with tiny hairs and tight with muscle,
feeling like experience and strength.
Trailing my fingers along your forearm
I feel you shiver.
I count your pulse.
I never knew you were so alive.

ABBA, FATHER

I remember him, solid and square,
with dragon-slaying eyes
and a burning-bush beard
to match shaggy red hair,
in his blue jeans and heavy plaid jacket
all ready for hunting.
He shouted my name with abandon
and when I came running
he lifted me high
in his strong builder's hands
and held me as if I were half the world,
and kissed me with noisy delight on both cheeks,
and set me with much too much force on the floor,
then went out before I could
think of a way to delay him.
The house seemed too large
and quiet without him, so I sat
on the staircase and waited
for him to come home,
bringing light and sensation
back into my life.

UNION

You don't remember this now that you are seven
and well acquainted with the ways of the world,
but when you were much smaller
you used to sit on my lap in the bentwood rocker,
your brown hands against my neck,
buried beneath the weight of my straight, light hair,
my fingers tucked into the centers
of your tight black curls,
and we would admire, without words,
the amazing, unexpected differences
that brought us together.

PRIMARY COLORS

"Today blue is deep summer sky,
not shadows on snow.

Yellow is golden and red is for roses,
not blood."

I tell myself this every morning
with my palette a rainbow before me,
and I mean to remember,
but storm clouds come easier than soft clouds,
and red and green mixed come out brown,
never Christmas.

My primary colors clot into sadness
on my canvas.

HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH A BLIND WOMAN

Choose one who's pretty,
sweet-faced, with vague eyes.
Avoid those with alert, acquisitive stares,
they don't look blind enough.
Pose her against a bank of flowers
or with her mother, a Bible in one hand,
or a musical instrument
to indicate submission, consolation,
her guide dog harness in her other hand
for that look of tender dependence.
Tilt her chin for bravery
and make her smile,
a doll that everyone wants to take home,
cuddle and protect,
give things to but never, never
let her earn or be owed,
succeed to anything outside
the icy velvet bounds of charity.

BETRAYAL

Monday evening

Mary Winston

slashed her wrists

because

I was

too young

to stop

the bleeding.

IN MY HEAD

Sometimes I think, apropos of nothing,
that I could turn on the garbage disposal
and thrust my hand in,
or leap over a railing into a stairwell
onto the heads of unsuspecting people.
These thoughts linger for just a moment
but it's like waking up in the middle of the night
and finding ugly strangers
in my bright, well-ordered living room,
watching TV, eating my corn chips
until they see me appear in the hall
and they flee out the door,
leaving no trace but crumbs
and the smell of sweat.

CLEOPATRA AT LANSING GENERAL

The X-ray technician tells her
it's called the Cleopatra pose,
her hand behind her head,
her elbow pointing fussily,
and as the plates clasp her breast
in their tight impersonal grip,
they envenom her with the fear of knowledge
as the fangs of Cleo's asp
promised her the knowledge of what comes after,
and for a moment she doesn't want to know
why she flinches from her husband's caress,
why she aches in the early hours
and finds her hand unconsciously touching her breast
while she's watching TV, fingers probing
for unexpected contours.

For a moment she exults at the bravery
of what she is doing, then grows frightened
because it is worse to know than to wonder sometimes,
and so convinced is she of what she will learn
that when she steps back from the machine
she almost expects to see fang-marks
on her skin.

LIVING BLUE

Sometimes she puts a blueberry in her mouth
and holds it there, not chewing, her tongue touching it,
her teeth pressing lightly, and thinks,
"This is a blue thing."

She listens to bluebirds in trees by her house
and thinks, "That is blue singing,
that's how blue sounds."

She buys blue-dyed carnations so she can
inhale blueness when she breathes.

It was the last color she saw
and now she can only regain it through other senses,
living bluely, not waiting to come across it
unexpectedly, maybe without ever knowing,
but planting it around her so she knows
where blueness is, thinking it might bring good luck,
and so far it has--
she still dreams in color.

CRUSH

Christopher.

Christopherchristopherchristopher. Chris.

I write your name and put it under my pillow.

Christopher.

I write your name and swallow the paper.

Christopher.

Christopher.

I write your name and hide it up my sleeve,

in my bra,

clip it under my barrette.

Christopher.

I write your name and hand it over the counter

with my money at the theatre,

at the market,

slip it into the coin box on the bus.

Christopher.

I write in your name at the voting booth.

Christopher.

I write your name on colored paper

and scatter it on the sidewalk as I pass,

pin it up on bulletin boards

and chalk it on bridges and in the streets.

I cover the city with marvelous syllables--

Christopher.

LISTENING TO YOUR HAIR GROW

Laying my head against your head
I hear the twang as your curls spring out,
little guitar plucks in my ear.
If I ran my fingers through your hair
I bet I could play the blues.
I know I could,
because sometimes at night
when you turn your head on the pillow,
I hear B.B. King.

SMUG

I'm watching the suntanned
green-eyed woman
who's giving my man a smile
as inviting as an open box of bonbons.
She's paying him lavish attention,
laughing straight into his eyes,
shooting double entendres
like modern Cupid arrows,
aiming a little lower than his heart.
I don't blame her.
I think he's beautiful too,
and who wants a man
nobody else wants?
Besides, I know his response to her
is only window shopping.
When the party's over
he'll come to my house,
and with Johnny Carson on
the bedroom TV
he'll forget he ever
knew her name.

THE INDUSTRIAL ROCK WALTZ

Do you remember the night we waltzed to industrial rock
in that big empty room over Pete's Taco Dream
that you lived in last summer,
under those awful fluorescent lights
that gleamed on the edges of your stereo equipment
your turntable cover and CD player and tape deck
and rippled along the albums in your record crates?
No chairs, no tables, not even a bed,
just metal clanging on factory floors
coming through speakers taller than I was,
and yards of empty space in which to dance.
Do you remember counting under your breath
the rhythm of a waltz
while the needle tracked something that sounded like
the end of civilization,
kissing in a gray crescendo of dissonance
that must have been the rebellion of the robots,
and laughing when the music stopped
and the universe must have been destroyed?

THE SOUND OF MY CLOTHES

For this date with a blind man
I will forget color and cut
and wear my sexiest-sounding clothes--
the two bead bracelets that click together
whenever I lift my drink or smooth my hair
or touch his cheek,
high heels that add a businesslike counterpoint
to every silky thing he says,
and my favorite taffeta dress that whispers "Szechwan"
as I move close for a kiss.

WARMTH

She collects socks people leave in the laundry room
and stores them in her dresser drawer.
Sometimes in the evening when there is nothing on TV,
when she's read all her library books
and eaten all her snacks,
she arranges the socks on the coffee table
and imagines who they belonged to before.
The grey wool ski sock with the hole in the toe
must belong to the distantly friendly Norse god
who lives in the apartment next door,
sometimes with his girlfriend.
The once white, now pink men's socks
are probably the result of a laundry snafu
for the woman upstairs
who looks like a person to whom bad things happen,
whose husband looks like a man
who would not see the humor in pink socks.
Sometimes she fantasizes about returning
the socks to their rightful owners,
imagines smiles and invitations in,
cups of coffee and life stories,
the beginning of something.
But the Norse god smiles right through her
and the desperate woman never smiles,

and neither look like cups-of-coffee people.
So she is thinking of making a quilt with the socks
in defiance of indifference,
sewing those people's lives together with hers
even if they don't know.
A dubious triumph,
but she never knew one that wasn't.

FOR CAROLYN

Black eyes,
through circumstance, not birth,
and no attempt at a smile.
Like a body walking in without a heart
she stares and does not speak,
commanding and begging attention,
a love she can live with
or the strength to live without.

A PRIVATE DECEMBER

Her depression descended like a blizzard
of dirty snow, hiding her eyes,
leaving her lost in a familiar place,
and she huddles in her bed now, cold
beneath her quilt of cotton and Valium,
not talking, not sleeping, not thinking at all,
just staring out the window
at the tracks she made in the clean white snow
back when there was somewhere she wanted to be.

THE BEE

The black and yellow bee that nearly killed my father
died beneath my foot as I watched
the dust settle behind the car that bore him,
tongue swelling and throat closing,
to the doctor.
It died as I remembered hard words
in the soft evening air,
my father and I arguing
again, still, endlessly,
bitterness and stinging sarcasm passing for conversation
until he reached for his green and white cigarette pack
and found the bee. It lay stunned as he ran inside,
calling for my mother,
and I wondered how such a little poison
could bring down such a big man,
wondered if he would die without another word to me.
I put my foot on the little bee
as the car pulled out of the drive,
and searched myself for sorrow,
terrified I would find none there.

TO MY ADMIRER

When I speak your mouth falls open
as if you were a baby bird
waiting to be fed.

When we walk
your hand brushes my arm, my thigh,
light as the touch of down feathers,
ostensibly a mistaken contact,
but I know.

You take my scarves, my handkerchiefs, my gloves,
thinking I don't know where they go.

What are you doing with my possessions,
feathering your nest?

The only things I can give you
are what you take by stealth.

I haven't any gentleness to spare.

Don't look to me to save you from the hawk.

I'm far too busy flying from him myself.

WHEN SHE CALLS

I am afraid to pick up the phone
because I know it will be her,
crying,
and I will sink to the floor
and bury my head
and try not to see the sunshine,
my hand caressing the receiver
as if she could feel it out in L.A.
I know I will say awkward things,
stupid things,
or nothing,
because her emptiness enters me
and healing words die choking in my throat.
This must be how she feels,
but misery divided is still misery,
and I spend hours on the phone
just breathing
while she cries.

SOMEONE TO ESCAPE WITH

I don't know why he clung to me.
Perhaps he saw me as a kindred spirit,
a means of escape,
but at sixteen I was ready to bolt
and not take anyone with me.
He sat beside me in class,
playing with Life Savers and erasers
as if he couldn't make up his mind
which was more important.
He would grab my hand under the table
and press it as if it were modelling clay
he wished to shape into a rose or a key,
and he'd keep me after everyone left,
reading me fragments of travel books
by Paul Theroux and Freya Stark,
saying "That can't be true"
and "Do you believe that?"
as if either of us could possibly know
what was true about anywhere else.
I hadn't yet gone to Quebec
with my French class, D.C. with the seniors,
Tijuana for the hell of it,
and I too suffocated in the diesel fuel
and cotton quilts of a small town

where everyone was a truck driver
or ran a bed-and-breakfast inn,
everyone going or coming but no knowledge
of outside getting in,
but I preferred to suffer in silence
and not be paired with a loud-laughing, gum-chewing
green-haired social gaffe
looking for a place to happen,
and after a while he got the message,
when my hand turned into a frog in his
and jumped away, when I ducked
around corners and dashed out of class.
Now I understand he needed someone
to escape with, this as important to him
as actually having somewhere to go,
and although I was always a person
who acted alone, and so could not have been
what he wanted, I suppose
I could have been kinder about saying no.

PERSECUTING TIME WITH HOPE

My sister had a baby in July,
a strong, stubborn boy who, the doctors say,
will be tall, light-haired, blue-eyed when he grows up.
I say he will be artistic.
His mother says handsome, my mother says pious,
his father says hard-working, down-to-earth.
We fashion his identity
as if it is a suit of clothes
he'll learn to fit with time and proper diet,
but behind our complacency we often wonder
if someday he'll throw aside our costume
and come home dressed as someone we don't know.

ALICE

She was my first best friend.

We met in second grade,

sat at the same yellow wood table at recess

breathing dust and lilacs.

That was the year I discovered

that other people's lives were not like mine.

"Why do you always wear the same three dresses?"

I asked her,

"the blue and white sailor dress,

the red and black plaid,

the black and white checkered?"

"I only have three dresses," she said.

I thought of my grandma who made me

pink and yellow and blue blouses

with puffy sleeves and velvet mushroom buttons

and skirts that swirled when I moved.

"Don't you have a grandma?" I asked.

"No."

We played on the seesaw

and it went higher than I'd expected,

but Alice never mentioned the fact

that I cried and made the recess teacher lift me off.

That was the year I learned

that people's names had meanings.

I looked in a book and discovered
that Alice meant truth,
and after that I believed everything she told me
until the June day she said
"See you when school starts,"
and moved away in the summer.

MY FAULT

I know you said

"Never throw baseballs in the house"

but I was sitting in the armchair reading
and Johnny stood in the doorway and threw the ball
into my lap when I wasn't looking
and scared me.

So I threw it back and he hit it with his hand
and it smacked the lamp instead.

It wasn't my fault.

I know you said

"Never run in the house"

but I was going down the hallway in the dark
and Johnny jumped out from behind a door shouting "Vampire"
and scared me.

So I chased him through the house
and in the living room he tripped
over the toys he'd left there
and hurt his knee.

It wasn't my fault.

I know you said

"Never play in the woods after dark"

but Johnny dared me to stay there till ten,
screeching and making tiger sounds,
and I was scared, and ran, and lost my way,

and there was no moon and no lights ahead,
and Johnny cried and I had to comfort him,
and the only reason I mentioned wolves
was because I thought I heard one.

I didn't know it was Daddy looking for us.

I'm sorry if you were all worried

but it wasn't my fault.

SUPERHEROES

We sat on the wide windowsill in her bedroom
and she read comic books aloud
with a strange stream-of-consciousness air
while I guessed at the pictures,
telling her what they should be,
not what they were,
pretending my words formed comic book bubbles
over my head.

I created the heroes in our image,
one with my blue jeans and short blonde hair,
one with her dreamy eyes and stubborn mouth.
We never lost a battle,
and when she closed the books
I would ask if we could be heroes and just not know it.
She always answered yes.

SPLITTING INFINITIVES

At fifteen she thought she was the poster child
for to love, to have, to be.

It took her years to understand
that anything she was was only sometimes.

She tried to love her husband always
and managed to usually love him.

She tried to look her best at all times
and found that to sometimes be beautiful
was the best she could hope for.

She knew her life had infinite possibilities
but learned she could not realize them all,
and instead of sweeping claims
she learned to qualify her statements
with often, frequently, seldom,
splitting her infinitives
in an effort to remember
that to always be happy is impossible
and to never be happy is too.

SHIT

It is the word they all know, my friends
from Germany, Bangladesh, Brazil.
They can't always make themselves understood
at restaurants, libraries,
or on the telephone,
but when they do badly on an exam,
when their bags of oranges break,
they are quite comprehensible in their dismay.
I think they learn this word first in English
because it is the most useful--
they know they can't get through a day without it,
and that if they can't properly express themselves
they might burst into frustration shrapnel.
And it is such a versatile word,
registering anger, distress, disbelief--
a sharp startled syllable,
a long drawn-out gasp--
inflection is everything with a word like this.
Yes, I think English teachers
all over the world tell their students
that this is an important word they must learn,
and students line up in rows, repeating with fervor
the word they will need to say first in America
when their flight is delayed

or their luggage is lost
or when they first realize
they are no longer at home.

KISSING MYSELF IN THE MIRROR

When I saw my gynecologist at McDonald's,
when he stopped and said hello,
all I could think was
"This man has seen my cervix."
I thought he was thinking about it
when he said "That looks good,"
and I started to ask "How can you tell?"
before realizing he meant my Arctic Orange.
Thinking the world is thinking of me,
I forget the world.

MARCH 31st

I will not go out like a lamb.

I will smash your favorite coffee mug,
the thick one with the cartoon characters.

I will throw away your Hemingway novels
that never taught you to behave like a man.

I will draw mustaches on the pictures of your parents
you insisted on putting up over our bed.

I'll behave in an immature and irresponsible manner
so you will feel right at home.

But I will not cry.

Onions and old movies make me cry,
but not you, ever again.

I will not ruin my makeup,
tear-smear it over my face like a clown,
carry bouquets of pink and blue Kleenex with me to the car.

I will leave the dishes in the sink,
the floor unswept, the bed unmade.

I will take the cat and our last champagne
and drive to the home of a friend in Des Moines,
a pretty white house among elms by the park
where no one plays jazz or drinks before six
and where life is boring but quiet.

I will not leave inconspicuously.

I will make a scene, squealing the tires

and playing "Dixie" on the horn
so all the neighbors will know I'm going.
I'll send clever change-of-address cards,
redirect magazines and bills,
pretend I never lived here.
But I will not go out as I came in--
like a lamb.

OLD MAGIC

I have no patience with what passes for magic today.

I don't need rabbits, from hats or otherwise,
and I don't want to watch some misogynist
saw a woman in half.

If I handcuffed a man, locked him in a trunk,
and put him at the bottom of a tank of water,
you can bet he'd stay there.

But let me draw a sword from a stone
and be proclaimed ruler of some misty land,
let me rid an emerald isle of snakes
or distill love potions from pansy juice--
now there's magic to be proud of,
old magic, useful magic
that changes things and is never forgotten.
That's what I want.

Everything else is sham.

FERTILITY CHARM

I put the kiwis,
fuzzy brown eggs,
into my microwave on low heat
to incubate them,
hoping they would hatch into--
what?

Baby New Zealanders?

Green chickens?

But when I removed them
they looked old and cratered
as the moon
and I threw them away
and went to change my tampon.

PRIVATE SYMBOLS

To hide his eyes from her as she is leaving,
he stares down into the candy box,
studies the chocolate-covered cherry
she's bitten and put back in its compartment,
and because he loves her and she is going,
the candy cannot just be candy anymore.
It becomes his symbol for an incomplete affair,
her unwillingness to be pleased,
his failure to be loved.
He adds it to his private list
of things no longer inanimate,
those charged with a little life of their own
through the violence of his emotions,
fraught with significance for him alone.
Roses and crosses and other public symbols
mean very little to him, but
the broken bottle that is his father,
the jasmine petals that mean his childhood,
a half-eaten piece of candy are statements of truth
so pure they will remain unquestioned.

ONE WOMAN'S OPINION

False:

Love conquers all.

Beauty is only skin deep.

Tomorrow is a clean slate.

The soul lives forever.

True:

It is better to have loved and lost....

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the sons.

This too shall pass.

WHY I'M STILL HERE

Your lashes flutter like butterfly wings
against rough cheeks;
your mouth is soft, your jaw hard,
and you breathe like a child
dreaming the dreams of a man.
Your pleasant contradictions
challenge me to hold you
and discover your less pleasant contradictions
which now challenge me to hold on
despite the fact that I'm not strong enough
to save you from your own fragility
and you are not kind enough
to protect me from mine.

WHAT EVERY WOMAN KNOWS

What about these women in novels
who always know what other women are thinking,
who rule the world from behind the scenes
and handle men without men knowing,
who pass on age-old secrets
to their daughters?

They're written about as if women are
girl-cookies, made from the same dough,
cut out in identical female shapes,
just decorated differently but with the same
amount of flour, sugar, water in all of them.
My mother told me no secrets,
and I have none for my child.

I don't know why most women do what they do.
Some rule, some handle, some couldn't.
Some love too much, some never love enough,
I don't know why. Shared biology
is not omniscience, I will tell her.

Real women are not girl-cookies:
this is all I have to say to her,
all the guidance I can give.
In her uniqueness she will be alone
in a very crowded room.

BREAKING THINGS

His expression shattered like breaking glass
at my careless words
and I remembered a casually thrown rock
smashing a stained glass window
in a church on my street,
red and blue shards of Jesus and Magdalene
lying in jagged glitter in the sun.
I tried to scoop them into a pile
and my fingers came away bleeding.
I was a child then.
I am a woman now
with no excuse.

PSYCHOTIC BREAKS

No hairy, tumescent strangers for my girl.
She sleeps alone, when she sleeps,
too battered to be touched
except by feminine hands,
almost too far gone to be touched at all.
Sometimes after nights of remembered cruelty
she screams about hard hands
and dark eyes staring at nothing
coming to take her,
and she flees to wherever it is she goes
and I clutch her, shaking,
afraid she will never come back.

WAITING FOR SNOW LIGHT

November has blown in
with its accompanying smell of smoke,
hissing of dead leaves past their glory,
rotting apples and moldering pumpkins.
The sky presses down like a dirty towel
thrown over a stain on a carpet.
And I wake every morning, tense and expectant,
looking for the snow light on my ceiling,
the assurance that when I pull the curtain
the earth will be softened and muffled,
the long white wedding of fall and spring
begun.

SENSELESS

To count how many fish lived in a lake
the DNR killed as many as it could.

To discover how many birds died
in the *Valdez* oil spill
some scientists went to a national park,
shot birds, covered them with oil
and threw them in the sea to see
which way they floated.

The next time the government takes a census
I will hide.

PAYING THE PIPER

I missed the sack of Rome,
the Black Plague, the French Revolution,
both world wars.

I didn't even find out about Vietnam
until it was over.

But sometimes beneath the quilt with my husband
in our warm dark house
with our warm bright cat

I wake to the sound of just-perceptible music
and wait for my price to be named.

A WARNING

Something shifts and something breaks,
like a glass falling out of the drainer.
You scold the cat but it isn't his fault,
just an infinitesimal movement
of skillet hitting saucer
hitting water glass hitting floor
and smashing.

You may clutch your fragile things,
your teacups and your peaceful days,
but life shifts, sometimes slyly,
without drama, sometimes suddenly,
with violence, and you lift your head
and wonder at the unexpected sound
of something breaking.

AS IF YOU WERE GOD

Put your hand on my forehead, just so,
and push in as hard as you can,
and keep the colors and shapes of things
from fading away completely.

Don't let them past the barrier
of your warm, well-educated flesh,
your medical degrees and promises,
don't tell me the truth
if it's not what I want to hear,
because when I look at your face
and realize I can't see it,
the panic rises in me
like a flock of flapping crows
after they've ruined the corn,
the sweet golden corn
which soon I won't see either.

NIGHT CLASS

As the sky darkens outside
the lights brighten inside.
Students chat in the intimacy of shared twilight
as they sidle down the aisles and into their seats.
This evening my New Testament prof
is talking about the characteristics of God;
God is love, God is life,
God is light and in Him is no darkness.
Bored, I turn to look out the window
and meet my skeptical gaze
in the dark glass.

NAKED IN THE SUPERMARKET

I heard a woman say it to her friend
as they were getting off the elevator.

"So there I was, naked in the supermarket."

In my amazement I said aloud

"Now what the hell does that mean?"

But no one answered.

Was she discussing a dream or a dare,
or playing a practical joke?

Or, fearful thought, simply retelling a normal event,
an ordinary occurrence for everyone but me?

Being blind, so much of my life is assumption.

I always assumed people dressed for the market
but what if they don't?

What if I stand out like scum on a pond
when I walk in covered with blue jeans and sweater,
wearing underwear, no less,
as if anyone could tell?

What if people wink and point,
pitying my reactionary tendencies
and Christian shame?

This certainly explains why so many people
pick out their mates at the market.

They can see what they're getting.

I wonder what they mean when they ask

to squeeze the produce.

How do they cope in the frozen food aisles?

"Dear Miss Manners,

is it customary to wear clothes while marketing?"

And she will reply

"Gentle Reader...."

ALL THE WRONG THINGS

I can read Chaucer in the original,
play Scrabble at tournament standard.
I know what a fizgig is,
a bangtail, a jaeger.
I know that a light on a train
coming toward me at almost the speed of light
would be ultraviolet.
I know how Shelley and Keats
and Oscar Wilde lived and died.
But I don't know how to scramble eggs,
screw in a light bulb,
figure a fifteen percent tip
at a restaurant,
or do any of the myriad things
a woman in my position--
married and unemployed--should know.
My head is stuffed with all the wrong things
and I feel like the housewife whose closet
is filled with beautiful dresses,
peach taffeta, black velvet, white silk,
but who has nothing to wear
while she cleans the toilet.

BASTILLE DAY

We sat on the still-hot grass
with French bread and red wine,
my blue skirt like a pool around my knees,
a breeze pressing his thin white shirt
against his body.

Conversation tumbled around us,
unintelligible to me, though he laughed,
and I watched him laughing,
his eyes July-bright,
his smile wide as a child's
swelling his smooth dark cheeks.

He introduced me to his friends,
mispronouncing my name,
and patted my knee with apology.

Sunset faded reluctantly,
unwilling to have her pinks and peaches
replaced by vivid green and blue explosions,
and we filled our eyes with shy new stars
just appearing in the violet blue.

"Do you wish on stars in France?" I asked,
but he only smiled and shook his head,
not understanding.

A song began nearby and he joined in,
telling me the words before each line

so I could sing them with him,
but I couldn't say them fast enough
or remember all the sounds
so I sat listening to the voices raised around me
like so many walls erected to hold the night,
structures abandoned when the fireworks began.
Faces were lighted with brilliant colors
and all the stars and flags and wheels
seemed to fall straight down into our laps,
and he and I stretched out our hands to catch the greens
and opened our mouths to swallow the reds,
and amazement sounded the same in French and English.
And when it was over we made our way
through the echoes of rockets and murmured "Bon soirs,"
me to my family's hotel,
he to his family's home,
and I mispronounced his name when we said goodbye,
and the celebration was still in our eyes
when we parted.

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