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AGAINST A WINTER SKY

presented by  
Elizabeth Bennett

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AGAINST A WINTER SKY

By

Elizabeth Bennett

A THESIS

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

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## ABSTRACT

### AGAINST A WINTER SKY

By

Elizabeth Bennett

Against a Winter Sky is the author's first book of poetry. The included poems are not intended to reveal a unified theme. Rather, they present several facets of the writer's life in an attempt to examine a variety of themes to be explored more thoroughly in future poems by the writer.

For Larry

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"An Apology for Melanie" and "First Snow" have been accepted for publication by the ENGLISH JOURNAL and will appear in a forthcoming edition.

## FOR COUSIN BETSY ON HER WEDDING DAY

Elizabeth.

Elizabeth.

We,

who are wide-hipped,

sisters who are sisterless,

stand here stout

before these men

---I the bridesmaid

you the bride---

to give your name away.

Great

Great

Grandma Delilah Lower

did it

wide-hipped,

and her sister Elizabeth too:

gave away their names,

that is,

120 years ago

just

before the War.

Delilah

married Enoch Robbins

December 14, 1861,

was with him  
six days  
only  
before he left  
to join the Union Army.  
In November  
she wrote Elizabeth  
of her nine-week-son-near-death:

"If it survives the Cough and my husband comes home safe  
I'll call it Enoch."

She did,  
and was practical, unpoetic like that,  
potent,  
gave birth to Minnie  
later,  
who gave her name to James Ferrell,  
and who,  
wide-hipped and resolute,  
gave birth  
to

Susan  
gave her name to Herbert Booth,  
mothered our mothers,  
wide-hipped and stubborn.  
And Susan's daughters have given  
their names to our fathers,

but their wide hips  
and "Elizabeth"  
back to us.

So we,  
who are sisterless,  
are Delilah's sisters:

Elizabeth

Lower

Robbins

Ferrell

Booth

Bradley Becker

Bennett---

Greenwood---

we,  
who have descended through a family of stubborn-hipped  
women  
have given our names  
to  
men!

But

we  
know,  
like Delilah,  
that names  
are only practical, unpoetic matters,  
and that it is

these wide hips  
this stoutness  
that will bear  
our Elizabeths,  
our sisters,  
our poetry  
through our granddaughters  
back to us.



## A MATTER OF EQUILIBRIUM

Standing,

my legs spread sturdy in the bottom of the boat so as not  
to rock it,

I strained,

pulled my arm back,

snapped it forward,

flicked my finger on the line just right,

and then with a whir

cast fifteen whirlpools for my father that day,

craving his approval,

and he,

in a cigar-clenched grin,

acclaimed,

"All a matter of equilibrium."

Growing bored with my game

and sleepy,

my stomach crammed with pancakes Dad had made for me,

I, nine,

peered over the boat

that cool six A.M.

in July.

My arms hugged around me

holding in the luscious warmth

that this moment was only

I---

self possessed,  
secure---  
glass lake,  
Dad,  
resplendent sky.

On the bottom of the immobile lake  
I saw dead birch branches,  
rocks,  
paralyzed weeds;  
even our silver anchor  
concealed the niche  
where the small-mouth lived.  
But I scouted further for my father,  
confidently,  
my equilibrium  
newly assured.

And then I saw him.  
Suspended  
silent,  
wise,  
the cool, green bass  
flicked his dorsal fin.  
He circled the bottom,  
never changing depths,  
self possessed,  
secure.

Under the fin,  
under the spine,  
a swim bladder,  
gaseous and sensitive to unnatural pressures,  
---soft-white---  
expands in shallow water  
contracts in deep  
to guarantee  
the equilibrium  
of the small-mouth.

Suddenly,  
to the right,  
my small-mouth darted under the boat  
I heard the inevitable whirl of my father's reel  
I saw the jerk:  
the hook was set.  
And now my fish fought pressure to the left.  
Clickety, clickety,  
up he came  
down went his head  
the hook tore his lip  
his caudal fin crippled  
in a drunken lunge.

Under the fin,  
under the spine,  
gas molecules pressed to a new volume in the swim bladder

and bounced against the wall  
of the tightening  
soft-white  
sac.

"Let's let him play!"  
my father called,  
and down,  
down,  
down he swam,  
playing his deft game.  
But now  
my small-mouth,  
eking out his equilibrium,  
was suddenly,  
gullible,  
foolish,  
and I saw,  
in my own ephemeral buoyancy,  
the cruel trickery  
of our innocence.  
  
Clickety-clickety-clickety-clickety.  
My father's wrist ticked out his  
throbbing deception;  
the gray-green blur  
lunged once,  
and then in a lurid glaze,

ascended pressureless,  
emerged in a bloody whirlpool,  
a blob of soft-white tissue  
spewing from his mouth.

## DEFEAT

"The human foot,"  
the orthopod droned,  
"is a magnificent mesh of seven, small arches.  
Five of yours,  
my dear,  
are  
undeniably,  
irrevocably  
fallen."

He prescribed  
a pair of black velvet oxfords  
that I clumped in  
for five years.  
They were huge:  
nine at nine,  
and I hid them in dusty shame,  
ball of right  
on  
toes of left,  
under St. Gregory's desks  
as Margaret McCraney giggled  
in black patent leathers.

With enameled red toes  
on the beach in July,

Margaret kicked sand at her rapt entourage,  
and they,  
tantalized,  
groped her minikin toes,  
threw her to the perch,  
her humping little frame kicking in delight.  
I dug  
my great slabs of flesh  
into the dirt  
and feigned interest in Jane Eyre.

At seventeen  
I listened to my father  
tearing at his disfigured toenails with pliers,  
the thick yellow rubble  
clacking  
in a metal waste basket.  
I contested my chromosone damage  
with bottles of Pretty Feet,  
lengthy pedicures,  
hours in the bathtub,  
imitating Margaret's neat water flicks,  
my Herculean plops  
creating huge tidal waves.

And now,  
mornings at seven,  
I still remember Margaret,

imagine her stilted in her Candies,  
tittering over daiquiris,  
as I crash along  
in dusty blue Adidas  
scaring cottontails away.



## THE AUGUST SUN AT 28

It is August  
by the blue pool  
and the hazy, hot sky  
hangs over the sun bathers  
rolling back to belly  
belly to back  
under the sun.

I,  
in my gingham bathing suit,  
am a part of the scene,  
my legs swaddled in terry cloth;  
the thighs swollen,  
the knees flabby,  
the feet thick.

I am as alone at 28  
in the green plastic webbing of my chaise lounge  
reading,  
as I was at 16  
feigning interest in Jane Eyre,  
while Margaret McCraney's enameled red toes  
captivated her entourage.

I am not built for the August sun.  
Margaret McCraney  
is. Well,

I have accepted this  
after 12 years,  
but

the August sun at 28  
glorifies not Margaret,  
but a flamboyant woman of 90,  
cool somehow,  
minikin,  
lilting in a deck chair overlooking the blue pool and the  
hazy hot sky.

In a chartreuse sun dress  
she too  
captivates an entourage,  
her laughter trilling  
from behind her jeweled teeth.

She is an enchantress,  
some ancient songbird  
luring them from the sea---  
the old, fat men  
and the young ones strutting,  
the big-bellied ladies  
and their daughters  
and granddaughters in teal bikinis (like Margaret's)  
are drawn to her  
irresistibly.

She speaks to them in melody,

laughing,  
chirping along in Yiddish-English,  
her brown eyes snapping to the music  
above the finch-beaked nose.  
Her tiny arms flap about  
as she talks,  
beating out her words.

They are enamored by her,  
as am I,  
and the entourage lingers throughout the afternoon  
to laugh  
to listen,  
seduced  
by her song.

Margaret McCraney  
never  
was as enticing  
or as bright  
or as musical  
or as beautiful  
as this chartreuse songbird,  
even  
even  
even as she hurries along with us,  
her tiny arms tucking under a green-webbed chaise lounge that  
brays and scrapes against the deck cement,

her bright-eyed-beaked smile turned earthward,  
as she hobbles along hunchbacked,  
retreating  
from the afternoon thunderstorm.

## INTRODUCTION TO SUBURBAN LIVING

I like my  
white kitchen  
in the quiet of 5:00 A.M.  
I am not alone,  
my cupboards lined  
in uneven rows  
with tomatoes stocked,  
glistening in Mason jars,  
potatoes in a brown sack  
still clinging with earth  
from the farm.

I hum,  
my curtains pulled tight across the windows,  
as I chop up the carrots  
in chunks  
for my vegetable soup.

But at 7:00,  
my soup simmering,  
I draw my curtains  
on a world  
paved in high-rise apartments, economy cars and joggers  
racing along,  
and my legs,  
two limp celery stalks,  
retreat to my bedroom closet

to practice the art of  
suburban living.

There

I strap on my new spiked sandals  
and imagine myself  
flitting about in a city garden  
among hybrid rose bushes,  
a daiquiri in my hand  
looking  
svelte,  
self possessed,  
nibbling on a scalloped carrot stick.

But these celery stalks,  
are large,  
taperless,  
limp at the ankles  
and wobble about insecurely  
in the shag carpeting  
and I think  
that I'll never ascend  
to these new heights  
gracefully

stumbling about in spiked sandals in my closet,  
my vegetable soup,  
rolling hot and succulent,  
spilling over



on the stove.



## THE PREPARATION OF SHRIMP

They are a delicacy,  
you know,  
and I buy them in a five pound box,  
unshelled and plump,  
their black eyes beaded like unground pepper  
staring back at me  
from the freezer case.

I bring them  
through the check-out lane.  
The cashier is rude,  
cracking her Bazooka in their frozen faces,  
but I ignore her,  
bag the shrimp myself,  
shield them,  
safeguarded  
at the bottom of  
a brown  
sack.

At home  
I pick them  
one by one  
from the frozen block  
with a thin knife,  
tapping,

prying at them just so  
as not to degrade  
them.

I feel  
as if these shrimp must have  
some dignity too,  
and so I am  
fastidious,  
making sure  
that each and every prawn is  
intact;  
I am proud  
that all  
possess their twenty-two legs and arching snouts  
because of me  
and my careful knife,  
and I drop them methodically  
undefiled,  
into the pot  
of boiling water.

I set the stove timer  
for three minutes  
and bide patiently,  
like a father pacing out his first born,  
wondering how I shall succeed  
with all this tangy pink flesh

I smell,  
see  
bubbling to the surface.

I am vigilant  
and retrieve my shrimp pot  
precisely  
at the buzz.

I pour the contents,  
foamy, pungent,  
in the waiting strainer.  
I turn the faucet carefully:  
water streams through  
to cool  
my prawns,  
and flushes the debris  
away.

I scrub my thin knife  
and then,  
meticulous as before,  
slit their bellies from throat to crotch  
exposing their pink flesh,  
discard their exoskeletons,  
integrity intact with twenty-two legs and arching snouts,  
carve a prudent line  
along their backs,  
flick away the brown aortas

rinse them and  
at last  
array them  
on a white  
enamel dish.

At the bottom of the strainer,  
nestled among the last few shrimp,  
I find it,  
legless,  
antennaeless,  
pincerless,  
its half carapace cracked,  
skewing the eyes  
laughing there  
at me,  
who stares with clever knife in hand,  
disbelieving,  
injured:  
How can this be?  
I have been fastidious with my shrimp,  
perfectionistic,  
and now this cock-eyed-half-a-crab  
dares  
to mock me  
in my efforts.  
I will not accept it.  
I will

not.

I study him,  
smirking,  
the defiler of my shrimp,  
perched on my palm,  
and suddenly,  
suddenly  
I see the absurdity of this position.  
This cock-eyed smile is not mockery  
but whimsy  
from the ocean:

how some daft crab  
hangs about with prawns all day,  
lives sideways,  
evades the fisherman  
the packager  
the grocer  
me  
in our conception  
of things

and sits here now  
demented  
and unpredictable,  
this cockamamie half-a-crab  
crazed  
among my shrimp.



## OUTLAW

A brown squirrel,  
scampering the chimney for an errant nut,  
miscalculates his step  
and  
plops  
into  
my  
in-laws'  
living  
room.

His bright eyes snap,  
dart the room,  
find the mantel  
crammed with ceramic sculpture.  
Up he leaps,  
clawing at the antique woodwork,  
smashing the knic-knacs,  
the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary vase,  
in his path.

Now  
he clasps  
the gold-balled drapes.

He rips,  
slits,

tears a

cock-

eyed

path across

them, gold

balls

dancing madly,

jouncing to the floor.

He scampers the kitchen tile,

leaps

to the counter,

smashing cocktails in his prance,

ice cubes clashing,

glasses crashing,

daiquiris

splashing

in our laps.

He frisks up the clanking china cabinet,

this outlaw,

scratching the woodwork with his nails,

until suddenly,

he poises motionless

atop his perch of rocking glass,

his bright eyes

snapping

at our world.



How is it we see him---

my mother-in-law,

Larry and

me

jolted rudely

from our afternoon cocktail

by his transgressions,

his miscalculated step---

how is it we see him?

The bright eyes

snap

with terror

at us,

at Larry's arm drawn back,

his hand gripped about the stone ashtray.

He flings it forward,

aimed just above the rocking glass

at this outlaw,

suddenly chastened and contrite,

his histrionics ceased to stop the rocking of our world.

He poises motionless

to shoulder

Larry's hurl,

his contrition,

our compunction:

there is  
the inevitable thud,  
the lifeless plunge,  
the bright eyes obliterated,  
brown fur bloodied  
against  
the cold tile.



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

## I.

I am  
sugar-sloshed  
and dull today,  
lethargic:  
white ripples  
hanging about my knees,  
thick slabs of pecan pie  
sleeping  
in my thighs.

## II.

I am  
a bulging ten pound can  
of Mexican peppers,  
botulistic,  
pressing out my scalloped tin;  
sticky black blood  
oozes from my thighs  
bubbling,  
drooling,  
smelling  
sweet-sour,  
my poison  
thick and viscous.



LAUNDROMAT,

a Titan whirlpool,  
sucking in life like Charybdis,  
its vortex tight  
with angry sailors.

A dimple bottomed platoon  
of limey stretch pants spotted with grease  
squeaks across the whirling wet deck,  
scowling with irritation,  
young parrots  
squawking at its heels.

Trapped in the eddy  
of their weekly odyssey,  
this oily, sweat-curled battalion of housewives  
flap their sheets angrily,  
the security of their mobile homes  
nestled in a trailer court  
behind the castle  
in Ithaca.

Furious  
with Odyssean strength,  
they heave their soggy gray underwear  
through the port holes with a scowl,  
batten the hatch,  
slap their squawking parrots



and snap  
crack  
their ragged towels  
into folded piles.

It is the fury of these sweaty housewives  
I do not understand.  
They have been hexed by Poseidon  
in this hot vortex,  
which sucks their flabby hips,  
their lives  
into passionate hate,  
leaving even bright-eyed Athene  
muttering and  
confused.





## AUGUST HAZE

My father-in-law,  
having grown furious in the August haze,  
has blackened Wanda's eyes again,  
and sits mesmerized in his shorts,  
eating bologna and Nabisco crackers,  
watching a sticky T.V.

Wanda, inured to the heat,  
clucks away my help,  
fries her Sunday chicken,  
scrubs sweet puppy excrement from the pantry floor,  
and chatters her fury away  
with National Enquirer news.  
I, clucked away and drowsy-eyed,  
sugar the lemonade.

In the field,  
stripped to their waists,  
Larry and Brian sweat away their fury,  
carrying hot rocks in the sun.  
Black flies chew at their ankles.  
I sweeten their load with cold, wet glasses;  
they smile energized,  
wise,  
and wave away  
my sleepy aid.



I lift my heat-heavy feet to the barn,  
and offer Moraff a sugar cube in appeasement.  
He shakes his mane tangled head.

A hot breeze slaps my face  
as I turn rejected from the silent, gray barn.  
A black rooster  
spurs at my legs,  
but I,  
muscle-weary and confused,  
am  
furyless.

I turn alone  
back to the smug-hot house,  
seeking sleep,  
release  
of its stingy secret  
that has sweltered in fury for thirty years,  
while the willow,  
ant-infested,  
in the brown grass outside,  
scratches desperately  
at the  
hot,  
clean  
windows.



## STITCHING UP THE KITTEN

It takes three of us  
to hold the bleeding kitten down,  
three of us,  
to master the writhing,  
three of us crouching on the kitchen floor  
as Larry takes the stitches  
in the gaping chest.

The kitten,  
sobbing like a betrayed child,  
claws at us savagely,  
and astonishes us with his strength.  
The eye the dog has torn into his chest  
stares back at us  
gawking,  
heaving blood.

It was April  
sometime  
when the kittens were born  
in the loft  
in the old barn,  
for I saw them,  
small as mice  
suckling at their mother.  
I chose the gray one



even then  
for he was fattest,  
feistiest,  
sucking at the fullest teat.

And on a day  
of whiffing spring winds  
and clouds  
puffing along a May sky,  
I stole him from the sagging barn,  
giggling at his attacks,  
his minuscule nails  
clean and scratching  
at my chest.

I emptied him into the kitchen,  
and he skipped along the linoleum,  
tore over the table  
and found his perch  
atop the best chair,  
he,  
the new house cat,  
snagging at the fabric.

Each time I returned to the farm  
the gray kitten  
leaped  
to scratch at my chest.  
I laughed at the mock savagery,





for his attacks  
were less intense,  
tolerant  
somehow by August.

It is brilliant October today.  
We have experienced the first frost.  
And this Indian summer  
reminds me of the day I stole the kitten from the barn:  
the wind,  
the clouds,  
the sky,

but only the savagery is real now  
the writhing  
the clawing  
the sobbing  
the heaving, gawking chest  
intense,  
intolerant  
of our stitching up mortality  
on the kitchen floor.



## ADVENT

Those cold December mornings  
when I was eight,  
I carried to Mass,  
in a green lunch box,  
my scummy hot chocolate and soggy toast.  
Our heads,  
capped in those crazy red beanies,  
bobbed after Communion  
when Sister clacked out the final genuflection.  
Solemnly,  
we filed from God's House  
three and a half tile squares apart,  
and crossed ourselves with Holy Water  
that dripped down our flat little chests.  
Then,  
in a sudden babble of virgin tongues,  
we squish-squeaked off to our classroom in fur-topped  
rubber boots,  
to savor our cocoa  
and the advent  
of our Christmas poetry booklets.  
  
They were lavish creations,  
that Sister Lucien Marie valued over multiplication tables  
and phonics,  
and we fevered over them,



sent our mothers  
to the hall closet for scissors,  
to the attic for Christmas cards, their winter nights and  
manger scenes redeemed and treasured from years before,  
to the Soo, sixty miles and back, searching for Ideals.  
We gorged on fir green frosting and divinity,  
pampered ourselves with hours of Christmas music,  
straining from our scratched 78's,  
and read prolifically from wonderful poets,  
Sophie Jewett,  
Christina G. Rossetti,  
Lydia Avery Coonley Ward.

And then  
we flowed  
the richness of their poems  
with the vermillion of our pens,  
agonizing on white sheets,  
our straddled legs wrapped round the rungs  
of wooden chairs.  
Sweaty with ecstasy,  
we swaddled our creations  
in holly scrawls and bits of ragged Christmas cards.  
But only then could we rest,  
our fingers clutching the moist beads of our rosaries,  
as we collapsed in warm beds  
those fine December nights.

## A CHILD'S METHODOLOGY

## I.

When her babies dirtied themselves,  
my mother treated it all with patient methodology:  
    extracted the dirty diapers,  
    rinsed them,  
    soaked them,  
    washed them,  
    stirred them with a wooden spoon to boiled sterility,  
    hung them in methodical rows  
        white as baby rabbits' feet,  
        flapping in the snow  
        of a squally sky.

My mother methodized us:  
    monogrammed our names in Buster Brown's,  
    wove them into Christmas stockings,  
    carved them in silver baby cups,  
  
    planned our birthdays  
        around the seasons  
        and the cycle of her  
        fertility.

## II.

That's why

we never understood  
why  
she did it---  
had Beeg when she was 40,  
that is.  
Well,  
we hated the methodology and smell  
of diaper pails,  
besides  
we were into hocus-pocus  
then.

So we called him Houdini,  
because we wanted him to  
think  
he was magic.  
Houdini Man Beeg,  
with the knot  
in his carotid  
that bulged  
huge  
and blue  
if he cried too hard.

He came with that hex.

### III.

We enchanted him,





Houdini Man Beeg:

bound him in handcuffs  
    (and left him the key),  
tied him in twine  
    (that could easily break),  
gagged him and left him  
    (in slip knots he slid).

At two,  
he was bewildered by our charms  
and bewitched by his own.  
He thought he was magic,  
so we knew it was time for his initiation  
into Tartarus  
to which demonology  
(we knew)  
could never apply.

#### IV.

It was one of those monstrous couches  
nubbed brown  
that pulled up and out and into a bed  
huge  
enough for Uncle Hi.  
This was Tartarus,  
about which we primed  
our Houdini Man Beeg:  
    taught him how



to hold his breath  
to lie silently  
to conserve his air in order  
to survive.

And so we folded him up  
(He begged for handcuffs too, but we said that that would  
come next.)  
and down.

V.

At first there was nothing,  
a silent lump of upholstery.

Then we

heard the deadened sobs,  
stared at the writhing lump of furniture and  
laughed in horror at each other,

and I

saw the sorceress standing, stirring the  
wooden spoon,  
saw that we could never exorcise all our  
badness,

and I,  
his mother,  
pulled him wet-hot  
gasping blue  
from his Tartarus,

kissing the carotid,  
throbbing,  
throbbing,  
throbbing,

and I  
knew

that just as there had been method in our  
magic,  
that there was magic in her method, and  
that there always would be  
that

black  
and flapping  
against a winter sky.

## AN APOLOGY FOR MELANIE

Your padded hips  
pleated in flannel gray  
betray your yellow braids  
and scuff-toed shoes,  
negate your adolescence,  
and bloom  
like the woman that you are.

I know the indecision behind those violet eyes,  
I know the hesitant clops and their clash with clapping  
lockers,  
I know the laugh that snorts with teenage restroom giggles,  
and disappears at frigid stares,  
I feel the humiliation each time your scarlet cheeks  
undress your heart.

The other day  
when you confided in me that you, "kinda like Forest",  
I teased you flippantly  
like I do the rest,  
because I,  
the woman,  
did not know what else to do.  
And for that I apologize,  
for there is nothing quite so terrifying  
as being in love



at thirteen.



## MIXING METAPHORS

Like imperfect metaphors,  
they screech their rubber soles at my desk,  
as if to brake themselves---  
but then are off!

This time  
racers of chariots,  
gushing blood,  
gouging flesh flaps  
at their bare heels.

And I teach them poetry,  
these barbaric chariot racers of thirteen,  
these drivers of Porsches, metallic cherries zooming down  
a mountain pass at 90,  
all 90,  
skewing in their seats  
to win control.

But

I am the pedagogue  
who has prepared:  
a lecture on onomatopoeia,  
a counting game beating out the hum of dactylic hexameter,  
and fifteen impressive piles of poetry worksheets,  
crisscrossed neatly,  
stacked on the formica table top.

My hands are slit with paper cuts,  
purpled with the blood of  
Perfecopy Duplicator Fluid.

We meet  
at some ancient arena,  
on some treacherous mountain pass,  
in a windowless white room posterred with Frost.  
Here we study poetry.

I, the poet who cannot mix her metaphors,  
extoll the virtue of Homer from the lectern  
and give them ambrosia.

And they, the mixers of metaphors,  
are unaffected,  
unappeased  
by my gods  
and kneel down  
at their wheels

to plunge their arms into a huge black vat of thick oil,  
pull them back,  
slicked smooth and unctuous to the elbow.

And then,  
blood at the heels,  
wet tongues uncontained at the corners of mouths,  
appeased,

they get down to the poetry  
of greasing their axles.

TO A NINTH GRADE CLASS OF 33

It's Thursday morning  
and I've no poem for tonight  
and there you sit cracking your Bubble Yum,  
carving, "Langwige Arts Sucks,"  
on the desk ahead of you.

"Can I borrow a pencil?"

"I forgot my book."

"What page did you say?"

"I would have brought the assignment, Mrs. Bennett, but  
my dog was sick last night and threw up all over it  
and all I could wipe off were the big chunks. It was  
gross."

I'd level with you,  
and you would acquiesce,  
stifling your giggles,  
tiptoeing to the pencil sharpener,  
turning the pages of your books surreptitiously.

But

I could never concentrate,  
knowing that I had muted  
the ragtime of your raucous farts.

## SEEING BACKWARDS

## I.

They come to me  
vibrant  
from  
dinner guests,  
K-Mart Blue Light Special Days,  
my next door neighbor who rattles with senility.  
Their little sprouts  
shoot  
green youth,  
but I give them age spots  
turn their livers bad with jaundice,  
drown them,  
starve them,  
kill them all.

It is not that I do not care about my plants.  
I do.  
I give them my time---  
water them diligently,  
read volumes about their care,  
ask advice from the checkout girl at Kroger,  
whose Boston fern is lush in February---  
but still  
I kill them.

## II.

You should see Paul,  
 an Eagle Scout,  
 stout  
 and firmly planted.

His mother could overmilk his smile for seven years straight,  
 but I know Paul.

He'd still be  
 springing circles into class,  
 crashing into lockers,  
 all two hundred and five pounds  
 pumped full  
 with smiles  
 and gallons  
 of good blood.

But Paul

sees

backwards,

his

brain

trick

ing

words,

and we (his teachers, parents, psychologists, counselors)  
 have meetings concerning his dyslexia, worry about his  
 self concept, and agonize over methods that would allow  
 him to see straight.

But

Paul

still

sees

backwards,

still

pumps a smile

of good blood,

still

springs circles

through lockers

to class

around us

who

still

spraymist

our

redwood.

III.

So

when I discover my rubber plant

has coughed up

but another yellowed leaf,

I think of Paul,

shooting into class to find his work all circled bloody.

I think of Paul,



watering orchids,  
making metaphors  
with  
his  
resilience.



## DIAGNOSIS

Trapped,  
he scratches his dirty neck,  
licks his field of cold sores  
and snorts his snot back in.

I read the test instructions:  
"Be sure to make heavy black marks,  
filling the entire oval.  
Questions?  
Turn the page and begin."

He snorts again.  
His angular face glistens with  
pus.  
The skin pulls tight across the  
jig saw teeth.  
He turns the page  
and scrawls an "0".  
Raw boned elbows jut out  
to hold the trollish face.  
Hard brown eyes pierce  
the clock  
and  
Lisa,  
pretty and petite.

Teachers in September,  
with greatest sensitivity,  
diagnose defiance,  
and shake their heads at teacher failures  
in the past.

I know the rebellious slouching now,  
and vow that I  
can cure the cause  
by June.

I stoop by his desk,  
and the bulging brown eyes roll down.  
The smell of dirty underwear and cigarettes  
irritates me.

I ask if I can help  
and notice that the cold sores drool  
down his face.

The clock ticks.

He shakes his head,  
picks a grease packed fingernail,  
and snot creeps off his jutting lip.

I retreat,  
my mouth pulled to a smile,  
knowing that there are some  
who will always rebel  
and knowing too  
that June,

of course,

is only a winter away.

## FIRST SNOW

They say you were blasting  
through some subdivision at 70,  
and the giggling, beer-filled fourteen-year-old next to you,  
her breasts up tight against your elbow,  
jerked the wheel  
through your hands.  
And so you died that night  
bleeding in your souped up Camaro.

I never had any hope for you.  
You walked into class,  
a two-time repeater,  
in an axle-grease-stained denim jacket lined in imitation  
sheepskin,  
your hair hanging in oily clumps,  
rectangular wire rims of thick glass  
sagging on your pimply nose.  
But there was no belligerence,  
no cocky five-minute-late saunter across the room,  
no chair scraping thud into your seat.  
You always slipped in secretly  
before the bell,  
sitting inconspicuous  
and politely bored,  
in that axle-grease-stained denim jacket lined in imitation  
sheepskin.

All I ever wanted you to see  
 was that Santiago typified a Hemingway Hero.  
 And you,  
 in your axle-grease-stained denim jacket lined in imitation  
     sheepskin,  
 would write,

" . . . he caught that big fish and wouldn't leave it for nuthin  
     and he kept saling and saling and so that fish dyed  
     and got all ate up but would Santago leave him no cuz  
     he was so prod and he stuke with him even when that  
     fish was know good he would have dyed for that fish."

But, God, you drew beautiful carburetors  
 in the margins,  
 lovely curving manifolds,  
 always a souped up Camaro parked  
 under your name.

Today  
 my classes squirm all giggly and slush-happy  
 with the innocence of the first snow,  
 and the chalk squeaks,  
 and the fourteen-year-olds chatter about their red velvet  
     pants for Christmas parties,  
 and you lie under this snow cold in a corduroy suit, your  
     face smashed against the ridiculous pink satin,  
 and nobody even cares,  
 Mat,  
 that in dying that night  
 you bled  
 in your souped up Camaro.

## DEBAUCH

Blood-red and gaudy,  
cheap crushed velvet curtains  
lop at the cigarette stained windows  
of the Marine Bar.  
A group called Savannah  
sings for the backs  
of the patrons,  
leaning on plastic table tops with red meshed candles,  
lost in a pool game  
at the back of the pine panelled room.  
I do not enjoy pool  
or the paltriness  
of the Marine Bar  
in scarlet October.

Six years ago  
on the hill,  
above the lake flung cold and clean  
with brisk October winds,  
my cancer-ridden father  
huddled close to the brick chipped chimney,  
clutched by a scarlet vine.  
In his final venture across the lake,  
the brain tumor,  
the black patch on his eye,

the limp right leg,  
the scarlet October wind  
pushed him down the hill  
in a jaunty, drunken gait  
to the rocking boat.  
Three times he fell,  
swearing lavishly:  
a drunken sailor,  
staggering home from a whiskey spree.  
On the third lunge  
he spat  
brilliant pools of scarlet blood  
into the dying earth.

Suddenly,  
from the men's room of the Marine Bar,  
roll two greasy boys  
slurring lusty ultimatums at each other.  
They are a cocky network of arms and legs,  
now jolting the pool table to a precarious list,  
the pulsing cords at their necks  
throbbing with young blood.

In an extravagant fury  
the boy with the torn T-shirt and the bulging chest  
rocks to his feet.  
In a spasm of convulsive lunges  
his arm lashes out

to clutch  
then shatter  
a pitcher sloshing with beer.  
His great chest swelling,  
his arm thrust out, throbbing with rage,  
he stands square-footed,  
victorious,  
heaving over the pool table,  
spitting scarlet life  
onto the green felt.



## PEANUT BRITTLE SEASON

When duck hunting brought Dad home  
smelling of cigars  
and Hershey Kisses,  
and red drenched maple leaves  
splashed across his boots,  
you could be sure  
peanut brittle season  
had begun.

Those nights until Christmas  
my mother,  
cold,  
loveless,  
in the basement sorted clothes,  
but Dad and I  
consorted in the lush oak of his den,  
laughing,  
exchanging Christmas secrets,  
Hershey Kisses,  
shucking peanuts  
into a great, two gallon  
potato chip tin.

Mother  
never shared her secrets  
or her kisses,

her hair pulled back in a tight French roll;  
she went to bed  
between our giggles and whispers,  
without our ever knowing.

But mornings at 5:00  
she'd tease her sleeping family  
with the smell of roasting peanuts  
and the slap of bubbling gold  
against buttered marble.

Then came  
the scratching of two furious forks,  
stretching the candy  
before it set.

The metallic clank against marble  
signalled the abandonment of the forks,  
and we knew her own buttered fingers  
caressed the hot gold now,  
sumptuous,  
lush,  
thick with snapping peanuts.

This was her secret---  
the Ferrell family recipe she inherited with her genes,  
Christmas for acquaintances:  
the barber and the newsboy,  
five pounds of choicest gold  
to the nuns

and Father Joe.

At 7:00

when we awoke,

tantalized by the smell of her sweet secret,

we descended the cold stairs,

with dreams of sucking,

savoring

a golden mound before breakfast.

We found the kitchen empty:

mother in the basement

sorting clothes,

her secret hoarded away

somewhere,

somewhere.

A stingy white sauce dish

held the solitary trace of her horde,

her offering to us:

scant threads of translucent sugar

sticking to its sides.

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