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Claudia Rachel Skutar

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MOURNING AT MIDPOINT

By

Claudia Rachel Skutar

A THESIS

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

MASTER OF CREATIVE WRITING

Department of English

2000

ABSTRACT

MOURNING AT MIDPOINT

By

Claudia Rachel Skutar

Mourning at Midpoint is a manuscript of 60 poems reflecting on a woman's arrival at middle age, the difficulties of family relationships and the various cycles of coming together and moving apart in a love relationship.

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**For Sylvia, my bonobo,
always.**

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Introduction

The poems in this manuscript range in form from narrative to lyric, in subject matter from family, love and relationships to survival both in nature and in emotion. Few of the poems are light in tone. That fact does not signify that I see nothing light about the world around me. It means merely that, in using language to explore self, I came first to the outer edges of calluses I have grown for survival, hardened scales covering those things that were once hot spots as I travelled through my life.

One of my readers suggested during the writing of this manuscript that my poems lack emotion. Those comments were the source of the poem in this collection, *She tells me to put more emotion into these poems*. I do agree with her that my poems are told from a distance. The personae often relate what might be considered emotionally charged subject matter with a hindsight intended to give the poems an introspective quality, their meanings unfolded from a safe distance for the personae in time and space.

I use the word "personae" here deliberately to delineate the voices in each poem from my own, though every poem is rooted in my experiences, both real and imagined. The fact that I have lived my life in inner as well as outer realities is what, to me, makes each of them truth.

Poets live with visions, sensitivities, things that many who are not writers do not understand and which can make concentration difficult. I find myself having to rein in my thoughts often as the simplest thing will send me into a hundred different directions unrelated to the matter at hand. I am an associative rather than linear thinker, intuitive more than logical. So often what I see or hear serves as a springboard to a steady stream of ideas.

In fact, this kind of unbridled associative thinking is the root of my poetry and requires a willingness to remain open to a flow so strong that it can sweep one away. This drive, this need to shape language is, therefore, sometimes unwelcome.

I came to an understanding of the thought that leads to creative composition through a book author Marion Zimmer Bradley wrote many years ago, *The Mists of Avalon*. It is the retelling of the myths of King Arthur and Camelot from the viewpoints of three of the women who, in Sir Thomas Malory's famous telling, are peripheral to the male characters.

In Bradley's story, Arthur's mother, wife and half sister recreate the mythology through three tales, one from the perspective of each. Half sister Morgana is trained from girlhood as a priestess in the ancient Goddess religion that is being strangled by Christians gaining a foothold in Britain. In Morgana's story, women who see visions as girls are brought into the priesthood and taught how to cope

with and interpret those visions. Those girls and young women who cannot learn to do this eventually go mad.

It is the interpretation of images, sounds, words via a poem's composition, that, for me, checks the force of their freefall. Fortunately for my development, despite the low value contemporary society places on the making of poems, I long ago sought out journal writing and composing to order my thoughts and imaginings. As Jim Harrison has said about his own work, this is what keeps me alive. Writing the poems in this manuscript gave me a way to make sense of the experiences that sparked them. But, more importantly, the writing process took them out of me and made them something more, preserved them in crystals of language.

Denise Levertov's essay, *Some Notes on Organic Form*, in her book, *the poet in the world*, comes the closest to describing my own writing process of any essay on the making of poetry that I've read. I first reflected on this essay in my mid-twenties, but only now after all these years of writing and life experience do I understand exactly what she meant. She says that to create a poem:

First there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him their equivalence in words: he is brought to speech. . . (8)

A confluence of elements she goes on to describe—this sequence of perceptions, the pressure of demand in an experience and the meditation on it—results in my being brought to words. Sometimes I don't know what I'm going to say; what ignites my creative sequence may be simply an image or a particular phrase. I never know what is going to end up in a poem until I start searching for the language to pinpoint a thought.

Says Levertov about the words that initiate a poem:

These words sometimes remain the first, sometimes in the completed poem their eventual place may be elsewhere, or they may turn out to have been only forerunners, which fulfilled their function in bringing him to the words which are the actual beginning of the poem. (9)

Levertov has accurately described my writing process. In *Forewarning*, for example, the poem originally was written in first-person perspective but I changed it to third person to make it less confessional and more narrative. The poem also contained dialogue set in italic type that I deleted because I thought it diluted the main narrative. Yet, both elements were necessary to get me into the original draft of the work.

In *Curriculum*, I changed the color of the character's suit from a (remembered) drab olive green to black. Though it is a factual difference, the black suit was

more in keeping with the Catholic imagery running through the rest of the poem. In other words, the slight change in color worked better with what the poem was trying to say, black suit being suggestive of a nun's habit within the poem's context.

Leverlov's work has helped me identify and articulate my experiences in poems, but there are other writers whose words have influenced me as well: Mary Oliver, Jim Harrison (particularly his *Ghazals*, long out of print and now available in his recently new and collected poems, *The Shape of the Journey*), Margaret Atwood, Judith Minty, Sharon Olds, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, William Carlos Williams and Ted Hughes. There are, of course, other poets whose work I enjoy and learn from. However, the work of these poets, in particular, taught me how such things as title, image, metaphor and narrative function in a poem.

In the sestina, *Grandmother and Granddaughter in Photograph*, I was able to capture something of narrative, image and metaphor all at once, allowing me to propel the poem past the initial image of the photograph and strong emotions about the aging women that "brought me to speech," as Leverlov would say.

For the poems chronicling a love relationship, I took as a model the voice in Atwood's 1971 book of poems, *Power Politics*, which details the breakdown of a relationship. Her poems are simple narratives almost journalistic in observational monotone. It was this tone that I wanted to achieve in poems such as *Truce* and *We Go Aground*, a kind of numbness that follows shock and precedes grief and anger.

In other poems, one reader observed it curious that family is often a place where one gets hurt and that nature is a magical place. That is so, I think, because one must create a substitute or die, at least emotionally, if the world at hand is not working. Nature in these poems is most of the time a place where animals are often human-like or even godlike in their abilities, as in *You Who Care So Little for the Light*, where the owl is omniscient in ability to see evil perpetrated on innocent animals. In fact, one could read the nature poems as masks from the natural world for the world of human relationships, a way to create the emotional distance essential to my material.

These imagined experiences, or a combination of real and imagined experiences prove troublesome for some readers, who wonder whether or not a poem is "true." To them I give the words of W.B. Yeats, "A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria." So it is in the making of poems. So it is in this work, as well.

Walking to Heron

Evening sky and I see heron crossing,
a distant baton in motion
toward the marsh.

Each down draft of wings
is the slow beat of conductor,
audience crowding
shoulder to shoulder,
the upward stems of trees.

She has made invitations
over many sunsets. Tonight
I have crossed the field
to wood's edge, ready
to enter the forest.
I part the veil of old growth.

There is a pause

in the rhythms around me, a rest
between this moment and the next
as she descends to the roily water
somewhere ahead, settles to her wading.

A new movement now as marsh frogs
resume their bass.
An owl takes up its tonal hoot.
Branches break under
hooves as deer search for soft grass.

I lend irregular cadence, my footsteps
unsteady in crisp leaves,
toes knocking hard tympanums of logs.
Hand to living trunk, I use
the sturdy bodies of my fellows to pass.

When I arrive, heron is there, silent,
in the water. She parts the reeds
with slender body, blue even in last light,
seeks with rangy legs a common ground.

It is there we will share a fish, send
conjoined notes through the marsh
with a staff of night.

Sturgeon Point

I wanted to see

**lean into waves
from that lap
of land**

**walk there myself
on young legs,
choosing
even then**

to follow beside

water

companion

**rather than tame
it by boat.**

**You, father,
feared
my youth
my friends**

**followed me
by car
six miles
on black top
beside
the lake.**

**Travelers
on the same path
stared,
young girl
with backpack,
man following
slowly in a car.**

Some even stopped
to see if I were safe
not realizing
I was dragging
you like an anchor.

Untended Ground

I gather fresh peppermint leaves
from your herb garden for our tea.
The stalks are thick and waist-high,
marching on the tomatoes, themselves
wild rebels unstaked amid the aromatic
fountain of stems where mint sprigs
have taken over dry soil,
squatters on the land.

For you I name what you see
each day in the yard. Your ears
seem to long for these half-remembered
sounds of maple, sparrow, Austrian
pine, finch, crow, purple iris, peony. And,
"Grandmother," I say, touching your arm.

You work at the yarn in the coverlet
made when you could still carry stitches.
Your fingers are blunt knitting needles
askew in the loops.

There are torrents behind your eyes,
water rushing up against windows
of a sinking car. I look on
from shore, unable to intervene.

You once knew adjectives, neighbors,
nouns, grocery lists, birthdates, recipes,
verbs of a lifetime that now are cast
together in a mental game of roulette.
What comes out is a matter of chance.

You roll a word around, shape it
with your lips, drop it into my ear,
silver ball in a numbered slot.
It comes up noun. "Sunflower,"
you say, though that has never
been my name. Undaunted

I show you old postcards of Detroit,
hand-drawn in the pastels of an easier
age. For a moment the words follow
and you are yet able to name each image—
Grand Circus Park, David-Whitney
Building, Belle Isle, Penobscot Building—
from some old ground of memory
your disease has not yet eroded.

We sit with tea in your wild yard, I,
a fortuneteller with my crystal ball,
as though my best predictions could
beat your odds. All the while,

without you to trim it back,
the mint encroaches, resolute,
on the vegetables in your garden,
runners taking hold everywhere
they spread.

Memory

is a pack of Marlboros
smoked by my pregnant
mother. She shared her cord
grudgingly. Particulates
passed on her holy breath
to our shared lungs.
Her smoke transubstantiated
into my blood, left me
grimy with remembrance
of how I soaked nine months
in the salty fluid
of her regrets.
Later, I did not cry
when she lay dying of a biting
cancer, brought cigarettes
to help her pass the time.

We meet

You are a soothing forest
limbs swaying slightly
in the rhythms of this place

Your eyes are rich earth,
a path offered only to me.

I part branches, smell pine,
gather fallen cones
with your seeds inside.

Later I will learn that heat
opens the woody petals
I hold as we pause.

On Aging

This is a tough one
as you will
be afraid to look
in the mirror and see
what you will see:

rosaceous bloom
may at first distract
you from eyes, gray

quartz buried in sand.
Still, if you sweep marl
of disappointments drifting
on this facial
desert, you'll find
the two stones,
hardened
in reflection.

Getting to Water I

I roam
blacktop,
seeking
shore,

home

of sand to smooth
edges,

of blue tongues
to wash me
clean.

Telling of the Father

Speaking of him is necessary,
as necessary as the running
of the bulls through my blood,
the bulls he loosed at my conception,
those male creatures he made
part of me, that have trampled
the memories between us, snorted
and stomped on lovers and turned
again and again on me, the matador.
I speak to keep them in check.
I must kill them, one by one.

Uncle Victor

His pants clung to his legs
and, even at 10, I wondered
if they stuck to him because
he hadn't washed.

His skin was bare on his head,
hands, the spots where his socks
stopped, too worn to reach
his trouser cuffs, the flesh
in all those places pasty brown.
In his veins ran tobacco juice.

His smile seemed upside down.
The teeth he had left looked
as if he chewed grasshoppers.
Bits of tobacco stuck between
the green and brown enamel.

Give me a kiss

he said. I pulled away, afraid
I'd get caught on the craggy
wristbone reaching up to me
or, worse, one of those teeth.

I would have run to my mother
in the kitchen, but my father
told me to be nice to his uncle.
I let Victor touch my cheek.

He reached into a crumpled bag
at his feet, dug out a candy cane
fat as a dildo.

A Christmas present for you

he said

because you are such a good girl.

Meditations on Crow

Crow sits, highest point
of the pine, pitch
that glues bough
to clean sky, dot
underneath the
exclamation of heaven.

I guard the dog,
no bigger than a rodent,
working through the yard.
Her civilized senses blind her
to the stalking eye,
claws twitching on branch.

The car scatters three
of them from casual tugs
at matted flesh. They unfold
slick feathers to drop lightly
on the road's shoulder.
In the mirror, I see they don't
wait to return, black lords
at their table.

They're strung in twos
and threes and fives, abacus
beads on the wire, still
in their meditation,
intent on human conversations
just underneath their grasp.

Beak opens a hole
in the air. Black arrowhead shot
from a pine bough follows,
chases my car so long I fear
a harbinger. But it angles off,
no luminous messenger
in this sable crow.

Lunulae

I first felt the radiance in your hands when
you held me dancing on New Year's Eve.

You saved the moon as croissant to serve
next morning with coffee, your long fingers
spread elegantly around a mug

the way Audrey Hepburn must gracefully
have held her espresso in dainty china
mornings after making love.

Hands committed to their engagements,
steady, compassionate, trustworthy,

as if all good parts of you reside
in your distal locales, concentrating
in these plateaus your finer expressions.

Your Finnish ancestors knew their worth,
who ruddied hands ploughing or roughed
them pulling fish-laden nets.

Yours attend to more refined needs--
brushing canvas, healing animals, sewing
their wounds, reshaping
with surgeon's skill
the ragged edges.

Exquisite in your care, you please females,
crescent thighs bared nights on your bed.
Regular as the moon, they return
to re-make the sacrifice.

I, too, joined the cult after our first night,
caught in the gravity of your palms

witness to half-moons shining in the beds
of your capable fingers, the lunulae
splaying light on everything you touch.

Today

It's gray and she'll lie abed
for hours, rising to escape
the groans of her neighbor
screwing his wife next door.

She'll give the cat tuna,
take in mail, read letters
to the editor and want ads
over lunch, a pattern familiar
as the flesh settling on her face.

When all is quiet next door,
she'll slip back under covers,
lose herself to smooth memories
of skin when her mouth still smiled
with pleasure at all those she kissed.

She won't notice time slide
into the room until too late
when it has her pinned,
forcing its unwelcome seed.

Truce

From opposite sides of this square continent
we stare, explorers coveting distant lands.

Our cravings are so strong we never weigh
hazards of this journey. You are brave

and set out first. Disrobed, your body unfurls
on the bed, a white flag waving me on

to surrender of breasts, a conquest
of thighs. All the while your hands
wade through rivers on my skin.

Our usual friction ignites a fire
we use to warm one another.

For now we're oblivious
to silhouettes we cast in this light—
shadows still struggling
on the wall.

Lost

For the nine-year-old boy in Massachusetts who
went out looking for his dog one night in 1999 in a snowstorm.

4 p.m.

Mother calls up that you left
the front door open. The dog
has gotten out. It is starting
to snow, a gray sky slaking
its white scales onto the wet
tongue of earth. Somewhere
the dog is chasing them.

6 p.m.

Your mother calls you to
dinner and still the dog has
not returned. You miss his face
on your leg and wonder.

8 p.m.

You sit, deep in homework.
The snow knocks soundlessly
on your window, calling your
name. Downstairs you slip
on boots, coat, mittens, slide
into the night. The snow leaps
up and down in gusts around
you. As you walk, calling
the dog's name, the snow fills
the footprints behind your back.

9 p.m.

Your mother ascends the stairs
to see you to bed.

10 p.m.

The dog returns alone as police
set out. They search all night
but the snow has had a long
head start. It takes them two
days to find you.

11 p.m.

By the river you realize that
you are lost. Hoping now
that the dog will find you,
you curl in the cold to sleep,
small in your boy's bones.
You dream that the snow
whines in your ear
and is licking your face.

Curriculum

Each Friday
Mrs. Busler wore
the same black
velvet suit, habit

regular as eating fish.
To a sixth-grader,
she took up a chunk of the world,
her bulk a higher authority.

Manners, respect, quiet
attention were our curriculum.
When one boy ran
to the blackboard, disapproval
stopped him like a holy ghost.

Unbelievers knew omniscience
when someone stuck gum
on the register. Mrs. Busler,
appeared at that spot,

sealing respect of those
who pulled hair, pounded arms
when her back was turned.

After that we believed
everything she told us—

that all men are created equal;

that a perfect triangle
has three equal sides,

that, through natural order,
boys are better than girls.

Soon circles stopped meeting
under my compass. I lost
my protractor, drew imperfect
figures by hand.

The world became obtuse,
a place of infinite angles.

Meditation

Five decades wound a rosary about her,
regrets preying on old, old mysteries.
The secrets rose slowly, as she did when
swimming as a child in the neighbor's pool.
She lingered on the bottom, avoiding
the sunny shallows and her father, waiting.

How this good daughter of Detroit's working
class scoured her memory, where heaven
was a well-cooked pot roast and a new
Ford Falcon, communion a game of pickle
with her brothers and sisters; where sins
were wiped away by a blessing from the
priest and prayers the only thing done
with her father before bed.

Suspension

We sat at lake's edge--

**our silence a vibration
felt by fish below--**

**still
breathing
together**

**humid air,
watching clouds
pass,**

**welcoming,
like fish
in eutrophied water,
drops of fresh rain.**

Intruder

A storm pounding
windows, trying doorknobs.

I shut myself in tight,
wait with dogs in my lap
as storm throttles trees, breaks
branches over its kneecaps.

Every window is closed—
temperature climbs in the heat
but I think we are safe
closed inside with lights on.

A loud "zzzzztttt"
and lights go off.

It is daylight again and again
as lightning snakedances
to lure me out,
thunder a rattler.

But I know better than to succumb
to those long teeth dripping night.

Solitude

The summer we started over without my father, I was 13. The days were blue with heat that pushed into the drawers and closets of my new life. I kept my cool in the basement until Mother said I must

have some sun. I took to my bike to avoid the heat stuck inside me, a tongue nagging as I passed fathers mowing lawns, playing catch with kids who called to me. I ignored

them, pedaled to outrun the voices, came to quiet maples tall and lean as my father, with limbs reaching down to me. I rested in shade, a pool of dark in which only I could swim.

Taking Your Name in Vain

With sounds crashing
back of my teeth, whitewater
roiling off my tongue,
uttering it seems irreverent,

spit against mossy rocks
of longing. Much water
is thrown from a river

this way, depletes it.
But this only seems a waste,
as calling your name.

Cycles of river, sky,
love are closed
and whatever escapes,
or we push away,
is not lost;

evaporates,
comes back as rain, renewed
desire, fills us again—

only to leave once more
as water or word or the prayer,
Sylvia, Sylvia, Sylvia.

Close Range

A thunk and I saw
the hummingbird had collided
with the window, stunned
by a border it had not foreseen.
Both of us green, I cupped it.

There were white
and black feathers
along the eyes, throat,
forest chest.

There was the beak,
bone needle suspended
in fragile globe of fingers.

For its part,
the bird stayed very still,
For mine, I did not close in.

When I opened
my hands, the bird
did not pause in liftoff,
winged to safety,

hovered a few moments
in a nearby tree,
contemplating me,
better, perhaps,
in relief
at middle distance.

Getting to Water II

**They'll converge under
white pines, unstrap
suburbs,**

**drop stone manners
in a circle, rebuild**

fire, sacrifice

**stories,
marshmallows.**

**They'll float,
loose belts
in a lake
without current.**

**Later when they return
to large houses
in cul-de-sacs,**

**bodies will be clean,
minds shifted, dunes
on Lake Michigan shore.**

Old Growth

Down the street from Fordson High,
you fell in love with your best girlfriend at 13.
Her Romanian mother took her from you,
made you grow rings of silence.

Later you found a lover cheating,
became wooden, kept putting out bark,
dropped women from your branches.

At 50 you discovered yourself trapped
alone in shade, crooked roots
forcing up your foundations
everything alive about you crumbling.

You who care so little for the light

who would leave me now without a moon
or a stiff walking stick to find a path safe
from your storm, take note:

The owl observes the business of the dark.
With claws she tallies it on branches
accounts for snakes who swallow mice whole
with no sound then slide away.

She is witness to wolves who strip skins
from soft deer, who leave entrails
on the forest floor for ravens.

No savagery is hidden in this unlit place—
even yours. The owl is always watching.

There are no mirrors in this house

I wear no makeup, wash my face
in the shower, put on earrings
and comb thinning hair by feel.

I do not tweeze my brows
nor fool myself by hiding
wrinkles under varied light.

The mirrors which I must
have in my car are there
to look backwards only.

Toward the End

Eleanor, this letter
will reach you before I do,
and there is something
I must tell you.

Your daughter has spoken
of the tumors that squeeze
your lungs and brain,
that now want
your smile.

But she glimpses your humor
even with tendrils rough
over your insides, coarse
fingers.

As your daughter shifted
you for a suppository
you said

*pretend
I'm a sheep*

as though it were easier
for you both
were you an animal.

You laughed—
yet quickly looked away—
tense,
making the capsule
harder to slide
into place.

When your daughter finished
washing her hands

she said she hugged
you, wished
you'd never
let go.

Der Vater

When the father marched
through the house with black
pocket comb pressed to upper lip
arm extended in Zeig Heil
stepping high as though legs
were unjointed hardwood,
he smiled, false with teeth,

his gold one visible only
when he smiled broadly
the way a rottweiler bares
fangs. The mother stayed
in the kitchen.

When he marched us
to the yard on weekends
we carried rakes, shovels.
Neighbors shot looks
from behind windows
as we worked. Friends pitied
us from the other side
of the chain fence perilous
as any barbed wire
but kept their distance.

Even the boy in fatigues
with a plastic tommygun
stayed out of the father's
line of sight. Above the gate
the mother stood nervous
sentry at the kitchen window
washing dishes.

Once I climbed the fence
when the father wasn't looking
though he caught me quickly
in another yard.

What happened pierced
the skin of memory,
a tattoo that never wholly
disappeared, though faded
like numbers on wrists
of those in the camps.

Years later, before the father died,
the memories came after him.
We heard he became an exile
in his mind, the only country
in which he could reside.

Aftermath

Nocturnal wind paused
before shaking awake,

air around vacant as empty lungs.
Uncurling from grass, raising
a head above the trees,
it exhaled—
evergreens shuddered.

The wind seemed to break
faith with pale birches,
retreat from boxwoods
that nuzzled light shoulders
in gentler moments.

It tore at the trees, stripped
branches, leaving bark naked
and gnashed, trunks
bending, unwilling
partners in a frenzied dance.

When it was over, the trees
comforted one another
with broken limbs.

Small Poem About a Woman Who Moved On

She sits among the things she has brought with her—
the table, one couch, a stereo, a full set of dishes.
She will have to buy new sheets, but it is she who has the bed.
The music she selects is not light, nor is it mournful,
and when she gets up to dance, gliding carefully around
the packed boxes and furniture not yet arranged,
she is content to put her arms around the empty air.

Random Acts

Sprinting to first in a race—
to be a good daughter
for parents, school, country—
I ran far ahead of disapproval
from other girls.

Later, on my knees
sick in the bathroom;
classmates stepped past;
one

held my long hair
until I finished.

She disappeared
into the yearbook, left me

her name, certainly lost
long ago to marriage;

a face, now hidden
in folds of years;

and memory
of her grasp,
a baton
of kindness passed

because she was there
and carried
along my entire course.

By the Insides

You take what you see in this world,

the dog, beaten, with six ribs broken,
put to sleep because someone didn't want it;

the sparrow, head lolling from a grain
of poisoned seed, eyes clear till its end.

There is the woman at 51 who believes
she'll never work again, that wrinkles

and belly betray, that tides of youth,
money, men are pulling her under.

She thrashes in the ocean of this knowing,
spits salty phrases she has been forced

to swallow, strangles involuntarily
any lover who swims to her rescue.

What she has taken in has her
by the insides; barbs passed through

her ears and eyes, that will not let her go.

Mourning at Midpoint

I lost something on the journey.
Cheeks now are white peonies
bruised with rouge. Skin rests, tired,

on the folds and ledges of its wrinkles.
Blue spiders hide in liver shadows
of this landscape, where loss is hard

as a corpse and stinks. The body is said
to replace all cells every seven years.
According to this calendar of the flesh,

I have been reborn six times to knowledge
of how gradually we come to be here
and how quickly what we are is lost.

She tells me to put more emotion into these poems

so I say, okay, and look for the jar labeled *Feelings*
on my desk. It's there and I unscrew the lid, but turn it only once
to collect just a drop. Instead, this becomes a bad dream,
and I find out the lid's not a lid but a cork that succumbs
to the pressure of the gases building in the bottle.
The cork pops, of course.
I aim it at her eye, but miss because she's not looking—
she never looks, just says things like

Move over, the cat doesn't have enough room.

or

*Do you think you could keep your dogs quiet?
Chihuahuas aren't even real dogs anyway.*

I snarl but she's still not looking.
What does it matter anyway? I know
I'm going to tear this poem into little pieces
and feed them to her cat.

Sundays in Detroit

Each Sunday at noon we prayed
from suburban safety in our church.
At 2 p.m., regular as a punchclock,
my father sealed us into his Ford
Falcon, drove 30 miles to the east
side, where more suburbs

spread, plentiful as craters
on the moon. Cigarette smoke
settled between my parents.
They puffed while I pretended
them smokestacks.

My grandmother kissed
my hair, said I smelled
like a bar, then served
chicken noodle soup. I did not
say, once, my grandfather

and I walked to buy cigars.
He went to the bar, left me outside.
I traced the penguin on the door,
like the one on cigarette billboards.

Going home, we found a dollar
He let me keep it.
I told no one of the bar.

My father taught us dirty songs
riding home in the Ford. He kept time,
a perverse conductor, cigarette cupped

in hand. When I closed my eyes to shut
him out, the orange tip burnt into
my aftervision like the neon ball
atop the Penobscot, downtown watch
scanning the highways, noting
those who fled to suburbs.

From the expressway, the night city
seemed lighted from within,
the skyscrapers, cooling embers.

Legacy

Her beefsteaks, uncultivated, split
pregnant bellies on soil that summer,
afterbirth fattening ravens. Peppermint
ignored its border of smooth stones.

All things seemed wild that year
she was found face to earth,
eyes hard as half-buried marbles
lost in the yard.

* * * * *

Alive, she tended; trained
exuberant mint tenderly,
a tenth grandchild. She wrapped
her charges in newspapers, bestowed
roots on daughters for their gardens.

Zucchini, swaddled in brown bags,
she handed proudly to granddaughters
rushing after Sunday visits to husbands
warming Chryslers and Fords.

Only one granddaughter
transplanted the mint.

* * * * *

The granddaughter stayed
a last night in the empty house
among the wilting rhododendrons,
cilantro, wandering Jews, basil,
parsley, African violets, green
onions, ferns, coleus.

Outside mint rose above tomato
carcasses, stillborn gourds,
irises laid low in their drought.

The Force of Us

I saw the ring in the case
of wedding bands, recalled
how I once made you so angry
you threw mine off the bridge
between Sarnia and Port Huron.
No retrieving what sunk
in the channel.

I passed over the bands, plain,
not meant for women like us.
What stopped me was a near
circle, platinum surrounding a diamond,
the pressure of the two arms
holding the gem. With what ease
the metal conducted the force
securing unbreakable stone.

So unlike the bones and muscles
of our human arms, capable
aqueducts for that surging
pumped through arteries
but so easily ruptured
by rocks.

In My Brother's House

In my brother's huge house
there are golden children
a dog, a beautiful wife.
The clocks all run on time,
the picture window frames
deer who take their dinner
in the yard at dusk. Kites
are given tails to guide
them when flown. There
is a place for grandmother
to feed the baby a bottle,
and the living room ceiling
is a cathedral under
whose roof everything
is holy. There is even
a crying room in the back for
unmarried older sisters.

Impasse

Morning, breaking
camp from the place
I return to each evening
on this mountain of loss.
I hoist a pack heavy
with stories of our
former travels.

The sun, which rolls up
the peak, should warm,
but this yellow jacket stings
with alpine light; reveals
daily the summit I fail
to get over.

It's not a vista I want
to survey, my only companions
other climbers heaving
their packs up the same
mountain.

Lawbreak

We vied for facets
of attention,
his kiss—

young father, forbidding,
with briefcase,
off to law
school—

with sister, I pursed
lips through fence
in the yard, ritual
farewell to his girls,

patterns pressed
from the wire
diamonds,
staying.

But
he defied

order
of birth,
chose
her, permitted
her to steal
favor.

My sentence:

he turned

walked away
from the fence
my pleas

shattering diamond
fists on his back.

Playing in the Light

For Kelsey Madison

We run through the yard in mock chase,
she with ball in hand, I with arms out
stretched to circle this pixie
in peddle pushers. In mid afternoon
her sweat mixes with light pouring
on welts mosquitoes left on her calves.

She's glowing at the tongue she sticks out
when I catch her and take the ball.
There is a brilliance about her blond hair,
and I wonder if this is how haloes are made.

But then she pouts, hugs my knees
because, at four, she's just got to win
at something. I let her push me into grass.

My brother collects her later with her ring toss
and sippy cup, this girl the sun has annointed
with thumbs of light. He loads her into the car,
eyes bright even behind tinted glass.

When they turn the corner, the sun—
reluctant to carry the load
for the rest of the day,
follows.

We go aground

1

The first time

your breasts pout
in my hands, full

as the white belly of a gull.
We glide sleek in these waters.

Months afterward you reveal
you knew we'd be lovers

the way a gull knows how to spear a fish?

2

I should have known that words
are useless in a place of scales and feathers
where a perfect plane of water
seems unending. In the real world,
things don't go on forever.

We move through surface tension
for as long as we can
your wings sailing
just above this plain,
my gills gasping for air just below.

Grandmother and Granddaughter in Photograph

Your grandmother is severe, thick
lenses framed in tortoise shell,
face fading, mouth
a crevasse, jaw locked
against howling winters, loss
of a farm, a husband's death.

You are young, hair black without dyes.
You smile, but pretense is thickening,
setting in a copper mold hung, like loss,
over grandmother's stove. You present a shell
of happy wife so she won't think you locked
to a man who ruins your carefree mouth.

I touch your image from across years, mouth
a warning—in the present—I know will die.
I should have left this photo locked
in the drawer stuffed thick
with your past, where your grandmother still shells
peas and you ride ponies without getting lost.

I try to tell you the present is where you'll lose
your way. You'll stare at the mouth
of age, run from its bad teeth, shell-
shocked; bolt from your deadened
body, thickened
with use. Your life is no photo for a locket,

you'll think, and reach for your drawer, locked
after too many losses.
You'll seek memories in a thicket
of photos. You'll compare your mouth
to your grandmother's, shut tight before she died.
You will wonder how she stood it, how she shelled

out love during summer visits when bombshells
of age sprayed her body, unlocked
time and set it dead
on her. She will suddenly seem lost
in life's gnashing, mouthy
with silence, mired in its thickness.

You will seek this photo I hold of your grandmother in tortoise shell.
You will affirm your past, thickening as living unlocks you.
You will forget what is lost and avoid seeing life as a hungry mouth.

Spring Thaw

Early March and frozen ground
softens in the false warmth

that promises but will not stay.
Earth calls and, instinctively,
I pulse hope.

Insects stir in glaciers of soil,
rise from eaves and gutters.

Winter air is pushed aside by caws,
chitterings, whistles of those lured

home on wings only to find tomorrow
the unseasonable heat
a carnal vow quickly broken.

I, too, am lulled by warmth,
forget for today we buried
our feelings deep
below boxwoods, left

them in their last spring lodged,
tangled among roots
to drown in rich dirt.

Why I Prefer Dogs to Lovers

The good ones will hold your silence calmly
with their eyes and howl to welcome
the phases of your moods.

And if they are the kind that will eat you alive,
they don't pretend they don't enjoy it.

Letter to Self

I'm sending this ahead
since you'll know what to do.
I write from midpoint
having just arrived
at middle age.

The current here--
much stronger than I knew.
Many become lost
in the undertow.
I wrecked my youth
on the rapids,
and the water bites.

But then, you know this.

Do you recall our lowest years?
Is the view any better up ahead?
Write if you can. And Godspeed.

Forewarning

The four children sat silently at the table
for family dinner, wiener schnitzel
and potatoes steaming on plates;
their father finished the grace.

He passed the food, but no one ate
while he took the first bite, swirled it
in his mouth as though testing
the body of a wine, spat into his napkin.

No one spoke when he pushed his plate
away, lighted a cigarette, turned to the mother.

We must make an example for the children, eh?

He lightly ground the orange tip into her arm,
searing flesh to a weeping crater. The mother
did not move, instead remembered how she
had cooked potatoes she dug by hand

as a German child during the war, walked miles
to fields that hadn't been bombed to get this
little food, cooked the potatoes in used
coffee grounds because there was no oil or butter.

She said nothing as her flesh blistered under
the father's cigarette, not wanting to shame her children
with a scene, she who called her German dentist *butcher*
because he used no pain killer as he pulled every tooth

when she was 30, the result of poor nutrition in the war.
She bore it then because she had to, kept silent now for
her children. It would be worse with protest
as it always was with such men. Still, the smoke rose,
like a warning, from her arm.

There Were Her Eyes

I squinted, sucked
the stolen peach,
green, hard
as a pit, seeking
juice, getting water
left by the spigot.

Doris (Mrs. Crenshaw
to you, little girl)
cleared the table
next door.

My father screamed--
I crouched,
as though a spigot
could hide my crime.

Mrs. Crenshaw looked on,
her mouth an unripened O,
and there were her eyes,
stare so hard
I dropped the fruit.

My father screamed again.
My palms were flat
against cement blocks,

as though I could push away
what was inside with bare hands

as simply as refusing a bitter peach.

Union

**Ravens stab beaks into fur
and flesh rotting on hot tar.**

**These vigilants leave supper
only to avoid my car. I hear
curses cawed from above.**

**Through the rearview mirror
I bear witness
to their circling, a vortex
of pitch, a brew poured
from a cauldron of air.**

**When I can no longer see
them, I believe they remain
faithful at this blacktop**

**altar we share, devouring
the sacrifices we leave them.**

The Letter 'S'

There are words,
geographies
of thought,
straight lines, curves
of letters mapped
together that route
us over synapses
to locations
of memory.

Take this triptych,
for instance,
in which the letter 's'
begins or ends
a word that stands
on its own
for something,
sucker, say,
or loveless or stony;

each alone
a well-charted place
in the brain
but, visited together,
destinations
best avoided.

Desperada

"Desperado . . . you better let somebody love you before it's too late."
—Eagles

There are no cowboys in the Midwest
or gunfights—
only miles of white pine and birch, quiet
fields of corn or wheat still
somewhere
beyond suburban sprawl.
There are women like us untrained
to find men
and love them.

And the song is about a man.

But this poem is about you,
Desperada
straight
(really, bent)
out of Detroit,
slinging defenses you brought
from home, guns
men taught you to use
on your mind.

Three decades later
you avoid mirrors
and the woman
who loves you.

You have the guns trained
on yourself, and
since this is a poem,
not
a movie,
you are likely to use them.

On Drexel Avenue

Row houses built for Detroit
workers downtown
near
black forest of smokestacks.

My grandmother's house,
white.

Skip
to another dwelling,
a girl, alone,
playing,
invites me in,

and I notice her hair,
kinky;

her palms,
pale,
not chocolate
like their coverings;

her nails pink moons
on the dark landscape
of her fingers.

My parents find,
hustle me

home without
letting me say goodbye.

My grandmother moves
to a suburb
with no black
forest in sight,

where all the people
match
the color
of their aluminum-
sided houses.

Galatea's First Words

Pygmalion didn't know what lay under the marble,
only that here was a commission calling for craft.

Each day he prayed to Aphrodite while poised
with chisel and hammer over his human-size rock,
let my creation be perfect.

He revealed the middle first, the shoulders, the strong back,
the torso, at first of indeterminate sex, like an early embryo.

It was the white thighs that drew him in, pulled his thoughts
into his fingertips as he discovered the supple hamstrings,

the gluteus firm in hard skin. By the time he arrived
at the mons veneris, he had named her in his prayers.

Knees and legs (together) came next, then bare feet bound
into their base. And the breasts, how these polished stones

reflected light when he took to working evenings to uncover
her head. Of this, he saved her unparted lips for last.

Let Galatea live was his final prayer as he kissed them.
Tradition has it that she became willing flesh then in his arms

leaves unrecorded her first words—
save me from my father—
her prayer to the gods.

Stone Mother

Unyielding, she does not offer
her children nuggets, but allows
them to play among the fallen rocks
of her life, boulders too heavy to be shifted.

It is this garden she provides; no shade
or green or breeze, merely red face
of granite flecked with quartz under hot sun,
scintillating best at a distance.

Tolerating your ghost

We died months ago
but your memory has taken
up residence here.

I decide to go with it
though this place is barely
large enough for one.

Even now you keep
crowding me out.
You'd think remembrance
wouldn't take much space.

As your face is most vivid
in the dark I keep on lights.
Sometimes your visage
appears to be smiling,

so unlike you I fear

an intruder, that femme

you ran off with.
But, no, it's you.

I'd forgotten trickeries;

our old friend, the devil,
that she who paints
your fine mouth red

inside my eyelids,
that trickster
who did not warn me
of your lover's coming.

Observation Deck

By cable and pulley, I scale
the building's 94 floors
in 40 seconds to outrun
memory.

I see two states before thoughts—
dropped at the bottom
floor from sheer weight—
make the climb.

In the meantime, dusk;
the city shows its lights.

From this vantage,
I mark the path that,
if all lines really do travel
to infinity, would run
past the horizon
back to you.

How Beautiful, Orion

Sky is stretched with raven skin,
painted with black feathers.
Stars part its finest strands--
they come seeking the air.
And you Orion, wrapped together
by a belt and sword of light
cut your arc into that field
without once looking down,
a hunter whose quarry is night.

Taking Flight

The woman waited
with her Schnauzer,
stroking its back. Blue
fish slid through the aquarium,
people went in and out
of the busy waiting room.

She was called in,
did not return with the dog,
and I wondered how many
animals had passed to you
in just such a way,
behind a closed door, you,
the last steward of each.

You must have held each
face while emptying
the syringe, while holding back
your desire, if for just
a moment, to go with each one.

I thought, how, when I'm handed
over, I would it were you to help
me, small and naked,
that moment before I take flight.

We renew

Nine months to the day
I call, gestation complete,
sorrow carried to term.

It is your voice I need
to deliver me finally
of what was lost,

to implant fresh words
we can nurture.

We talk--

I grow

hopeful,
expectant

on the phone.

Yesterday

you wished
you could be younger
for me;
this while weaving
together thighs, sheets,
words
this while plaiting
a mat of your skill
for me to lie upon,
this after losing the silver
braids of your love.

Quarry

We chanced, while looking
for a road to the water,
on this white pockmark
more at home
on a waterless moon,

its platform now rusted
red as iron ore,
etched with hearts
surrounding teen names
and Cupid's arrows,
littered with remnants
of picnics.

Was this quarry
the destination
and not the lake itself?

Perhaps sustenance
through re-creation
for these people
in this town who tug
rocks
from the earth--

the way some pull
whitefish
from the lake,

the way those
from suburbs find
and breathe
blue water.

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