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Galloping Under My Hat

presented by

Barbara Lynn Swanson

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M.A. degree in English

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GALLOPING UNDER MY HAT

By

Barbara Lynn Swanson

A THESIS

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

GALLOPING UNDER MY HAT

By

Barbara Lynn Swanson

This collection of poems contributes to the question of what contemporary American poetry should or can be. Its surface is in the Whitman Tradition of open, non-metered line and use of common language. The poems embrace the Whitmanesque element of democracy in their use of contemporary people and place as subject, and in their use of the first-person narrative, while offering a connection to more traditional poetry through their underlying relationship to classical mythology and the Judeo-Christian tradition.

To my mother, who provided me a costume trunk
of images.

To my father, who read me "The Owl and the Pussycat."

To my five sisters, who gallop with me under their hats.

To my sons, Christopher and Todd, who have watched me
ride.

To Arthur, who carried me on his white horse to
a place of completion and beginning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you Diane Wakoski for leading me
through the night in the white glow
of your satin moon shoes.

Thank you Doug Lawder, Bud Drake, Arthur Athanason,
and Dr. Penn for teaching, encouraging and
pushing me on to my truths.

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SPINNING STRENGTH



SCOTTISH TEA
AT GRAMMA'S 1953

That three pound sweet butter paper wrapped spread
and cheese block to cut thick as fingers.
Cold Harvard beets, pickles & carrots, beef cold
from Sunday, served again Monday at tea.

China cups chatter like teeth
as we settle next to our saucers
at porcelain table in white tall chairs
on ruffled pads and wait for mother to nod.
The solid fridge clicks as jam's put on,
the oven's warm shortbread near ready.

Tea today from English tins (put the milk in
first) and scones warmed in linen cloth,
steamy sugar wafting.

We wait, we wait to drain our tea
to have our fortunes read
when gramma sees the leaves. I see her skin
lined like the table, hear time ticking
at my cup. She leans over,
looks in and says: "Ah, a bird. Look,
see there, Lassie, a bird."

"What kind of bird?" I ask, staring
at tiny black tea bits that
could be a bird, if I want a bird.
Or a house if I want a house. Or
a cat if I want a cat.

"Ah, that bird is a blackbird to take yeh
far away to Scotland, to lochs
and heather for ye hair."

I think of four and twenty blackbirds
baked in a pie, the gruesome death,
the trap of pastry, the taste of feathers.
I wonder if gramma is sure.

I look
at the leaves again and see myself
on the back of a bird high above houses
and cats, away from the tall weeds
that surround our neighborhood, flying
to big purple cliffs like in gramma's
kitchen calendar, the shiny page of fields
and sky swallowing me like the king
would swallow the blackbirds.

I see
myself disappear from my chair
from the white cracked table
from the scones and jam,
the butter and tea -
feel myself gone from my own fortune.

"No." I say. "It's a cat."

and pour more tea.

DISCOVERING BLOOD

Crawling in tunnels
I make in dead fur,
I bounce on the bed
with Mrs. Wiser's fox,
roll in the satin folds
of someone's shear beaver,

burrow my blonde head
under a black mink wrap-
ped as a cave
and listen

while my parents'
party laughs
over
coins clinking
on the game table.

I hear them eating
roast beef sandwiches
on white bread
while the honey
colored fitch
waves in my breath

and I pat the sable
Mrs. Herald parades around in
downtown.

Mother brings me
a boiled chicken on rye
and I smear mayonnaise
on a racoon
stole
before my eyes
close
and I hear my own blood.

At midnight
I feel them
take the furs
one by one
from the mound
over my white face
flushed pink from sleep
and head out
the bedroom door
quiet as Indians.

SEAMSTRESS

Starched cotton dresses.

Other girls wore

starched cotton dresses.

I wore: little wool suits.

Fabric shipped from Scotland, woven there,

sent on the Queen Elizabeth

by Great Aunt Mary.

Sewing a string of images

on a continuum in her mind,

mother's feet pedaled the old machine,

wheat-thrashing the needle up and down

quickly deftly sharply piercing

thread into, out of wool.

I would wear a red plaid tamoshanter tilted

on my head while waiting for the bus to school

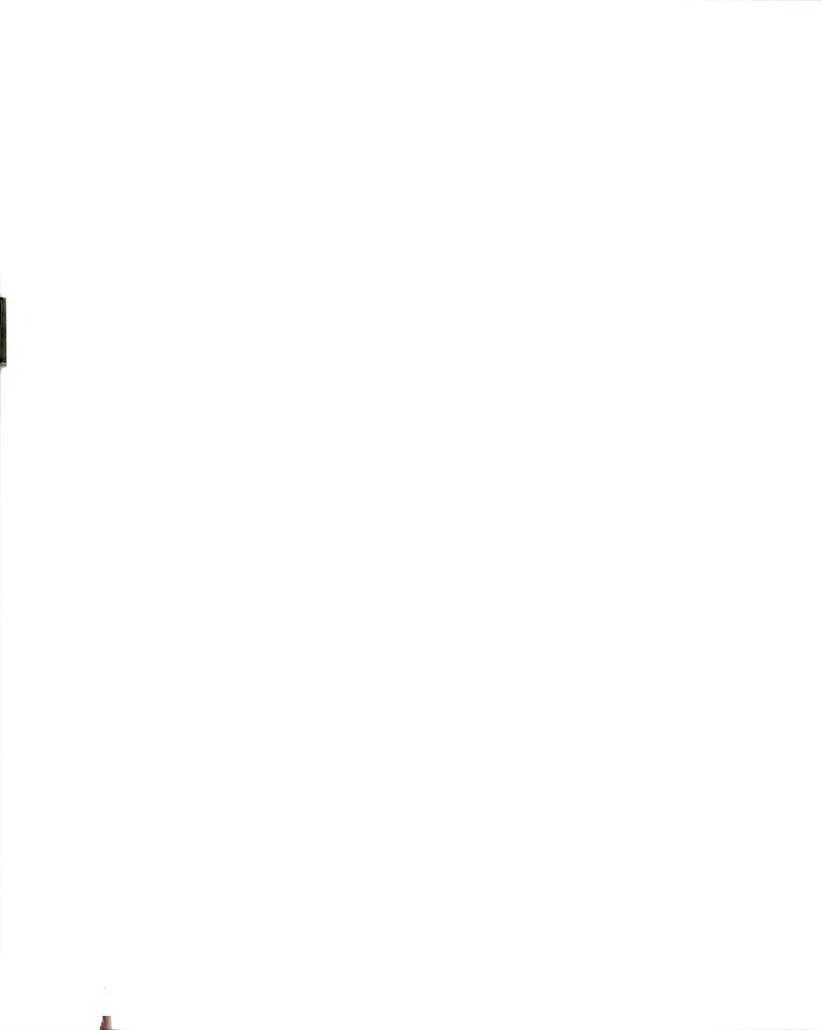
and under my great wool coat, this suit,

smearing my skin in silence, riding

my breath up and down, its seams sewing

my hips tight, my knees warm under its weight

of pleats.



But look, look at the others
ironed so hot, now crisp and squared
in their starched cotton dresses
and ribbons in their hair. Buttons
like shiny eyes glint at me, white
pearl saucers down the backs of tiny
threads, perfect store-bought stitches
stare.

I picture each girl's reflection
in the J.L. Hudson mirror
where their mothers stand behind them
checking for "poof" as well as
enough arm room and hem.

"Poof" I think makes boys notice
when you sharpen your pencil
if you walk "bouncy" back
to your desk. I tried this once
in my little wool suit but couldn't
get pleats to "poof."

Sashsay... I discover... pleated wool sashsays
if you learn to swing your hips.
A sharpened pencil while swishing
fine Scottish wool makes a good pulse-
weaving, brushes their eyes like silk.

I learned the sound of the sixth grade sharpener
like I knew the sound of sewing
and mixed them into a song
I danced back to my desk to.

And when mother made long taffeta
gowns and chiffon skirts that would "poof"
on the way to the prom, I danced feeling
little wool pleats under my dress, and I
sashsayed my hips as if I had just sharpened
a pencil.

HOW DO YOU MOVE IN FLANNEL?

Line of six on Saturday, sleepy
in our Friday night flannel,
mother handed us a mop, a broom, a rag.

Go! Go! through space and time,
propel your skeleton into these rooms,
she'd say, push your muscles to follow
your mind, make a choreography of dust.
The washbowl can be cleaned
in the pulse of your body-beat,
and the floor scrubbed to any of your moves.

But first, she'd beg just one routine
of high-kicks in ensemble
and stand before us in her robe
directing hops and juts.

Clap! Clap! her hands rhythmed out
memory-moves of professional chorus-line tap
and changes of steps and time.
Remember when I was line captain?
her face seemed to ask us
who were not born then, but saw

trunk costumes and glossy shots of
black and white tap shoes, checkered,
flouncy, short short skirts and halters
tied in back.

Straw broom a cane
over my head, on my knee, I'd follow her lead
to twist right, left, right, left,
make sure my sisters were with me.
Together inside our nighties, naked,
safe moves inside the flannel, hopping,
jutting, kicking, twisting
arms around each other,
working toward the big finish.



Mops, rags, dustpans, pigtails
half undone, laughing, counting
on our knees, rising one by one.

We came together on those mornings,
cleaned the whole house like a crew
from Busby Berkley movies moving
to the sound of bare skin under flannel
over mother's voice, around dirty corners,
through coffee table rings to the
big, big finish.

That night I'd sit with my date
in my clothes, on the bench, watching
football, feeling the pressure
of his movement, his leg against mine,
his jazzy improv trying to take me
into his syncopation when I needed
time to grasp my own rhythm

and I'd be
moving, moving, secretly propelling my skeleton
through space, my legs kicking like silent ghosts,
my hips twisting, my knees jutting
like they were still cutting the rug.

And when he'd
put his arm around me, I'd feel
my sisters gathering their arms behind my back,
their breath lacing us in unison,
into the safe, circled line
of our big, big finish.



TO MICHAEL WHO LEFT: SPINNING STRENGTH FROM MEMORIES OF A SWEDISH GRAMPA

Thank you for the apple
the melon slice
the coffee you left
near the bed.

I wanted to rise
with you
to the stream
to the fish

to arc a line
to intersect
with yours.

but the cool April
sheets brought
rare clarity -

images etched like
the perimeter of pebbles
in crystal water:

I saw the wood horse
grampa carved
still on the rope
where I used to swing

and the cottage cheese
carton he and I
ate from with two spoons

empty on the white
porcelain table with
red faded paint.

I smelled the orange
blossom scent
he gave me

on my fifth birthday
wrapped in tissue
the dime store

gave him after
he'd walked
the three miles
in his straw hat.

I saw the wild
tall daisies
dressing the iron

arches of Maplehill Cemetery
you have to walk
under to get

to his grave
at the tree
where no other

Swede has claimed
the untouched plot
adjoining.



and when I felt

you leave

I knew by then

I had a space

of strength to tie

my self to my self

an arcing line to intersect

my own. And I

was fine

left alone in the spinning.



TIGHTROPE WALKERS

They'd set up their ironing boards
in the front room, my mother Mary
and her neighbor Kay,
to keep from going crazy. They said
they'd end up in the booby-hatch otherwise,
ironing alone on a day in July,
blouses, shorts, sundresses for nine plus
bowling shirts.

Pssssshhhhhh.....the iron hit that cotton
sprinkled wet from a pop bottle,
steam rising onto their faces like veils.

"Go!" they'd coach the other,
keep moving, gliding, pressing on
a line between two points. "In time
we'll empty, empty the baskets."

Get your own lunch, they'd say, we're going straight
to the booby-hatch if we don't finish this

- then laugh -

or straight to the booby-hatch if we do. They'd race,
giddy by three, having started at nine, dinner to fix
by six, lipstick and dresses on before.

Let's stop and run away with the circus,
mother said once, then remembered she'd already done that,
giving it up for love and the ironing board
squeaking under a hot load,
those shirts hanging like an absent man.

I'd lie on the floor sometimes, and stare
up at the bottoms of the two boards, watch them
shift and groan with the weight of those two
pushing their heavy irons back and forth
on invisible wire, sliding down and back,
hot hitting the water: pssssssshhhhhh.



And I could see the circus on the bottoms
of the boards and could see mother and Kay
like tightrope walkers on fine, fine line,
balancing with umbrellas in one hand
and their irons in the other, waiting
for their husbands to call them home.

TO MY MOTHER: WINTER CIRCUS

Here, in Florida, you live
in a sun-soaked house like
the others

with a pool to soak your
arthritis, and a cocker spaniel
your second husband walks.

You are exactly like
your fellow dancers
at the Elk's - grey
hair curled, pink lipstick
over Punta Gorda skin -

except for the homing
device deep in your chest
that lets you know how close
you are to opening

day at the winter circus.
When I visit, you
take me there and sit
next to me like I used to
sit next to you,

your eyes bright as spotlights
sweeping the tent, smiling
harder than children, grabbing
my sleeve so I won't miss the

clown spilling water. You have
only these hours, these years left
as spectator, transforming
your body back to performer

and you do, feeling each bump on
your bare-backed horse, each sway
of ballet aerial rope,
every red sequin and feathery
bow, center ring lips
kissing crowds.

I see you clap your hands and remember
how you used to tell me there was no
hot water traveling with the circus

only cold, crabby elephants and
slivered sleep on the train. The horns
screech brass ghosts into my ear, but
you roar at a seal barking notes.

I could peel you from this
no easier than I could remove
from myself the rustly taffeta
skirts, long satin ribbons, little
silver shoes I would take from

your trunk in the attic, no easier
than I could shake from my limbs
the monkey-bar spins you taught me
to do, the stage-smile I learned
to go on with.

We take our bodies layered in our
other bodies out of the tent, tie
balloons to the car, let our cells
light the way back
to your retired subdivision,
let them shine like spotlights on the
houses all exactly like yours.

TO MY FATHER: SPRING FIRE

Exposed to the March wind
my hands grasp the rake's lined
handle, show tangles of my own
creases so recently hidden
under winter gloves, pressed
together under heavy blankets
beside my husband.

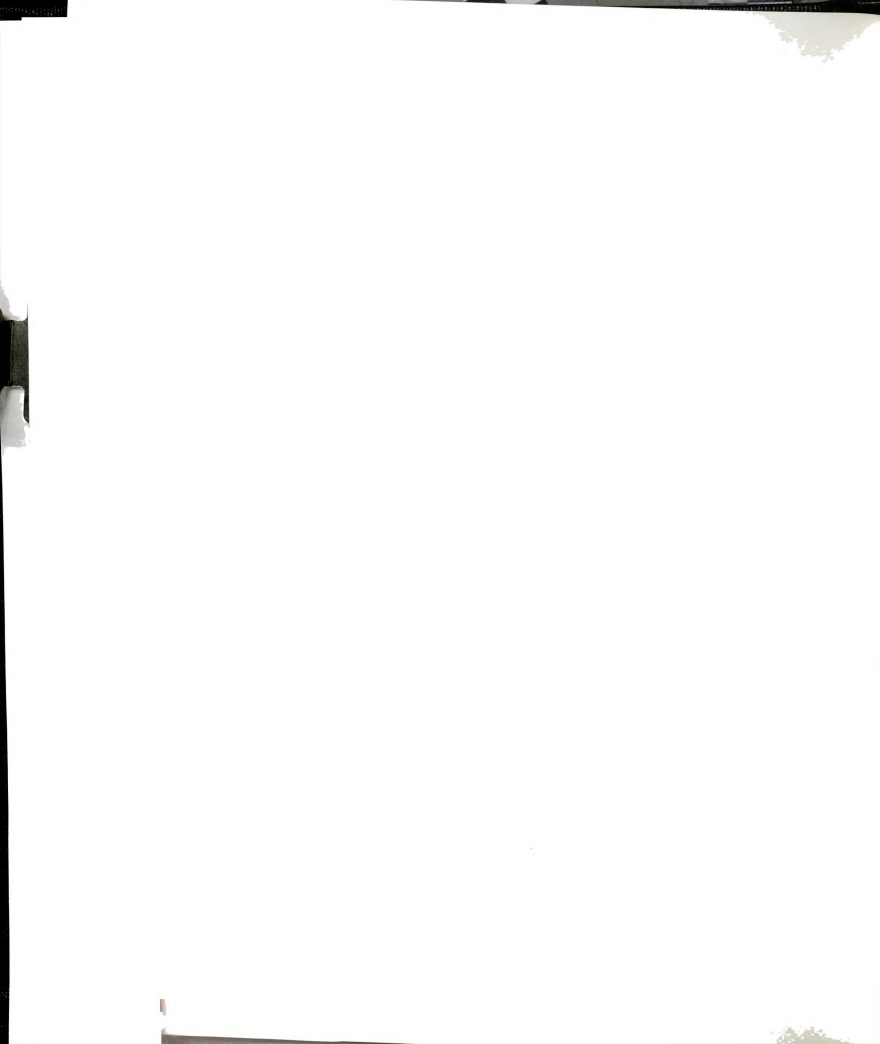
Then, I dreamed the winter
fire held spring imaginings
under a mantle streaked black
from old

wood found in fields
and burned in that place
I kept thoughts
to fulfill in the green
length of summer:

cashing in my silver
dollars to buy a horse
I'd ride out west,
galloping alone
under my hat
over yellow desert
scattering pomegranate seeds
to the sand.

Now, I build a fire in the field
with wood still damp from snow,
pull dead growth
snapped twigs,
bits of leaves,
through brown grass
into these tended flames.

I watch smoke rise,
smell fresh earth
stronger somehow
than autumn's burning
heaps of leaves
gone dry



and see my father's hands
pulling his rake
over this same fire,

see him standing near me in this
field, the smoke filling
his face, blanketing his arms
so I can't see
if he is smiling

or touching the silver
dollar in his pocket.



MOTHER AND FATHER WERE TO ME LIKE SWANS

swimming in their shapes
as single sculpture.

Under the softness of Sunday sheets
their curves arcing
in white lines drawing us in,
they shared pictures.

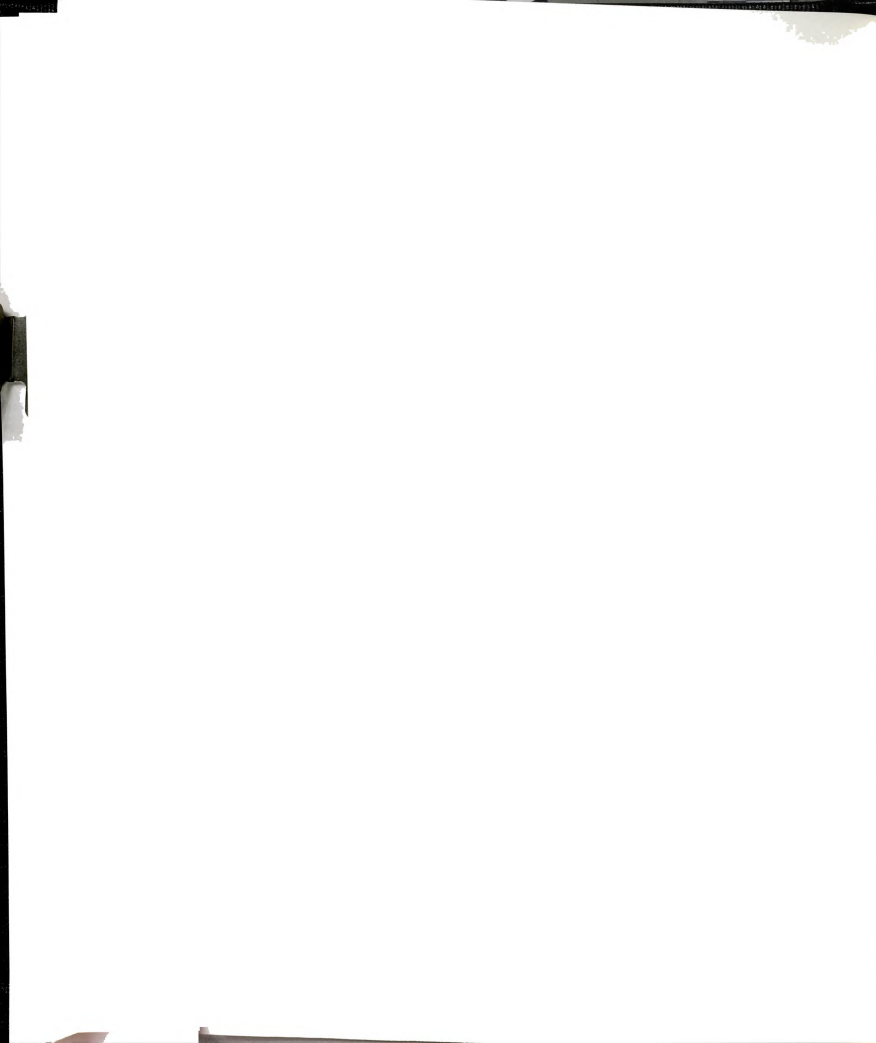
The night before they'd dressed up,
gone dancing, drunk scotch
and champagne, brought us matches
that said "Vanelli's"
if you tilted the silver script
in the light.

Mother's lime green & yellow chiffon
with flowered sash, satin shoes
and bag dyed to match
scattered themselves over her chair,
pearl earrings dangled
on the dresser, lingered in the scent
of last night's hairspray & perfume.

Father's pants hung down
from the dresser drawer
beneath her rings and pearls,
his starched shirt-
arms thrown over her slip
as though they were still dancing.

His Monday suits stood
in the closet like men
already at the office,
and her dungarees hung,
waiting to scrub

while this morning
mother and father wore only feathers
from last night's flight,
their bodies twined, gliding
like swans over every ripple.



THE TASTE OF PERSIMMON

The Sublime

That period before a dance turns
to romance, a kiss turns to skin.

A time before the heart has had to fill
its own cracks with plaster of paris,
dry as the rose petals
left crushed on your lips

when you kissed that first boy
dancing backward in the gym.

While he pumped your arm you thought
of eating steamy bowls of vegetable soup
in the cabin's kitchen with dad
after fishing his secret spot.

You remember making slippery words
from letters floating on orange broth -
you see "sun" and "moon" hanging on
the surface, see your dad watching
the stars out the cabin window,
feel the old beams wrapped around
your shoulder

this boy holds now. And you kiss him
again though you don't know yet
no alphabet follows you so you can read
what to do when you're parked in a Chevy
at his secret spot staring out steamy
windows at dark water while he tries
to catch your breath.

But that's long after
this dance will end, so you let him take
you backward again, let him pump
your arm while you pretend the floor
is the cabin's lake
and you are happy swimming barely
in the sublime.

TRAINING GROUND

Why did you tell me, mother,
to be nice to Billy Kostich?
You were a devil of a Christian
and I went to a hell
for girls trained to
be polite to all boys

including Billy Kostich
who took his pants down
in my back yard
while you washed your hands
to make him a peanut butter
sandwich.

"Let David sing to you
over the phone" you said
I should cheer him to health
so he'd come back out
and play statue
freezing me into some shape.

Why did you tell me
I had to take the
dirty soda cracker
from Tommy's filthy hand
just because he offered?

I ate that bread
you said would make
people see how good I was

and let those boys feed
me parts I
didn't know were myself

choking from my own
legs and toes they stuck down
my throat,

deaf from my own
fingers and elbows they jammed into
my ears,

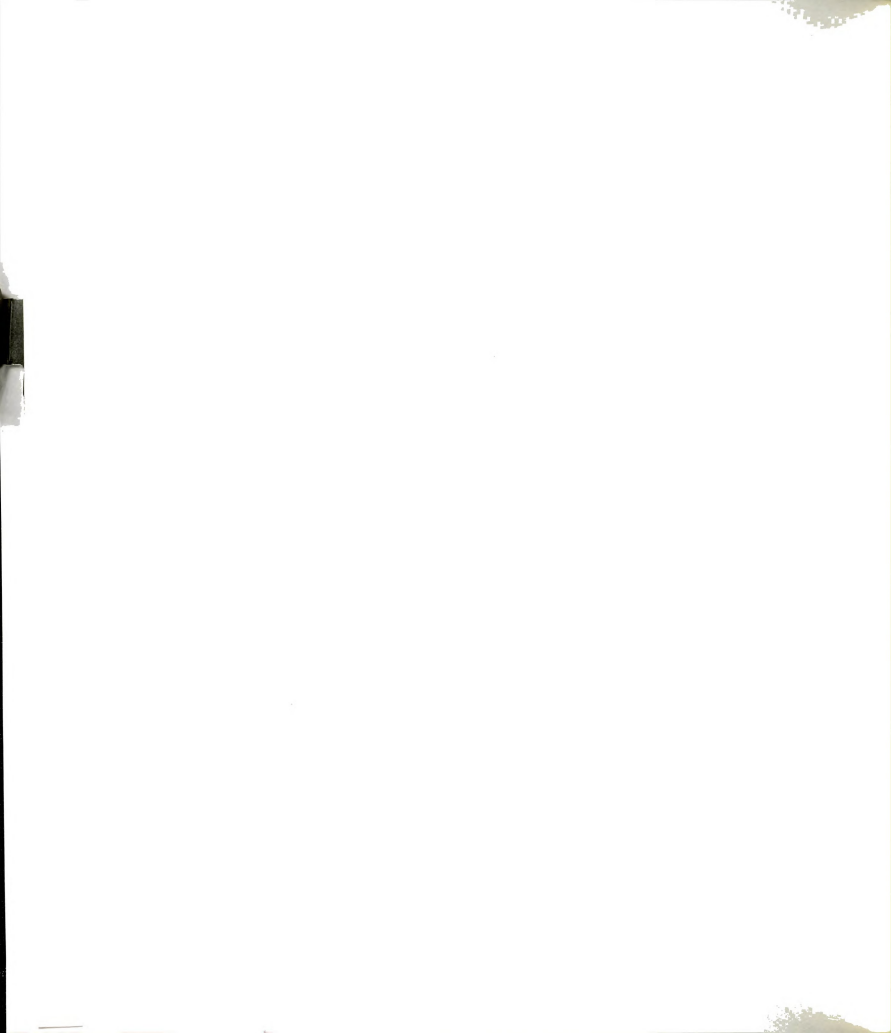
blind from my own
nails they pounded into
my eyes.



Did you not think, mother
how I'd walk
bound by my own
feet
into mobius strips
of hospital sheets
softly cutting

the child out of
my polite belly
while you stood
waiting to hold

the blushing red girl
swathed in your own
mother's shroud?



THE TASTE OF PERSIMMON

These California birds are high
eating tree-berries.

Loony from intoxication, they
swoop and bank in chaos
change direction mid-air, one wing
pulling against the other.

You stand at my elbow
in fulmination
of Santa Clara fruit, offer
me persimmon, grape,
& pear.

I look up to tracings beyond
the trees, see last night's
stars in this morning's sun,
see figures of you and me
with drinks on the balcony
watching the deer come out
for supper on the grass below
while little lights from the valley
switch on.

Weaving the picture from my eyes,
a bird criss-crosses to more
fruit, dives straight into lush
berries it doesn't really know
hold spells, careens off,
barely missing another in flight.

I follow its path with one hand,
feel my arm float from my body
as I reach down with the other to take
a persimmon, not really knowing its taste.



NÉGRO

Más? the young waiter asks,
Sí, I say, holding the glass
to his eyes, feeling a tickle
of wet ride between my breasts.

In the bright sun he pours out
of strong hands,
white linen around black glass,
dark brows over moist lips.

Letting my hat fall
to my neck, the red ribbon
catch my throat,
I sip
remembering words I'd heard:

traveling alone
forces you to trust
strangers & lose sight
of your familiar self and friends
giving only things essential -
food, sleep, air...

I see those words
tilt along the side
of the bottle,
watch the clear sparkle crash
to the bottom of the flute,
hear kisses of liquid
spray my skin.

The fabric of my skirt falls
between my thighs
and I see the full red
cape swirling from a matador's hand
in the wet-washed poster dangling
from a fence in the wind, a bull rippling
in billows and snorts.

I lift the stem's glass, see an arena
in my reflection pulsing in the air,
the sun, the sky take off
my hat and lay it next to my feet, bare
in the sway of Spanish grass,
balance in the effervescence of my blood,
feeling only my breath
essential.

SUSTAINED STACCATO

A Poem Found in the Music Room
of an Oceanside Hotel

I sat with tea & cake, trying to hear
the girl play the piano
but he kept interrupting, her hands
halting & moving like fluttering birds.

"You have to understand
that I broke off an engagement
two weeks ago. And she's here.
At this resort. For the summer.
Like we are."

"I see."

"So, I'm in mourning."

"Oh."

"And I want to keep busy.
To keep from getting depressed."

"Um hum."

Why doesn't she play
while he notes his dying,
I think. I want to sip
to Bach.

"So, I mean, I like you
and I had a good time last night,
and I'd like us to b -"

"I understand - to have a good time...
some more."

Ah... she begins again.

"Yes. That is, I don't want you
to worry about me.
And I don't want that I
should worry about you.
I mean, on dance nights
I should dance with
a zillion people. So
should you."

"Other men, you mean."

"Yes. Other. Men."

"I see."

"But, I do really like you."

"I do really like you, too."

"Well, I just don't want you
to think you're involved...
with a loon."

"Oh, no

I just want you
to know that it's been a long time
since I've been in relationship."

"Oh."

"And I got so involved ...

I'm just now enjoying
having time to do things
for myself."

"I see."

"Yes, I mean like
practicing piano."

"Un huh. How long
has it been?"

"Three years."

"Oh. This is my first mourning.
You've been practicing piano
for three years?"

"Well, yes."

"Is that how long it takes?
To finish mourning?"

"I don't know. I mean,
I don't know when it ended -

She stops again on the word
"ended" as if it's a lyric
keyed to her body's muscles.

Beethoven might have just
run over it."

"Suffocated it, you mean?"

"Well, drowned it maybe."



"How do you know it's over? Maybe
the music just suppresses it."

"I don't know really."

"Well, maybe you should stop practicing.

And see what happens."

Here I slam my tea cup down,
ready to go to her bench, to
place her hands on the shiny
keys, offer her gloves to protect
the knuckles he squeezes.

Then she begins again,
the music flowing and free.

"Maybe you should go away
and come back in three years.
I mean, I really like you
but I think you need some
piano lessons."

I eat my cake and pour
another pot of tea.



INEVITABLY

If he told you the first night
he had a bad track record,
that he often fell in love
and often fell out,

and you asked your therapist
if you ought to
and she said okay, but when he leaves
as he inevitably will,

remember it won't have anything
to do with you, and now after
these years of intimacy he's done
it and it's so long afterward

that your therapist has moved
to Florida and you have a new
degree but no apartment, then
inevitably it is spring.

The earth
tilts oddly toward the sun, enhancing
my imbalance and I think maybe his
house will slip off, his books free-
falling into space, the pages lost
to him. But I know the inevitability
of crocuses, budding branches,

the long stretch into summer
on flat land. The green filling of
the sky seems to press its back
against last autumn's red where
we held the hope of ourselves there

under a restless tree, winter not
appearing until now. In this spring
the wind holds a whiteness cool as snow
the pussywillow branches out to catch.

I dream in hibernation you lie
curled with me, our eyelashes
weaving a fragile meshing.

As the earth begins to tilt,
You nuzzle your face in my neck,
place your hand on my thigh,
whisper the inevitability of spring
when I'd just begun to trust
the winter's darkness.

PEELING APPLES FOR ARTHUR

Peeling apples this autumn
I feel my skin tight as the fruit's,
that red glow in harvest light
holding in my amber flow for you

I make this pie like a soft woman
in your kitchen while you are in your books
preparing. You will teach me my life
can open to fresh new orchards, now I am alive
in your breathing after dead years

and passionate nights of misfire with
men who, unlike you, could never
understand my need to keep
my skin one, long, continuous peel.



KEEPING US ALIVE

KEEPING DEATH FROM YOU, MOTHER

That summer
the sun beat my yellow hair
and burned rusted bits of tin
to my bare feet
while I stood high on the oil barrel
humming in my feedsack halter
skirting the possibilities
you would call me in
to do the dishes.

June was hot, the corn planted,
the drum hollow.

I remembered the puppies
in the shed
five weeks now
and only the runt
dead
so I dropped the lead
pipe deep back into its hole
for safe measure
and jumped the four feet
to the grass.



I took the rust one
from his mother
who trusted me
like mine
and saw his eyes
still shut.

It was mine!
in its blindness
I made him see
me dance in black
rows of sun
soaked seeds.

I made him listen
to me sing
while I swirled
him
high over my head.

I made him whimper
to my ear
and be still
while
I kissed his nose.

I made him crawl
in the grass alone
beneath the oil drum
while I mounted it
and reigned over all
life below,
my braids a crown
to the lead pipe sceptre
I swung

then dropped
in the speed of my heartbeat
onto its head.

I saw nothing
when my sisters saw
his head
caved
and lowered
rust into the dirt hole.
I felt nothing
break
in my throat
when I felt my sisters
cry in a circle
of silence.

I smelled nothing
except your warm vanilla
cake when you wondered
how it happened.

This way I would keep us
alive.

PHONE BOOTH

I sit in the phone booth with my dimes
and the list of names mother told me
to call. I would say "Hello, Mrs. Martin?
my dad just died here at Henry Ford Hospital
in Detroit where his veins broke, shredded
to pieces by his own coursing blood.
Or maybe I'd only say "Dad just died."

I sit in the phone booth with my dimes
gleaming in the single bulb's light
and think of the dimes he'd pushed
out of his Saturday trousers into my palm
as reward for some unconnected act like
cleaning the toilet.

I pick up the phone, push a dime through
and during the clinks think I'll say: "Hello,
Mrs. Martin? My dad is dead" then hang up
before she can ask me why.

I stack the dimes high like Dad
used to when we played poker
and he taught me to risk,
not to fold too soon.

The box before me is solid and black
and I think maybe it will ring
if I sit tight. It will be Mom telling me
he's still alive
or at least to come home
for dinner.

But I wait and it doesn't ring
so I hold the cradle myself
then dial. I listen to one long
alarm, then another, but no one
rescues me from this connection,
this closet.



No one cares that I have this silver
slicing into my hand,
cutting into my heart.

When she picks up the phone,
the sudden silence
jars the coins to the floor.

"Hello, Mrs. Martin?" I begin,
"My father's dead" and I
picture a spray of silver
coins arcing from his blood,
spilling on his casket.



AMBULANCE

I am in the ambulance every night
pounding on my husband's heart
and each morning the sun makes
a shadow-cross on the bed
from an old bottle of perfume
on my chest.

In the A&P I see him browsing
the damaged-items bin: torn gift
wrap and candy resurrected from
Christmas. But up close it is
another man who wears the same hat
laughing with his wife.

In the car I carry myself,
tattered like the Sweetheart
Soap I saw the man buy for a
dime, through the parade of
noon-time traffic while
my heart races to return

through the rear-view mirror
like Jackie Kennedy crawling
in her perfume on the back
of the limo to get Jack's skull.

ALZHEIMER'S

Like a rabid monk gnawing
bits of dusty books
she drooled feverish pantings,
heaved in trappings from her dark
rooms to lock herself in
with an old man down
the smelly hall. They'd find her
in lacey underpants touching her bare
nipple.

I chased her once down slippery halls,
stood at silent doors I
didn't want to pass through. Then
found her simply feeling the fabric
of a stranger's clothes, trying on Mrs. Angelo
's hats and shoes.

And after that, the time she picked
the pimentos from everyone's olives
while they were still eating lunch
on the sunporch.

Oh, why can't they contain her? Oh,
why can't she stop? I'd ask my vibrant
head. But that was some time ago.

Now she feels only her broadcloth
robe, hangs her earrings up to dry,
waits to be fed
the paste of mashed potatoes.
And I want to find her there
one day in Mrs. Angelo's hat,
pimentos dripping from the brim.



SLIDE

On the white walled living
room paint breathes
under film from 1958,
a projected slide:

pheasants dangle next to quail,
woodcock, feathery browns,
reds drip against the burnt orange
wool of mother's sweater,
guns resting against father,
the dogs weaving still in the light.

This is the autumn of leaves
bright as Yellow Delicious apples
against the henna of my mother's hair.

The hot, humming bulb cuts
a tunnel of filtered dust
through the blackness,
lights one side of my face
and in its swath I see
the thrown colors of the season
turning.

Mother turned 75 today
the same time her mother died,
my father long dead, both when
leaves had just begun to yellow
and apples were not quite ripe.

Dried leaves
are scraping the skin
of my house
as I watch the suspension.

In the picture,
their smiles explode
like the guns, like the trees -
like a frame would hold them
to this one autumn day.



HEALING SISTER

Your nightgown's heaped over bones
the same in your ancient skin
as in your little sister flesh. I kneel
and trace my finger in a circle on your back.

I hum the song we'd duet all night
in those long August hot spells,
mesh in the window screens a holey
gauze for cricket sound as we turned
ten and twelve.

"Draw a circle on your back,"
I whisper as the lace curtains
billow in this summer wind
over your dull hair, withered neck,
stale water near your hand.



In our child's game,
I want to draw something easy
to let you win
so you will know you made me well
bringing me the peach from grampa's tree
when I had measles.

So I mark inside the circle
clearly the tree, then listen
for your breathing.

You manage to turn
your head toward me,
your eyes, raspy as your voice,
say no, you are not inside
your back enough to know.

So I hum the tune, put the peach
on the tree, on your back,
put my ear to your mouth.



Your breath clinks sound
like the chains of our bikes
& I dip my finger in the old water,
put it into your mouth, tell myself
it is a hot August night
and you have fallen asleep playing.

This time when the wind pushes in,
you must be hovering just over
your back, your breath still -
against the skin
against the peach
pressing from my hand.

The air billows the curtain,
lifts you up out of the window
in its breath, away
from my hand
away from the scent of
peach
it leaves
behind.

THE OTHER SIDE OF MY SKIN

TOUCHING GREENWICH GLASS

At the Cafe Venezia
in East Lansing, Mich
I image
what Greenwich Village
windows
steamed to in 1963.

Venezia voices
loft me
through SoHo
to the Village
and I breathe the steam

from a tall glass
of hot dark milk.
A perfect line
cracks the glass,
ages the surface.

I see Bohemian breath
rise from my mouth,
steam over the cup
breathe onto the
window

breath of Bohemians
wrapped black
in lined beat
pulsing against
the neon on the
other side of
my skin, fusing it
to the glass of Greenwich,
1963.

CHANGE

I place this rock, this paperweight
on the solid surface
of an ancient table

over bills for the phone,
lights, water, these walls
that hold my bed.

I will pay them
and secure my small self
to this tiny portion of the earth
for one more month.

I write each check
as if it were a continent
making up my surface,
the envelopes continental shelf
sloping into my own oceans.

For a month I am solid.

Then they come again,
the mail having its own axis.
I put them under my weight,
hope I'll have enough
this time to keep things
unchanged.

How do I always manage
to forget
even the crust
of the solid earth
is in a state
of constant change.



LISTENING TO THE HUM

of the refrigerator sift its motored
song onto the arms of the chair,
the blank TV, this morning's paper,
over my shoulders,
I strain to hear

the mourning
dove tucked under the house
since winter
tucked precisely under the kitchen
floor beneath the refrigerator.

The hum whispers against my ears
until I let it in to share
the inside of my head
where it meets the other hum,
and I think I hear my children
laughing.

But there are no children here.

I am alone in un-argued-in rooms

safe in my un-

married-to-anyone, un-

connected-to-anyone

apartment. I have

no gerbil houses here, no peanut butter

spoons in the sink, no words I don't

want to say screaming from my mouth.

I turn a page and the wind off the print

billows my face and I think I feel

the hum behind my eyes blending into

the other hum, the one from the refrigerator

we had when the kids were little

when I always wished for silence

enough to hear a refrigerator

hum.



I shake my head to sift apart
the sounds like falling snow
but hear only a silence
so white I can see it
oozing from my ears
filling up my skin
swaddling me in absence.

And the two hums vibrate together
slicing my head in half
giving me two stories:

one

about how I wished for this

the other

how I got it.



THE CHILD FROM PERU

I am there in the crowd at the airport
when you come through the gate with the child
and see the signs we have made
to welcome you from months in Peru
where you got this child, somebody else's
child of unseen father and gold-skinned mother

who looked at your snapshots
of the nursery, the park, the school,
handed him to you--
an exchange for space he'd just filled,
poverty pushing him out
of a place only big enough for his brother.

At the house your Christmas tree's still
waiting, though it's a month beyond, and
I wonder if it stands for the disrupted
schedule to come. We drink wine and eat
pizza, chips, and brownies, pass the boy
among us, make a community show
of support for your years of hoping,
resignation, joy.

The unfertile private seed has grown
into a public display of balloons, flowers,
ribbons, this small child staring at us
in American overalls with Peruvian black
for eyes and hair, letting a just-acquired
neighbor kiss his cheek.

You hand me the child
at your kitchen table and I remember
how we sat with tea here last
summer, the house so quiet we heard
each sip, each tickle of a leaf at the pane
each thought that this would not be born.

I leave you in upheavals
so fertile and hot, the house seems
to ask me to stay, to not leak any
helium out the open door.

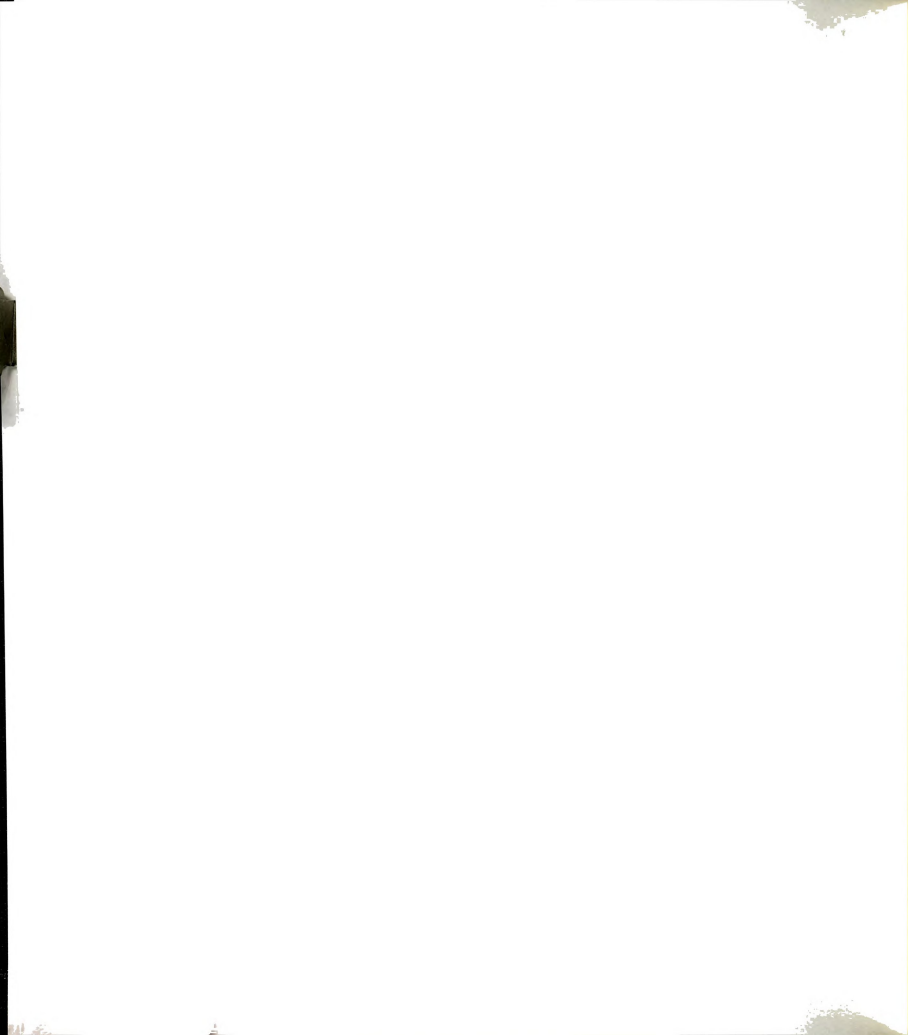
I look back at your face in the window,
see you holding the boy,
still feel the weight of him
in the space of my arms,
understand the meaning of exchange.

PEBBLES

Does it matter to the naked
foot wading in the stream
which is the oldest pebble?

They nestle close
do their work
grace the sand-bed
in tight skins

offer flesh smooth
curves etched from
time stretched on
existence of water.



SUN TEA

Now sun tea sparkles on the sill
in spring's fresh paint of white
where darkness of the winter night
brewed iced-wind steeply shrill.

Then hot Darjeeling took the chill
from bones blown cold and tight.
Now sun tea sparkles on the sill
fresh paint in strokes wet, white.

When black air hung its wreath to kill
at window's yellow light
spring shrugged it loose, breathed clear glass bright,
wiped clean the hot tea spill
Now sun tea sparkles on the sill.



MORNING GLORIES

Twining the wooden trellis,
stretching like mouths of birds,
morning glories unfurl
purple petal
into the pull of early sun.

Lined in thinnest white
they survive their own tangle of green nest
yet are unable to fly nearer the sun
before the first frost.

Cordate* leaves connect
flowering funnels
the closing and opening,
closing and opening
my heartbeat at night.

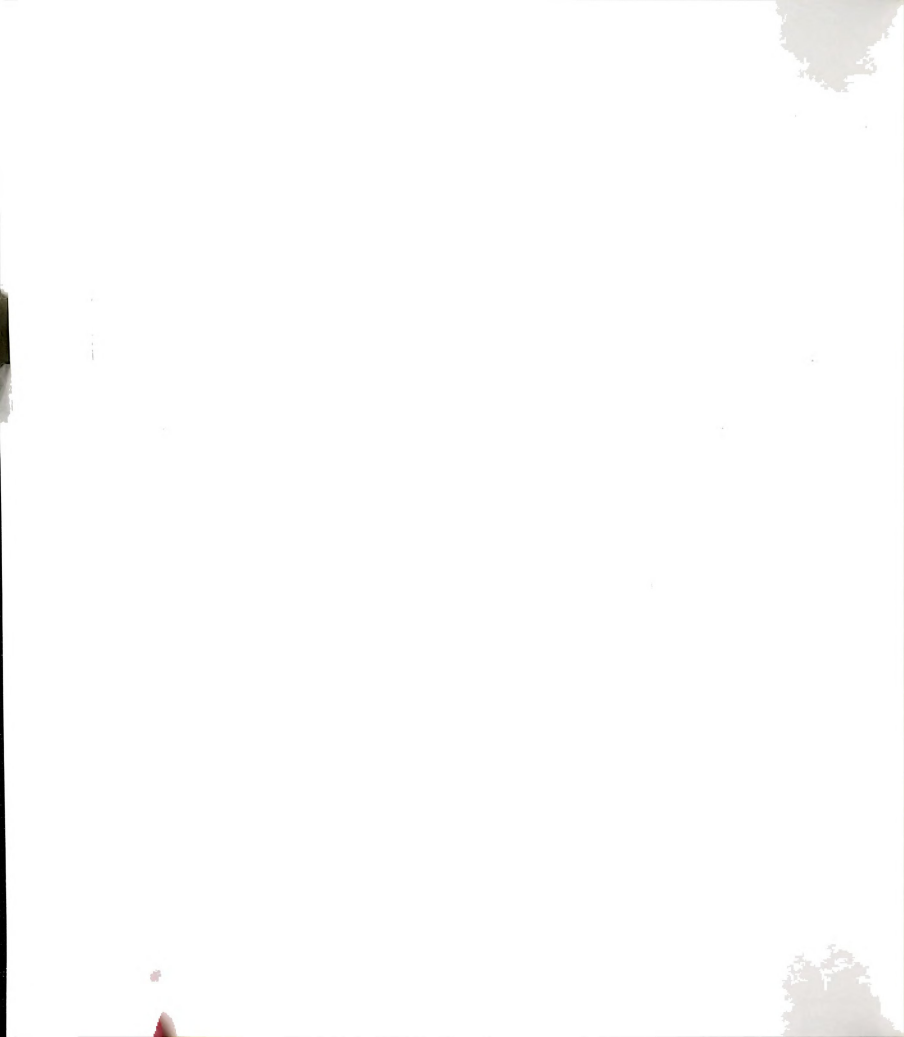
* Heartshaped

DANCING ON A LINE IN TIME

Go! Go! move your body through space and time,
propel your skeleton into this room, go, go! Push
your muscles to follow your mind, to climb the air,
to define that shape. Go fast enough to project a string
of images on a continuum, no breaks here, a painter's
hand breathing on white matter, now blue, now red, now
yellow now, now, now! Smear your skin on silence
making the sound you want, riding your own breath up, up
to create a rush of down, collapsing into gravity, feeling
the floor, hitting the heights of low in a curl of flesh
on wood. Go! Go, beyond the rhythms of a drum, make the space
pulse in your body-beat, blowing out and sucking in, running,
tossing, crashing molecules that reconstitute behind you. Go!
into your material, throw it onto your bones, move it like
a bulk of innuendo, brush their eyes with silk, wool, corduroy,
the lace of your pulse-weaving. Sustain! Sustain that movement
at the top, waver forever an instant before punching out
staccato jabs with elbows, knees, your head circling out then,
carving a path your hips will follow, always on the line in
time, making motion so you can make movement, a fountain spewing
neon verbs, spraying syncopation and whole notes, shaping sculpture
from skin. Go! Go! Across the space now! Stagger your levels
for interest, switch from roll to leap, from toe to waist, from
hair to foot, all the time moving, moving from point to point,

then centering mid-floor. Now carve volumes of air, taking rounds of it into your arms, under your leg, over your head, throwing it over your shoulder, catching it as it swings. This volume knows gravity, keep it going, going, no splatters on the ground, keep it bouncing through time, in space, on the line with you. Now throw it away, your time is almost up, get into stretching on the diagonal, graining into the corner, becoming one with arrows. Go, Go! pursue a luscious tautness, proving you can rearrange tendons to pull muscle on filament straight between two points, a tightrope walker on fine, fine line. Now drop it, fall into the net of slow motion, pretending if you decelerate, time will slow. Show control, that your body knows "seeing" and "sensing," can lift itself to this awareness all the while time swirls around it, pushes you to move forward, tickles your heartbeat with feathers. Duration is the study, provocative in its need for interruption, so continue, continue. Now move on to the end in improv, taking bits of heavy, bits of light, streaming an array of what you haven't done yet with what you did before, but go, Go! into the time that is the line, that is the threshold of your motion, until you stop. Now Stop. Hold onto your muscles, your bones, your skin, your heart that beats too fast. Feel the arms, the legs, that were the shapes, the patterns in this space. Feel the feet that carried you from there to here. Now let them take you out, out of this room, out of this air, go, go, leave this time, leave this line, your images will linger.





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