This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

INTOXICATION

presented by

Dianne Rebecca Cafagna

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in ENGLISH

Major professor

Date 2/16/90

INTOXICATION

By

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A THESIS

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

MASTER OF ART

Department of English

1990

ABSTRACT

INTOXICATION

By

Dianne Rebecca Cafagna

These thirty-two poems represent the culmination of my master thesis project with Poet-in-Residence Diane Wakoski. Organized in chronological order, these poems construct a narrative mythology that may be viewed in the Dionysian tradition of American poets Walt Whitman, and most recently, Charles Bukowski.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many of these poems originally appeared or are forthcoming in the following magazines: The MacGuffin, Abraxas, 5 A.M., Brix, The River Rat Review, and The Burning World.

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ONE

One More Beer

So many nights were spent
crouching in the back
of a '57 Chrysler
in the parking lot of Mac's Bar
where my mother and father drank beer
and forgot about me.

Ten years old and told by my mother
to keep my head down,
watch for police,
not wanting to be confused
for an abandoned child.

Every time I saw light beam across
the parking lot or heard the slamming of doors
I wedged myself deeper into the floorboard--
the hump in the floor
making an awkward bed.

Day went into night
and still no dinner, except
the potato chips and coke
Mama brought out.
Her natty fur coat
never enough to keep me warm.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

Mama--
there she stood
hovering over me
beer breath, lipstick on teeth,
seamed stockings, black bar dress,
false teeth clicking and always
that cigarette dangling
swinging her purse side to side
like a pendulum.

At last call
her drunken smile waking me up
scaring the hell out of me
warning me not to complain
I had school at 8 a.m.

The Gift

My mother bought me dolls that hung
from a clothes line
in the grocery store
up above the Wonder bread and Ovaltine.
I wanted the one in the purple taffeta dress,
a magical swirl of plaid pinwheel
with the ruffled hem
pinned to the back of her auburn hair.

In the check-out lane,
on the conveyor belt,
my doll shifted in her cellophane-sealed box
with the Tide, the Cheerios,
the Robin Hood flour.

Zipping around corners
  in a '52 Plymouth my mother
banged me hard against the armrest
while I clutched the box
to my lap,
my legs glued on the vinyl seat,
admiring my miniature doll
until the house, brown,
no grass, no trees, came up close
in my window.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

My mother's fingers dug into
my arms, jerking, almost
dragging me to the gravel
as I balanced the box above my hair.

And in the kitchen
I refused to walk into
the living room
to meet another little girl
in a wheelchair,
her skin white and bloated
and smelling of socks.

I would see how she hated me,
her eyes pitted like black olives.
My mother would shove me toward her,
shove me until,
reluctantly, I'd give up
my doll in a box
to this dystrophic girl
with the tired muscles,
thrusting my doll,
encased in her silent, pretty world
into those useless and claw-like
hands.

After The Throat Cancer

My grandfather quit his job
as a janitor
in a children's mental hospital
in Columbus, Ohio.

At the train station
when I reached for him,
his high cheekbones folded skin
around his watery blue eyes
and he squeezed marbles --
sparkling cat-eyes
into my tiny hands.

And I hid them
in the safest spot
under the arch of my foot
so when I walked
my mother thought
I had polio.

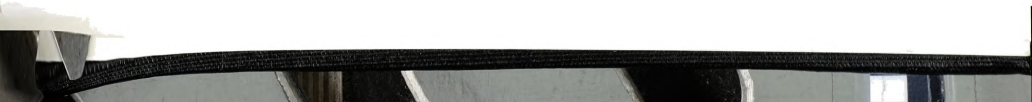
The last picture taken with him
was in 1952
in our back yard.
It was summer and he hoisted
me up on the hood
of my father's '48 Chrysler.

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

I could feel the sun on my shoulders
in that blue dress
and metal burning the backs
of my legs.

My grandfather --
half Cherokee,
boney fingers,
plopped the red cowboy hat
on my head
and we grimaced together
as my mother snapped
the Brownie.



Beans

Through long afternoons
clouds sprinkled rain
while Mama sat smoking
by the kitchen window.
When it stopped she flicked
another bottle open,
her murmur slow
and steady.

But I could not look
with her through those
eyelet curtains, out there
on the back yard,
at those green beans
I hated,
tiny peppers buried half
in crooked little
rows.

Those first seeds
Mama bought
taught me what it was
to garden. The afternoon
she got drunk while I stooped
in dirt, slapped my forehead
and my arms until

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

my lumps rose up
in bruises,
until with a palm of mud
I buried each
in furrows.

Every morning kneeling
there, I dipped
my head, my sweating chest
below the shower,
her watering can,
and resolved myself to like
her beans,
her funny peppers,
tomato plants seething with worms
but I just
couldn't.

Not even on cooler nights
though we huddled
cozy together against the porch,
bowls upon our laps.
Their thin green heads and tails
snapping sticky
through my fingers.

Easter Dress

Every Easter when I complained
how the other girls
in the neighborhood got
     new dresses,
     white bonnets,
     and patent leather shoes,
my mother blew smoke out her nostrils
like a horse
and popped the top off
her quart of Drewrys.

Yet at the rummage sale
she bought me
     a velvet dress
     though two sizes too big -- waist hanging down,
     hemline below my knees.
And I found
     the perfect satin ribbon
     to tie around my waist
     and scrubbed my sneakers
with a toothbrush and set them
in the oven to dry.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

In church, walking proudly ahead of her
over the maroon carpet, I noticed
the other girls
    fidgeting with their lace-hemmed dresses,
    like ballerinas lifting
    the toes of their shiny round Mary Janes.
Propped in odd postures
they would laugh at
    the worn artificial flowers pinned in my hair,
    the blue dress with its frocked hem,
    the gym socks bunched around my ankles,
    the stained cotton poking through
    the toes of my sneakers.

I decided then
I hated these girls.
    Their hair tethered back
    in meticulously tight curls,
    amethyst rings twinkling on their fingers,
    unsnapping their mothers' straw purses
    and stuffing Wrigleys Juicy Fruit
    into their puffy cheeks.

The Gray Coat

That Saturday Mama returned
early from the rummage sales,
carrying a double-breasted coat
of gray worsted wool.
Its waist nipped and skirt
flared out in checks of red
and gray plaid trimming
collar and cuffs.

In a pocket I found a miniature
gray tam, the elastic band
tucked under my chin.
I couldn't believe it, owned
once by some rich girl
my Mama said, GRAND
RAPIDS scripted over
the satin lining.

Because the coat hung long,
below my knees, I resolved
to grow very slowly.
But within a year the sleeves
were short, the tam strap frayed.
Over our kitchen table
Mama spread its wings for
the woman across our
back yard fence.

(cont. next page)

(new stanza)

Between bannister bars
I poked my ears and heard her tell
the story of my coat but
the woman only nodded, tucked
it beneath an arm,
walked back outdoors.

That January I couldn't bear
how that woman's daughter rolled
its checks in dirt
below their clothes line pinned
with dirty rags except for one --
tulips red and windmills Dutch
stitched through its flapping
printed cloth.

Intoxication

Sunday afternoons I woke
to the pop of a Goebels cap,
country music squalling on the radio,
that heavy scent of turnip greens
boiling on the four-burner.
My mother and father in the kitchen
quaffing scotch and beer,
steam rising behind them,
brown water lines running down
yellow walls.

Folding my legs to a chair,
coffee rich and sweet and
too hot on my tongue--
I modeled the Dutch Masters paper ring
my father placed on my finger.
The ritual of smoking his passion,
the peeling of cellophane.
As if hypnotized, my mother
raising cigarettes to her lips,
rolling smoke back out her nostrils
like Bette Davis.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

And then padding barefoot
to the front door,
I would stoop against the draft,
fish up the icy roll of newspaper,
crack it open. The intoxication
of fresh newsprint,
columns ordered and typed fine,
stories in bulk, black headlines
reading Detroit Free Press.

Columbus

Every Thanksgiving we escaped
our peeling wallpaper, dingy rooms
and cupboards, swerved I-69
in Daddy's Plymouth
to feast with my grandparents
in Columbus, Ohio.

Columbus. The name so magical
I didn't mind waking
to a cough, nostrils burning
with the stench of cigarettes
and beer. My six years jumped
and kneeling the suitcase
closed as Mama snapped
the silver buttons.

Huddled all day in the back
seat, cheek pressed against vinyl,
against the whine of our
spaniel, Queenie until
I woke in Daddy's arms,
lifted high over winding steps
to a bed strange and clean,
cool sheets ironed white,
chenille bedspread
at my feet.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

In that four-poster
I'd imagine myself as
Martha Washington, study
the portraits of Victorian ladies
framed on walls like Spanish
monarchs in gold brocade,
starched doilies
ornamenting floral lamps,
like snowy icing.

That night my skin prickled
just to inhale that room,
burrow my face in those sheets,
those pillowcases like
the sweetest apple.
And dream of the next morning's
breakfast, scent of sausage
and gravy, yolk dripping
yellow down my chin,
my own chocolate cake
rising in the oven.

Mama's Beer

It was beautiful
the way Mama drank beer
in the light by the window,
her hair the color of champagne.

Every morning in pearls
and a wool suit after my father died.
Her mouth pinched
in a perfect bow.

How I loved the sound
of pouring beer,
so thick and gold
in a hexagon glass.

The way Mama used to take that first
long drink, pull me into her lap,
into that heavy smell
as we stared out at bare trees.

How I'd watch her sip that beer,
lick the foam,
bubbles snapping
at her upper lip.

Later she'd offer me
my own glass.
But it always tasted better
out of hers.

Jane's Date

I used to feel sorry for Jane Townsend
on nights when her husband
took her out.
She'd stand on her front porch,
too young to look so haggard,
calling in the kids
for one of those hot dog dinners.

At twelve I was the neighborhood
hair-styling professional,
for 35 cents an hour
I stood behind the chair
in her living room, combing her hair
with a fistful of bobby pins
and a can of Aqua Net.

Untouched for years
her mane was a long black tail
draped over a white knit dress,
yellow from being hung up
too long.

And she would look at me
through that pregnancy mask,
a face blotchy and brown,

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

unfaded from the last kid
and ask,
"What am I going to do with this?
If only I could get my hair up like yours."

My blonde cotton-candy hair
was pinned in a French twist
with tiny wisps
that hung down below my ears.
Hers was dark and thick
like an Indian's in my hands.

Ratting, sectioning, and piling,
I twisted in sequin butterflies
until it became a sleek black roll
running up the back
of her neck,

until I had transformed her
from the factory housewife
with baby food stains
on her shorts,
so she could peer
into the gilded mirror
and see Jane Townsend --

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

the eyes now blue with shadow,
lashes heavy with mascara and curled.
Her smile like Audrey Hepburn's smile,
lips painted persimmon
when she was Holly Golightly
in "Breakfast At Tiffany's."

Trumpet Unblown

If she caught me with the boys
after dark,
my mother went crazy.
And seeing the red glow of her cigarette
bobbing down the hill,
I would race to the house
and hide in our clammy basement
behind the furnace.

I could always hear her
out in the yard cutting
rose switches,
the front door slamming shut
as she called my name,
saying she wouldn't hurt me.
It really didn't matter.
I knew by her rhinestone glasses
she'd find me eventually,
so I yelled up,
"Mama, I'm down in the basement."

Yet she'd never come downstairs
right away.
She had to finish the Blatz,
the ancient steps finally clicking
under her patent leather pumps.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

Holding my breath
I stepped out from behind
the furnace.
"You slut! You tramp!" She screamed
when she saw me.
Even at thirteen I knew
she'd been reading, Trumpet Unblown,
passing that paperback around
to all the women in our neighborhood
who wore spoolies and smoked cigarettes.

Then suddenly
she was on top of me,
the rose switches singing
through the close air,
the thorns
digging into my skin
like fishing lures,
those tiny hooks
buried in my arms and back
while I hugged the ceiling support
and held my face in my hands.

When She Was Thirteen

He had told her, "Take off the clothes --
especially the bra." She stood naked against
the bathroom wall and only heard him
walk in and lock the door.
Unbuckling his belt, she listened as he pulled it
through the loops.

She did not see him wind the leather around
his fist but she heard the snap of the leather
before the buckle came across her face, cheek,
and back. And though she was small
she couldn't wedge herself behind the cold,
urine-stained toilet. And she tried.

He chomped down on his cigar and
the belt cut again and again into her flesh
and she wondered is she was bleeding.
Rolling into a ball did not help --
the buckle easily found the back
of her neck.

She cried out, "Please stop. Please stop!"
But the man would not. Then she heard a familiar
voice demanding to be let in. And then the
click of the lock. Her mother stormed through.
"What have you done to your own daughter?"
her mother asked, pretending not to know.
"Get out of here," her mother ordered while
he pulled his belt through the loops.

The Shower

It was just another gym-class shower game
to fourteen-year-old girls.
Each class they ripped the swimming cap
from a different girl
and held her underwater until
her hair was sopping.

But the day they chose the small one
for their victim --
things changed. She resisted
and refused to let them take her cap --
until she felt them removing
her suit.

Pinched by fingernails, bruised and scratched,
she could not see the faces holding her
under. Only the burn of soap
entering her brought back the fight.
The cap and suit she relinquished --
that burn remained.
Later she stood in the shower
trying to wash it all away.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

In the toilet stall, she stared at her body,
at the red marks
and rubbed the towel a bit too hard
into her dripping hair.
By her feet, her swimming cap, abandoned
by the girls.

She felt stronger as she reached for it
but she stopped when she saw
in the base of it, a single perfect lock
of dry blonde hair --
still curled -- exactly as it was ripped
from her head.

TWO

My Father's Hand

I think of my father's hand,
the times he slapped
my cheeks burning,
the Masonic ring casting red light
off his fingers.

At seventeen I was desperate,
separated from my husband,
just wanted an abortion.
I wanted that doorknob in my fist,
not my father's hand dragging me
back across the living room,
folding one leg under my butt
in a bizarre can-can,
his knees tearing blonde hair,
pinning my arms like nails.

That day he straddled me
to the carpet
to save his unborn grandchild,
his stomach against my stomach,
against the speck of life
inside, ash of his lit cigar
like sand in my mouth,
twisting my face from left
to right.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

I looked up into his tired face,
eyes heavy with the color
of blood. And I had to pity
the forehead folded deep in creases,
chest heaving the syrupy smell
of scotch. That man
had given everything he had
to hold me down,
to beat it
out of me.

Tomatoes

So many nights I sleepwalk
now, brush hands
against the window frame,
click back blinds and see
my father still alive
in the parking lot below.

From his white Chrysler
I watch him move
through moments more
than 20 years,
the car crash
that took his life.

The gift he carries
always tomatoes,
tomatoes he has grown,
round and juicy in a paper sack.
The only gift from him
I can accept -- newly married,
proud and poor.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

More tomatoes than I will
eat all summer,
each morning while he works
his fingers black with dirt,
packs them like balls
around the butter,
hiding cans of soup.

Dreams I still squint these
nights to mark that face
rosy with drink against
this upstairs light.
And watch him snap the Chrysler
closed and touch his hat
and start to move.

Relics

In 1972
my husband took up mining.
Pick-axe and cotton bag in the trunk,
we drove away from Michigan,
from the city
to make a home in Moab, Utah.

At the Ramada Inn
in the desert
he left me
with our four-year-old daughter,
with nothing
but a plastic potty chair
and went down into the canyons
to search for Indian artifacts,
his jello belly hanging
over plaid shorts,
sweatband pinching his head.

I must have looked like a woman
out of the depression,
face scowling,
forehead creased from the desert sun.
I thought
I just can't do this.

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

I can't justify poisoning him
and there's
no war
to send him to.

And I looked at my little daughter,
at her four years
in her potty chair
and I thought
I'll have to wait
14 years
to divorce him.

The Appointment

That morning I was trying
to sneak out
and not wake up David,
who had fallen into bed again
under a rage of booze and cocaine.

But before I could make it
out the door,
he started bellowing,
"You fucking cunt!
I'll kill you this time!"

Determined to make the appointment,
I grabbed the meat fork
off the kitchen table
before he could.

"You pig," he breathed.

"Whale," I sneered
and slipped the meat fork
under my suede jacket
and turned out the door.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

After me like a child,
he screamed hysterically,
"You can't do it -- you'll
lose everything,"
fat and naked
on the front deck --
his little sausage penis bobbing
up and down,
up and down
in front of our suburban neighbors,
a tiny mushroom
in an apron of aspic fat.

Enraged,
I stabbed deliberate forkholes
into the white fender
of his brand new Blazer
until it looked
like a tenderized piece
of steak.

Later, in the law office,
when I finally sat down
and unzipped my portfolio,
the meat fork
clattered to the floor
and I laughed
while my puzzled lawyer stared
and asked why
I wanted this divorce.

The Divorce Sale, 1982

My idea.

I tell my soon-to-be ex
we split everything
down the middle:
mismatched silverware,
lawn chairs,
bookends,

whatever he can lug
from the garage
while I secretly slip
the family .38 between
blown glass figurines,
tag it $10
on the card table.

20 minutes later
somebody's husband stumbles
through the yard
rubbing his bloody nose,
thumbs the ribbed stock,
the barrel, asks me
if it works.

Yes, I quickly nod,
wad his bills
in the trade, sigh as he
walks it
all away.

Visit

He sleeps more and more
these days.
He says, sleep is his only peace --
food -- his only pleasure.

Stumbling to the door
his eyes squint like an animal
just awakened from hibernation.
He stands with bear-like posture --
squared shoulders have disappeared
like a hanger yanked from a coat.

His once handsome face has fallen
into his neck.
And his neck --
it's the candle that's burned
into a puddle.

A robe strains to hide the bloated belly
that once rippled with muscles
and now shakes independently,
as though trying to escape
from a dying host.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

Only his hazel eyes remain
as I remember.
But now they fixate on the television remote,
and a rapid fire of channels
zing through the screen.
This is a repeat of yesterday,
years of yesterdays.

He hears my goodbye,
and I look at the envelope
of divorce papers I sent him --
still unopened.

Married Stuff

I just kept carrying the married stuff up the stairs
while my neighbors kept their blinds pulled tight.
I kept carrying the married stuff
to the landing. The landing
I called the Grab Bag.

All of these things from my married life
dumped on a landing for anyone else
because I couldn't use it,
couldn't store it
and yet couldn't leave it
where I found it.

So I hauled it out from there
piece by piece: the screen projector,
luggage, tools, book shelves,
complete barbell set.
I jammed all of it in my small
apartment only to realize I couldn't
wiggle into bed, didn't want
any of it.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

Only after I slept
would they sneak out and take everything
from the landing -- my neighbors
keeping blinds tight,
pretending not to watch me
struggle to give them my stuff.
All of it --
every married thing
finally
gone.

Flies Dancing

Finally her hospital bed
replaced
the dining room table.
And each day Mama seemed lighter.
And when I'd lift her, she'd cry
at my touch, sleep
more and more
under a codeine cloud, ask me
if it would ever
stop.

But I could not say
the words to the woman
who starched my baby dresses,
cross-stitched tiny flowers
on my bodice
and ran cool fingertips
across the bottoms of my feet.

"Feels like flies dancing,"
I'd say,
the touch tickling
my four years. And I'd clutch
her hand until she stroked
my shoulders.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

So that years later
after my father packed the Chrysler
and left,
after she started drinking
by the stove,
if I stomped the snow off my boots
or slammed the door
to her "Shut-up,"
to that slap -- somehow
the sting of that hand
on my face, the perfect
imprint of fingers
on my cheeks
almost tickled, like
flies
dancing.

Grandma Lotoszinski's Pern-a-ment

Those last weeks
my routine was to stick a tube
down the hole
in my mother's trachea, suction out
mucous so she could
breathe. Feed her morphine
and watch her drift from the pain
and doze.

After that
I crept north across the street
toward the scent of kielbasa
and the woman our neighborhood called
Grandma Lotoszinski.
At 92 that smile
making her eyes half-moons
on a biscuit face. Turning her short
plump body like a model, popping
her hands to her hips,
to the touched-up auburn hair
springing with spiral curls.

Asking me, "Dyanne', do you
like my pern-a-ment?"
And I would answer, "Yes, you look
like a movie star."

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

Then I would sigh
and mention my mother
and Grandma would search the 'fridge,
offer me a highball.
A tumbler of Jim Beam
mixed with Dad's root beer.
And I'd drink it,
all of it
by the third swallow.

Dear Brother

He was your only son
and just two years old
when the bump appeared.

Trips to cancer specialists
showed the bump riddled
with holes. The last hope

the Mayo Clinic, revealed
there was no hope. Only
six weeks to live

in the last stages
of Neuroblastyoma,
a bone cancer.

Those last days for him
were spent in the hospital
with grandma and nurse

trying to comfort
an emaciated body,
always in pain.

You and your wife Jan
saying, "Life is for the living" --
filling your days with other places

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

and your nights --
with bars. But when your son
died he was alone.

The nurse who drugged him
rocked him tightly. You
could not be reached.

And though it's been eighteen years,
I know his death bothers you.
Last year, after Jan's suicide,

you were the one who
threw out his toys, the little motorcycle
cap and all the framed pictures

displayed in the bedroom.
At her grave you stared at his
and stayed long after

her funeral was over.

Real Love

(For Jerry)

Late afternoons
waists wrapped in blankets,
Sharon and I played Hedy Lamarr,
fought our turns before the keyhole
to watch my brother wave his hair.
Black wings he combed
above his temple,
drew one lone curl
across his face.

Sharon said he looked like
Elvis. Last looks we'd squint,
his turned-up collar,
that click of heel
and drop of lip, an eyebrow
crooked before the mirror.
A final pose.
The door knob turned.

How quick we'd slink
back in the hallway, duck
pixie cuts below the door.
His V-shaped shoulders
and heavy feet
pounded wooden steps

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

as wing-tips clapped
a jitterbug
in tightest pants.

We sighed our envy,
and wished those nights
to be a girl
in a poodle skirt,
wear the braid that beat
against her neck.
For him we knew she'd
always wait.

The kitchen of her mobile
home about to burst,
his DeSoto fins spun
into view. How we imagined
he'd scoop her up,
rings glinting streetlight
as he drove her through
those drive-in dreams
where real love moved
upon the screen.

THREE

Petoskey Sunrise

I sift sand through my fingers,
the shell of a waterbug
like a dozen green mirrors cabochoned
into an opaline marble. Blow grains
like tiny faceted diamonds
over cattails and reeds --
floating into the hollowhead
of a plastic milk bottle
like the white bone
of a cow skull.

Birth

When I remember giving
birth,
I remember a kind of
death,
not still born
or aborted,
just a rising
beneath my skin,
that first scream
of life
as though someone is
dying.

Strapped down
like some crazy rider,
my legs caught
in stirrups,
chin digging my chest.
It's impossible
like this
to breathe or move
or see
the baby being
born.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

I can't hold her
in,
can't stop the doctor
from taking her
out
or the nurses who plop her
down like a fish
to kick
in a pan
or the rubber hands
that search
the depth of my bones
to yank the remains
of her nine-month
survival.

And the room is so
bright
I know nothing now
can save her.
Still, as the R.N.
strips my bed
I wish to hold
something,
wish against that
separation
the world calls a
daughter.

Burgundy Glass

This is your bowl, my mother said,
the burgundy-colored glass bowl
circled in gold.
The weight in her hands
after running and falling,
after cutting her nose.
Only nine, clutching that bowl
close to her chest
as if it might save her.

Its burgundy shell catching drops
of blood as she races the Tennessee backroad,
stumbles over slated wooden steps,
home to a sick mother
and hungry children wearing flour sacks
for underwear, dreaming as she dreams
of biscuits and red-eyed gravy.

In that front room, her father dribbles salve
down her open nose,
his hands speckled brown with the sun.
A man too big for a room so small,
his boots scuffing boards
to the back door where he dumps
out the blood. Says it's not worth saving.
This is 1929.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

Today in Michigan I finger this same
bowl in my daughter's tiny apartment.
Heavy as it is with rhinestone earrings, pearl
and onyx dangles, miniature charms,
and silver rings. Today I remind her
of this bowl, how it caught blood.
This burgundy-colored glass circled in gold,
chipped against the curve
where my mother fell the day
she carried it home
down those backroads of Tennessee.

Leaving Ann Arbor

We were driving I-96 leaving Ann Arbor.
The red sun finding us through sets of trees
popping above billboards.
And I kept turning from the flash,
turning from the light of the sun,
squinting at the cars we were passing.
That's when I saw her.

The woman with old knife slashes across her face:
deeply embedded scars from a blade.
She was driving a white Pontiac
and wearing a pink shirt,
a small girl seated next to her.

I only saw the woman a minute as we drove by,
only a second.
But I'm sure about the scars
cut deep into her cheeks,
cheeks with pock marks.

This woman with brown hair curling around
her pained face.
A face leaving someone
and taking a daughter.
Though I can't be sure,
I only saw her a minute,
a second in the sun,
in an old white car.

Green Meat

That morning my daughter drove south
back to college.
From my window she looked tall
in the front seat
touching a small scar like a cross
printed against her nose.

I stood there and watched
as two boys
in the courtyard below
stripped the bark off a sapling,
a baby elm twice their size.

I wanted to bang the glass
and yell out though I knew the tree
had been flayed the day before
by the same boys, circling,
splitting its thin trunk.

The shorter boy holding it down
and letting it go
like a slingshot -- sending tiny snaps
of nothing through the air.
The older one fraying green meat,
twisting apart the crotch.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

They both giggled, their eyes darkening
with joy until the sapling
lay flat in the brittle grass,
two halves spread in a V,
snowflakes dressing bare branches,
bones under an icy blanket.

Worms

She calls me tonight
my tenant, Evangelynn. She wants to know
when she'll get back
her damage deposit.

"You've lived there two months!" I say,
"And you agreed to stay for a year."
She denies it.

I yell, "Lawyer" and "You brought in those cats"
and "Who's going to take down my Christmas
decorations that you hung
the day after Halloween?"
and slam down the receiver.

I go back to grading and coffee.
Pick up a student's paper,
writing he wants to take his
fat balls and shoot his wad
at me.

"How's that for creative writing?"
the dialogue reads.

(cont. on next page)

(new stanza)

And then I feel that striped cat
Blanche, the stray I took in --
rub against my back. And I
inspect the pink little pucker
at the base of her tail for white worms.
(I'm in the mood for the grotesque.)

When I discover one I flick it on the couch.
Blanche pops her tail, batting
that tiny worm at me.
And I can't find it! Cross my eyes
inspecting my heavy red robe,
my thighs, then my pubic hair --
frantically scraping at my hips, my stomach --
scrutinize the carpet, desperate
when I find the little white ribbon --
that speck of egg white so tiny
the little segment looks like nothing
in my hand.

As I drop it
dry as rice in the envelope
and mail it to my tenant.

Marge And Norm

Norm worked at the post office.
Marge made salads at the Koko Bar.
Nights spent drinking Blatz there
remembering how handsome he looked
just out of the Army in his uniform.
Marge's hair dyed pitch black
the way he like it
and wearing those big hoop earrings
like a Mexican senorita.

Then Norm had the heart attack,
retired early.
The doctor saying
he wouldn't last the year.
Marge kept shredding lettuce at the bar.
Trudging home at 3 a.m.
to boil his hospital diet,
undress him in front of the TV.

He never moved off that couch,
just sat there smoking Raleighs,
flipping through Fingerhut catalogs,
ordering matching quartz watches
that played "The Yellow Rose of Texas"
and waiting. Ordering:

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

flannel robes
and stainless steel cookware,
cuckoo clocks,
and blue vinyl luggage with those little wheels,
digital alarm clocks
and fawn-colored leatherette jackets
and rechargeable flashlights.

Marge said
it was o.k. though
because Norm couldn't last
much longer. But every week
for the next ten years
the UPS truck delivered
something.

Then one day Marge died.
Down at the Koko Bar Norm told
everyone he was heading
south to Mexico -- though he never
did, just drove back home
and kicked at the latest package
wedged in the door.

I Wouldn't Have Missed It For The World

"I like livin' alone in Memphis, Dianne.
I'm tellin' you the truth.
You know I wouldn't lie.
I like bein' single
comin' and goin' when I please.
Drivin' out to Graceland with Jerusha
just to see that
big old mansion
where Elvis lived.
It's a fairyland
goin' through those curlicue gates.
I wouldn't have missed it for the world.
Even though that nigger boy
came through my window
the other night.
I woke up
and he had me pinned down
to the bed.
When I told Mama about it
she said,
'Carol Nan --
how could you have
lived
another day.

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

if that nigger
woulda raped you?'
He took off my gown
and Dianne
you know how skinny I am.
I had to wonder why
he'd even want any.
He told me again and again
not to say
nothin'
that he had a knife
though I didn't see it.
And as he got down on me
I thought of what Mama
would say
and I brought up my knee
and caught him on the chin,
and started screamin'.
And that nigger flew
right out that window.
I sat up for hours
with all the lights on
in my apartment
till it was time
to go to work
at the video store.

(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

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(cont. on next page)

(same stanza)

But I like livin' here
in Memphis.
I wouldn't have missed it
for the world.
Though I do miss my girls.
You know I love
my girls.
But they were better off
with their
daddy."