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This is to certify that the

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SNOW TOMATOES

presented by

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of the requirements for

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Diane Wakoski

Major professor

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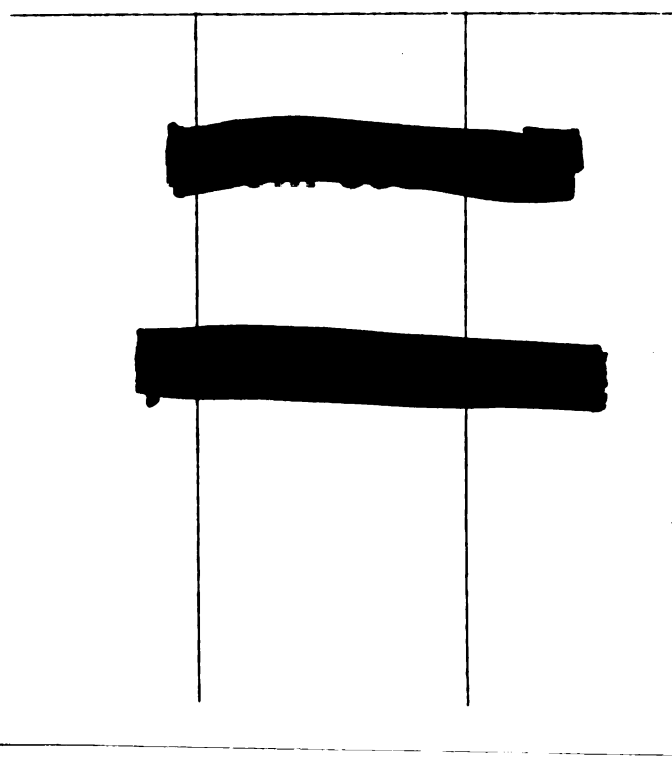

SNOW TOMATOES

By

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A THESIS

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Clean Like A Splinter

One in red
steps onto the board
pauses in concentration
springs back into somersault
around twice
then fast into the water
like a nail through soft wood
and clean.

Another
rubs his calves
with chamois
measures gait of approach
bounds high
arms out in rigid swan dive
clicks them together like scissors
just as his nails
reach water.

The next
all shoulders and stripes
rides the limit
whirls like a drill
punches through the surface
is under.

The discipline of the mind
which surpasses innate fears
resistance
against movement, unusual angle,
can lend itself malleable
to reason, command,
move several directions in a motion
injury certain
without perfect control.

On the ten meter platform
the boy stares down
the pool below,
toes in sure grip from falling
as if it could help.
The crowd is not watching
the divers.
Those behind him in line
add to the taunting
which rises up around him
like muck.

He sees the divers
snap taut as whips
spin effortless as lariats
from various meters
then bite into the water
sure as chainsaws.

Poolside, the coach
gestures changes
in a rush of movement,
asking more angle
harder motion like a gunshot.

The precision of the mind
when it evinces logic,
controls the lobes that warn
against
precarious dips and spins,
exercises reason
over basal knowledge.

A woman leaps
hovers as if she has a choice
flicks her waist
turns fluidly
then into the water
quick as a slap.

The crowd watches
the boy
just away from the pool
wants his yelp of descent
to see him chunk down
like a jackhammer,
his sound better than the divers'.

On lower platforms
his friends drop off
solidly as a big hand
laid square on the shoulder.

The guard whistles him back
so others may jump,
he retreats along the rail
sees them step easy
over the edge
moves again to the front
memorizes the path down
as if that could help.

The sometime refusal of the mind
to accept the logical--
that a drop from ten meters
will not likely injure,
yet the absurdity of the human body
falling through space
clean as a foghorn.
It is often what is unusual
that seems dangerous.
Society protects the individual
with guards and coaches.
It is order and will,
control,
that overcome fear,

like learning to handle rattlesnakes,
tamping the jaws locked-open,
retaining the value of the unknown
yet subjugating it.

A few remain with the boy
they are dripping
begin to tremble
but are silent, patient.
As the boy inclines slightly
another sidles up behind him,
body drawn back
foot snug against the other's backside,
nudges him over.
He goes
quiet.

Limitations Of Bone

According to a local
gerontologist, interviewed
by WKAR radio, the aging
process starts at thirty
when the brain begins
to shrink.

It must dissolve
the cells sifting like silt
through the filter of skull.
It must ooze into the hair,
drizzling the strands into gray.

The gray matter sodden and mushy
as lobster cooked dead,
taut membranes slackening as if the brain
seeped like fog into the cranium,
as if the head were filled with mud.

Or the mass compresses
congeals like a roux
sticky as putty
in the cerebrum, cerebellum,
leaden weight of ash.

There must be gaps as the brain recedes.
If I shook my head like a gourd
when the time came,
at sixty or seventy,

I might hear the dried inner workings
report the limits of bone.

The hints of gray that float in my eyes
must be a first sign
like newly muddied snow,
so that years from now the gray will spread
like a new bruise
into obsidian gray,
as, when a child viewing an eclipse,
I looked at the sun
through a strip of exposed film,
my clear vision smudging over
like a window.

I am waiting to find which
part of my brain will disintegrate first,
though by the time I notice,
first sign will no longer be an issue.
Then the brain stem,
monitor of heart beat and breathing,
will thicken like mold.
If I sleep too soundly
the smooth gray muscles of the lungs
will hinge, catch
function no longer.

More likely flecks of brain matter
are sloughed off like a scab or virus,
the unfeeling brain graying
like a river in January thaw.

If at seventy or eighty
in autopsy
they shear off my skull,
they may find my brain
taut and hard as a fist,
the sludge of connective tissue
swollen and taking up the slack.
Or pluck it from the skull's cavity
like a mushroom,
the gray matter reddened and absolute:
the gray splat of a blood-filled mosquito,
the gray of long-dead animals in the road.

Snow Tomatoes

In winter
the only tomatoes
available in Michigan
look to have been
grown in snow.
The flesh is anemic, ochre,
as if the fruit has been bled
of its color by icicle leeches
thinly dripping into snow,
redness sliding away
like the blade of a stiletto.
Though they are from California
or raised in hothouses,
you can almost imagine
translucent gardens of tomatoes
growing in frozen rows,
the stalks fibrous and sturdy,
the ripe fruit a compromise
between blood clot and pearl.

In winter
you almost have to
pound the tomatoes
like veal
to eat them.
If you slice into one

it will be sketchy
and crystalline--
a skeleton of a tomato
if it had one--
like the beaded, outlined spaces
in a balled length of chain.
The tomatoes snag and dull
whichever knife you use
as ice floes trap
dead timber at a rapids,
blunting jagged edges.
Or,
they are soft and thick
like a fetid marsh or bog
which doesn't quite freeze over,
but would take you quickly
through its surface
if you stepped onto it,
like a scalpel's blade
sliding through the brain's gray matter.

In winter
eschew tomatoes
for they will betray you
like pistachio nuts cracked open
to reach the prized meat inside,
but somehow filled with ash instead.
Avoid these tomatoes.

They are something which
is rotten
at its best moment of ripeness,
like an axe murderer at twenty.
If you must have tomatoes,
find photographs of them
for they will be far more satisfying
than the tangible fruit.

In winter
tomatoes
satisfy the palate
only in theory.

Time-Lapse Photography

The hanging plants in my living room
vibrantly score the white stucco walls,
move slow as the cloth Marimekko they border,
creep along the wall like green
vapor trails
which simply appear in a thin sky
though you can't see the movement
can't see the jet.
In the corner the philodendron spills lush vines
from its ceiling basket,
tracking the white with four feet of
meandering green highways, interstates, junctions
on a tourist's map.
Near the window the Chinese evergreen
undulates in a windfall of leaves
from an air current,
as rushes near a riverbank
beckon with tapered shoots
for someone, a weaver,
to gather them.

In Biology class we watched films of plants
shown in time-lapse photography.
In fifteen seconds you could see
a 72 hour growth cycle,

could see a flower fist its way
from a talon of green, fully grown,
could see the growth that eludes our daily vision.
I can't resist the yearning
to snap on my bedroom light
thinking I can catch a plant
in the midst of movement, unaware,
like the fashion mannequins
who train themselves to remain motionless for hours--
and large salaries--
ignoring cravings to blink, scratch,
and if you look at them
you know that they are human,
can move if they wish,
but choose not to.
I am convinced that plants
grow in the dark
arresting a guilty shoot
halting a new spike
if they sense someone hunts their movement.

In my bedroom window
the burro's tail shakes out its green-grape braids
Rapunzel, Rapunzel,
letting down her hair.
The aloe plant on the bookshelf
spreads its watery thick leaves in calculated scores,

an old lady at the opera with jade fan,
anemic, swollen fingers
splayed along the silk.
Next to the succulent
a cliff-brake fern
sizzles up out of its dark pot--green lightning.

The greenhouse on Grand River boasts exotic plants,
shocked unearthly green,
the green-Martian green of a green-bottle fly,
the neon green of parrots,
the color so vivid I have to touch the plants
to make sure they are real.
Walking through the foliage
dodging talons thrust out into the hothouse aisles
like water witches,
I want to possess
every plant I see:

the firecracker vine
the bat-wing coral tree
the telegraph plant which spreads like gossip, in the sun
patient lucy
the flame-of-the-woods with its leaves dark as spinach
the chenille plant tasselled in red like a bathrobe sash
the windmill palm fronds fanned out
like a deck of green cards
the rosary vine

the mother spleen wort

the maidenhair fern filigreed and delicate
as a girl's lace slip.

I am convinced that I could catch

one of those plants

mid-growth, unaware,

its energy diffused--

at being exotic in the Midwest--

I could watch the spiralling-out of new tendrils,

could hear them declare growth in photosynthesis

with a rustle of stems;

I could listen for the clink of cell on cell,

would not need a time-lapse camera

for the rush of flowering

like a suddenness of green kernels exploding

into white popcorn big as magnolia blossoms.

Breaking The Back Window With A Wooden Spoon

In the street today
I smashed my kitchen appliances,
watching them settle in heaps
on the pavement.
The smaller appliances
will have to be replaced.
I couldn't move the stove
though I blackened both my eyes
trying.
Fragments of harvest-gold and avocado-green
are scattered through the grass
like steel traps
that spring when eyes hit them.
They were whispering to me--
I couldn't stand that.
I can still hear them,
their scraps of voices
find my ears like
mines when ships
strike them.

When I was five
my father bought a horse for me
and a rifle for himself.
He taught me to ride the horse
back and forth in the field

behind our house.
While I rode he fired
the rifle at
targets he had set up nearby.
He made me ride the horse when
I didn't want to.
When I was six
he shot at
me while I rode.
As the horse and I
raced panicked
back and forth
he shot at us over and over.
At first I stopped riding and ran,
but when he caught me
he hit me and hit me,
so I rode when he told me to
after that.
One bullet took a mole off my neck.
The horse and I both would scream.
My mother,
watching from the kitchen window,
screamed too, but never
helped me.
I could see her mouth
opening behind the glass

Once she ran into the field
pleading with my father to
for God's sake stop.
He laughed and shot her
in the leg,
saying,
Itwasanaccidentyougotwhatyoudeservedbitch.
He stalked into the house
and went to sleep
while I stumbled
off the horse to call
for help.
After that, my mother stayed in the kitchen
whenever he shot at me.
Those nights they screamed for hours.
My mother was always bruised,
he said he'd shoot the tongue
right out of her mouth
if she told--
I think he had already.

It is not enough to ruin
my kitchen appliances.
Someone,
my husband,
will simply replace them.
There must be more.
I shredded my nails

to the knuckle
peeling up the carpet,
and broke the back window
with a wooden spoon.
I threw my wedding rings
down the disposal--
the diamonds were my mother's.
I liked watching them
curl down the drain
with potato peels and egg shells.
The stones hissed at me like
maggots or earlobes or voices
striking dry ice.

Maybe I will shoot my father
and my horse
and bury them together.

Something Ready To Be Found

Every day I walk into the wooded areas
behind my house
looking for bodies.
I know they are out there
hiding like slivers in skin,
festering,
suppurating,
waiting to be excised.
Day after day I read newspaper accounts
of the murderers who leave
bodies in secluded areas,
faces flush with clotted leaves.
It is not the finding
which disturbs me,
that would pass quickly
as a slap,
but the waiting.
I cannot tolerate having something
out there ready to be found,
waiting to disrupt my life.
There would be questions to answer,
forensic photographers,
unwanted attention.
These killers typically accost
their victims late at night

leaving the bodies in coagulated underbrush,
behind trees;
it is sometimes months
before they are found.

It happened to me before,
though I knew little about waiting then.
When I was a young girl in Germany,
during the war,
my mother and I were walking
with my aunt who hated us both--
hated my mother for her quick mind,
for being a younger sister,
and hated me for my mother;
   my aunt later went crazy,
   they put her away for catching,
   stunning,
   then killing small animals, pets,
   immersing them live in cement,
   lining them up on fence posts
   outside her home;
   who drew designs on the sanitarium walls
   with her own shit
   until they restrained her;
when the bombing began again.

We were separated in the rush for cover,

my aunt and I reaching shelter,
my mother not with us.
Later we searched for her;
my aunt found her
in the rubble of a building.
I tried to spring away
but my aunt caught me
forced me to look at
what was left of my mother,
holding my head,
laughing,
as I strained to turn away,
holding my gaze there
until I lost consciousness,
perhaps even after that.

It has become an obsession,
this searching for bodies.
It has become routine,
as natural as the throat's glottis
closing involuntarily
so that breathing and swallowing
remain separated.
It was only while reading
a letter telling of my aunt's death,
some time ago,
that it all came back to me,

that the notion of waiting
seemed to suddenly make sense,
the idea of waiting no longer
making even more sense.

The Testing Of Values

I imagine him
being lashed
to trees, posts, doors,
the way you would anchor shutters
in anticipation of a hurricane,
finding anything to be
fastened to
which would keep him upright
while he slept.

Hundreds of years ago
there was a monk
whose name no one remembers
and who, himself,
is remembered for one reason only:
near the end of his brief life
he took a vow of asceticism--
which must have made the most pious
of monks cringe,
or bristle because he had thought of it first--
claiming he would never again
sit
or lie down,
but would remain
standing
until his death.

I wonder what compelled him
to make that vow.
It does not seem
an act of humility,
but pride perhaps,
the way he claimed to be able to
supersede what must have been
an agonizing need
after weeks of walking,
standing,
and he must have become simplistic
like a doric column
just standing there,
concerned only with standing,
he must have been able to think
of nothing else.

Growing up in Calvinist Grand Rapids,
and spending many hours
a week in church,
though not by choice,
I did not believe,
but wanted to.
I considered extremes,
thinking I would convince myself,
or someone,
that I did believe
if only I could:

fast for a month,
pray for an hour every day,
treat my sister charitably--
all certainly extremes
for a ten-year-old.
But I did none of those things,
so others thought I believed.
I lamented, felt isolated,
wanting a Bible verse or hymn
to swallow like a potion
so I would believe.

I hated my sister
for singing with conviction,
for believing so easily,
thinking myself cheated.
At a youth-group retreat
I paddled a canoe
alone
an entire day,
hid in the obscure marshes
of the lake
to escape the
laying-on of hands,
spiritual growth workshops,
group prayer sessions.
My hands blistered badly
from the paddle

but I almost enjoyed
the pain.

I wonder if that monk
who carried out his extreme,
while I did not,
was trying to convince himself
of his belief.
I wonder if he ever stumbled, faltered, fell,
stole away into the forest
alone
late at night
to lie down
or to torture himself
with the temptation of it,
while I knew that
anything which requires
an extreme
to test its worth,
needs no testing.

Choosing Shoes

Aunt Evelyn stood in a factory every day
for forty-six years
sorting three sizes of bolts
into separate trays
as they passed by her on the line.
When the whistle blew at 5:00
she walked the two blocks home
in heavy black shoes,
her ankles swelling from the laced tops
like souffles.

She never married but lived
with her parents
until they died.
We visited them every summer.
In the hottest weather
she wore the thick oxfords,
changing to a newer pair
every Sunday for church and for
her role as Sunday School Superintendant.

Aunt Evelyn lived a sparse life,
meals eaten at a faded white formica kitchen table,
evenings spent reading devotional materials or
listening to inspirational music,
nights sleeping between pressed white sheets

with her hair stamped in pincurls.

My mother said my aunt
had spent so many years on her feet
that her size 8 shoe was now a 9 or 9½,
but when at the shoestore
she insisted on the smaller size.

I thought of the ugly stepsisters in Cinderella,
one of whom cut off her heel,
and one, her big toe,
to fit the glass slipper,
each being caught by the telltale blood.
But my aunt's feet mushroomed
from her shoes
like the five-pound sand ankle weights
my brothers wore during training:
her ankles pale and big
as igloos swelling out of
a frozen black tundra.

Aunt Evelyn has now retired
and lives in a modest apartment
halfway between the state prison and the state hospital
which account for half of Waupun's population.
I doubt that she will ever realize
her feet have grown.

Funeral Flower Arrangements

My cousin drove a hearse
dusted the casket showroom
helped with the embalming
and lived on the upper floor of a funeral home
     to put himself through college.
The hearse was air-conditioned
with black leather seats
he could sink into like a hammock.
Returning
            alone
from the cemetary
he played the radio full volume.

He wrote me
that the odor of flowers
       which followed him like gnats
bothered him--
probably because he'd had asthma as a kid,
which flowers worsened--
all else seemed tolerable.
Funeral flower arrangements
in rigid cardboard vases,
casket sprays with their ribbons
   announcing:
       brother

father

grandfather.

Chrysanthemums

cool to the touch as formaldehyde,

purple statice

stiff as the brushes

he used to clean

the stainless steel work table

where each client was readied

for viewing.

Because the stench of the flowers

followed him into his tiny second floor apartment,

he stuffed towels under the door,

bought a huge window fan to draw in outside air,

burned pine and sandalwood incense,

cooked liver and onions, smelt,

all to no avail--

the odor persisted.

Visiting our family

on a brief vacation

during the slow season,

he claimed the funeral home

didn't bother him,

that he was comfortable

working with the dead.

But I noticed how he flinched
as we passed a florist
on driving him to the airport.
The next day
I found the spring flowers my mother
had placed unknowingly
in the guest room for him,
at the other end of the house.

My cousin told me of a dream
he had had
just several weeks ago.
He woke within the dream
horrified to see the flowers from all six viewing rooms
banking his bed on their wire stands,
lined up like a marching band
with the casket sprays
draped at the foot of the bed
as if a second blanket.
The flowers were doubling, tripling
their size.
Moving, leaning toward him
their smell increased
was visible in clouds
the way trains derail
spreading ammonium chloride vapors.
Choking,

knocking aside the ferns
as they reached for him,
he realized the flowers were all plastic,
yet the fumes continued.
He ran downstairs
into the showroom
leapt into a bronze casket
pulling the lid closed,
the hermetic seal
tamping out the stench of the flowers.
He could hear the scratch of the stems
against the lid,
woke just as the air ran out.

My cousin maintains
his dream was not related to
his leaving the funeral home
the next week
for employment in the reference section of a library,
and to live in a modern dormitory
with a closed air circulation system.
He claims the pay was lousy
and he couldn't get along with his co-workers.

I agree.
It probably had little to do
with flowers.

Silent Confrontations

On the day of an horrendous snowstorm
my parents, sister, and I
watched my three brothers play
on three different teams
in three different games
in three different cities.
I could not imagine a purer definition of hell.
Hell = Basketball.
I thought basketball a kind of religion,
the national anthem, nightly line-up announcement,
beginning jump-ball, half-time,
all rituals connected to a kind of church service.
Our team of good guys, or the saved,
vs.
the pagan other team, the sinners.
Our players rarely or never received technical fouls,
except on occasion when reacting to
a referee's obviously bad call,
perhaps slamming the ball down so it bounced
ten feet into the air,
but never swearing, and immediately repentant.
My mother told my brothers, in turn,
that she would haul them off the court
by the ear in front of their college teammates
if they ever got a technical.

Though I prayed to see that happen
none of them obliged me.
But, during an out-of-state game
we could not attend,
the oldest of my brothers cursed enthusiastically
at a bad call, sitting on the bench
for the entire second half.

In my childhood I read as much as I breathed,
sitting under an enormous tree in summers
reading as many as six books each day,
and in winters closing out the basketball world
as I read in the bleachers at each game.
Especially I enjoyed any story which occurred
before basketball was invented.
Once I read about five Chinese brothers
each of whom had a special talent.
One could stretch his legs at will
to span hundreds of miles,
the youngest had the ability to draw
the entire sea into his mouth.
Each day he would swallow the ocean,
allowing his older brothers to gather fish
as they pleased from the sea's exposed floor.
But they grew increasingly greedy,
fishing longer and longer each day,
until brother number five warned them,

gesticulating frantically,
that they must stop, that they were in danger.
The other four paid him no heed
and were therefore drowned
as their brother, in horror,
watched the water shoot back.

I counted nineteen cars off the road
that day, as we drove in an old Ford
from game to game to game.
My father missed the last exit,
the sign nearly hidden by snow,
by only a few yards,
so my mother stood on the freeway's median
directing the car backwards
nearly being hit several times
by passing cars.
I cursed silently in the back seat
watching in the rear-view mirror
as my father bit his lip, scowling.
They had many silent confrontations
having learned it was better not to say anything,
than to fight,
and wasting so much because of this philosophy.
My father heaved a radio into the floor in anger once,
one of three such incidents in ten years,
then spent the next six months

trying to put it back together again.
But at basketball games, as at church,
the heavy bills, petty disagreements,
were forgotten:
anything can give meaning or structure
anything can be a religion.
Basketball ordered their lives for them.

My mother returned to the car
ready to resume the week-long argument,
saying to my father--
angry at his missing the exit,
angry at missing the first few minutes of the game,
angry at needing basketball so much--
"I'd divorce you right now
if it weren't basketball season."

I returned to my book,
thankful to have only three brothers,
not five.

Crystal Pulses

You loaded the
crystal into a cramped
cabinet stacking delicate
stems onto each other.
An entire set of
crystal for twelve
which you could not replace,
purchased when you lived with
your parents after you first
married.
One cupboard in the kitchen
that bled crystal,
crystal lacerated
from its cabinet
only for special occasions.
You loved your crystal,
polishing each piece as you
replaced it,
nearly dulling the thin rims.
Alyda's hand-cut pitcher,
Evelyn's vases,
Emma's individual salts and peppers,
in a cabinet meant for
thick ceramic plates.

Sometimes it took you
all afternoon
to ease the stemware into place,
adjusting and re-adjusting
Waterford ashtrays,
champagne flutes.
There was no room
for dust.
Goblets, parfaits, platters,
somehow you made them fit.

I could hear the crystal
glimmering
glistening at night,
squealing brakes.
It would sometimes wake me.
Other times I would see
a crystal mountain and the
knight riding up the mountain
to the rescue,
and the mountain crashing
crashing shattering
the knight falling through the mountain,
and I would wake and hear the crystal
in the cupboard
like a siren.

Until I knew better
I obeyed you
and set out the crystal
on holidays.
I would
imagine my hand into
the glass cave
jostling stalactites,
extracting stemware.
I have never understood
how you could have let me near
the crystal you loved so much:
you must have known
I would break it.
Was it because you were hurried,
rushing to stir the gravy or
slice the turkey,
that you forgot the crystal
you loved,
risking its destruction?
I think you were careless
in your haste
during those holidays,
as careless as I was clumsy,
your mind on other things.

Something would always slip away

or shatter in my hand
as I reached for
thick ceramic
and found instead
crystal thin as an old woman's breath.
You would declare it
to be your favorite piece,
each time a new favorite piece,
and reaffirm that you could never
have anything nice.
But you were secretly pleased
that it was I who broke it
and not you,
at least I thought so then.

Once I destroyed
your beautiful pedestalled
crystal cake plate.
I could not tell you
and so juggled the cabinet's
crystal like skulls
to fill the gap.
You never missed it.

Ten years later,
on a special occasion,
you announced that this
hand-cut cake plate,

bolted to a silver pedestal,
must be put into service.

I skidded it into the house
just removing the last
of the price tag as
you walked into the kitchen.
You had been startled that
I offered to search for it,
since I had vowed much earlier
never to venture into the cabinet again.
And you had said
maybe at least this way
you could have something nice.
Words spoken in haste.
Spoken, I realize now,
on your way to take care of
five children,
one of whom was ill and near death.
Rushing off to a job
which didn't quite cover the
medical bills,
rushing past the other children.

I laugh unreasonably
now,
thinking about that cake plate.

Thinking about how
you had probably missed it
but would never admit
you couldn't remember where you laid it.
Would never ask anyone.
It must have taken you hours,
it must have perplexed you
gathering bits of space
for the cake plate,
more crystal having accumulated
between original and replacement.
You will never ask me
where I found that cake plate,
or how to fit it back into the cabinet,
or how I could possibly
extricate it unscathed.

Caring For Books

In elementary school
I enrolled in a child's version
of the Book-of-the-Month Club.
Every six weeks our teacher
gave us a catalogue of books
which could be ordered
and I would examine each choice,
wanting the stories which promised
to be as fascinating as
the promotional bits I read.
Though I would have preferred them all,
I was permitted to select
only one book each time.

When my first book arrived,
my father demonstrated the proper way
to break it in.
Working the slim volume
back and forth,
beginning then end,
he turned the book,
smoothing his fingers
close to the binding,
sliding them along the pages,
delicately separating them
with hands that could palm

a basketball.
He warned against cracking open
a new book in the center,
for to do so would snap its spine
like a wishbone.

There are many book sales
in Grand Rapids every winter
which my father faithfully attends,
browsing for hours
at the folding banquet tables
piled with books.
He once purchased so many
that they filled the trunk
of our ten-year-old Cadillac,
and he brought them into the house
a few at a time
each night
for months
so my mother would not realize
he had bought so many.

My father particularly enjoys
reading about the Civil War,
and when I brought him
a pictoral biography of Abraham Lincoln
on a recent visit,
he did not speak to me

all day,
but sat alone in the breezeway
erasing hundreds of pencil marks
left by the previous owner.
My mother and I laughed
in another room,
listening to the scribble of eraser,
and she told me how my father
had read aloud to me--
books on
Chinese history
Jonathan Edwards
trout fishing--
from the time I was four days old.

I have learned
to care for books,
never bending a cover around
behind itself,
as if it were an arm
twisted behind an opponent's back,
choosing my books carefully,
from bookstores with
luxurious wood shelves,
selecting volumes thoughtfully,
then,
breaking them in
the way my father taught me,

my hands smooth along the pages.

Singing Lessons

You were a beauty at eighteen
with a nineteen-inch waist,
wrists slender as oboes,
Kahlua-dark hair curling like treble clefs
around your face.
You entered Waupun, Wisconsin's
annual summer beauty pageant,
easily winning.
You remember how they celebrated
your coloratura voice,
choosing you instead of:
the twirler dressed like Uncle Sam,
the orator of two-month's experience
who read excerpts from Macbeth,
the acrobat who pulled ligaments
in both legs
while attempting the splits,
or the pianist who played
Bach with a rhumba beat.
The notes you could sing
were sounds a small town
had never heard,
and dazzled them,
like aborigines who see
a jet thumping overhead
for the first time.

There were many church solos,
singing lessons.

But you entered nursing school
in Chicago
to prepare for a practical career,
one respectable for women in 1942.
You earned perfect grades
but left school
to support your parents
after your father grew ill
and could not work.
You have told of
your meager salary then,
working in an insurance office,
yet you and your best friend
attended every opera
in Chicago,
purchasing the best tickets
when you could.

When I was a child
we fell asleep every night
listening to operas and other classical music
which you played for us
on a rickety phonograph.
I heard you sing the arias
as you watered the flower-borders,

or dressed for work as
an elementary school secretary--
when you thought no one
was listening.
But I was listening,
and I want you to know
I believe the pictures I've seen,
believe the stories you've told.
You could have been luckier.
It could have been different for you.
I hope you know it too.

Ode On A Pig Farm

Great-uncle Charlie inherited a pig farm
from his twin uncles
Jacobus Johannes and Johannes Jacobus.
The scent of hogs reached
to the last inch of his acres
just outside of Beaver Dam.
Sandra and I visited him and Great-aunt Florence
with our parents,
driving out from Waupun
where our grandparents lived,
and past the town pool where
a child drowned
in four feet of water
on opening day.
We rolled up the car windows--
heading down the road
which sent up a trail of dust behind us
as if we left a wake--
to keep out the odor of pig,
a futile gesture like trying
to stop a speedboat
with a catcher's mitt.

My sister and I walked with Uncle Charlie
as he did his afternoon chores,

listening to him tell about
the time in the barn when
a rat ran up his pant leg
and he crushed it inside his overalls
with his hands--and other stories,
that the twin uncles never married
never left Beaver Dam
until their preacher convinced them
to travel to the State Fair in Milwaukee.
The twins drove there
parking the car on a side street,
then taking a train to the fairgrounds.
As they arrived at the entrance
they realized that their car
was on a nameless street
somewhere twenty or more miles away,
they hadn't looked at the street sign.
Jacobus and Johannes found a police car,
rode in it for hours
searching for their car,
then drove immediately back to Beaver Dam,
which they never again left.

We watched Uncle Charlie feed the pigs
filling the troughs with one hand
and gripping a fireplace poker with the other,
to ward off the hogs

who would otherwise
trample him
in their frenzy to eat.
As he bent over
I could see white ringed scars
on his bald tanned head
where he said he hit it
whenever the tractor needed adjusting.
Leading us into the dank barn
he showed us his antique tools,
churns, scythes, a plow,
he never noticed that we stared uncomfortably
at our feet.

Then he led us to the grassed place
where his swimming pool had been,
explaining that he had filled it in
after the pigs got out one night
and eleven of them drowned.
While the grown-ups sat inside
drinking coffee and visiting,
Aunt Florence brought out cookies for us
and a pitcher of milk fresh from their cows
still warm and thick like phlegm--
which I dumped out behind the crabapple tree
after she went back inside.
Sandra and I discussed our luck

at living in the city
and debated whether we would ever
forget the smell of pigs.

I haven't.

Listening To Aunt Bertha

Every Sunday morning
we listened to
Aunt Bertha's Children's Bible Hour
while dressing for church.
During the show Aunt Bertha introduced
each scripture reader and child soloist,
then the Tiny Tot Chorale,
all accompanied by Aunt Bertha herself
on Grand Rapids' most dissonant piano.
After a commercial message
from Zondervaan's Christian Bookstore,
Aunt Bertha and her helpers
dramatized a different story
each week
designed to make believers
of all the young listeners.

One Sunday morning
the ten-minute radio play
had Aunt Bertha driving
along some highway in Montana when
the Lord directed her
to pull over and pick up
a hitchhiker
who rode with her a short while
before robbing her at knifepoint.

Aunt Bertha began to pray aloud,
mentioning the various charities
for which the stolen money was intended,
and persuading the crook
within minutes
to forsake his evil ways
and turn to the Lord.
Aunt Bertha and the repented thief
broke into
a spontaneous duet
which ended as she
dropped him off at
the police station
and waved as she drove away.

This was about the time
my five-year-old sister asked
to be helped into her
starched white dress
and confessed that she wanted
to be a giraffe
when she grew up
like the one embroidered
on her collar.
I allowed as how
I didn't think that was possible,
giraffes having much longer necks and all.

This upset her and
she scuttled off crying to our mother
who--not really listening as she finished
getting ready for church--
reassured my sister that
she could be anything
she wanted to be
when she grew up,
then came into our room
to yell at me for upsetting my sister
before church.

Another Sunday morning
Aunt Bertha and her cousin Cyrus
were picnicking in Yosemite
when they encountered a huge bear
who was drawn to their spread
by the scent of
delicious pickled bologna sandwiches,
corn curls and root beer.
That bear headed right for
Bertha and Cyrus,
and again Bertha began to pray.
The bear drew closer,
then abruptly turned away
and fled back into the woods.
Aunt Bertha thanked Jesus

and hummed a hymn
as she slapped Cyrus
to revive him.

She was still trying to awaken him
as I fished out
the entire box of crayons
my sister had just scattered
into the heating duct,
and just as my mother
came into our room
thinking me the culprit.
If Aunt Bertha could get rid of
a bear
I couldn't understand why I
couldn't keep my sister
from getting me into trouble.

Several Sundays later
Aunt Bertha was visiting
a mission in Kenya
which had had no rain
in several months.
The agriculturalist-missionary
pleaded with Aunt Bertha
for help, so she
prayed and prayed,

producing rain in
forty-eight hours
and saving the yam crops.

In church later that morning
I watched the collection plate
being passed from pew to pew
until it reached my sister
who deposited about $10,000
in yellow, pink, and blue
Monopoly money.
I snatched her money out of the plate
aghast, as she hollered,
"You put that money back."
It was easy to hear her shrill voice
over the quiet organ music,
and I prayed for Aunt Bertha
to come and rescue me,
but she did not.
My mother scowled at me
along with the other five hundred members
of the congregation.

I stopped listening
to Aunt Bertha's Children's Bible Hour
not long after that,
figuring she wasn't about to help me

with my problematic sister.
And my mother told me she had seen Aunt Bertha
at the beauty parlor
under the dryer
with her hair pinned up,
smoking a cigarette
and reading a copy of "True Confessions".
I decided I had enough to worry about
with my sister.

Why I Do Not Ice Skate

When I was ten
I longed for ice skates
like the sleek white
gleaming skates
which all my friends owned.
But my mother said
they cost too much
and Michigan's winters
weren't long enough to make them practical.

Then I found my father's
high school hockey skates
in the cellar
behind the furnace
and under the water meter.
I paid my younger sister a quarter
to crawl underneath and get the skates,
then, wearing my mother's rubber gloves,
and the oldest clothes I could find,
I scrubbed them for an hour
with saddle soap,
vacuumed the interiors,
then sprayed them damp with disinfectant.

I had to stuff the toes
with ping pong balls

to keep them on my feet--
though even then
they wobbled as if filled with jumping beans--
and pulled on four pairs of socks
to get them laced,
and protect my feet against
the sandpaper and thumbtack insoles.

One Saturday afternoon
my friends and I planned to skate
at the Pinery Park rink
four blocks away
at the bottom
of a tremendous hill--
that we could coast our bikes down,
but not ride back up.
On my way from our house
at the hill's top
I stopped for my friends:
  Chichi Wright, who later became
Michigan's first
licensed female embalmer;
  Anita Penninga, who married
a worm farmer
and now has twelve children;
  Janet Hovarter, who became
a minister by mail

and in her spare time
sets Bible verses to songs
of her own composing.

Chichi had new Christmas skates--
white and slick as canines or refrigerator enamel--
which she removed from the box
and laced for the first time
as we watched.
Anita's skates had yellow pompons
on the toes,
and Janet's skates were light blue
and circled around each ankle
with rabbit fur.
My own skates
seemed big as my legs,
and had laces that wrapped in knots
three times around the top;
they had been black when new,
though now were more a pastel mud.

Hockey skates share the same angle
of blade
as the acute triangles
whose distances
I could never calculate in math.
Unlike figure skates,
whose tips are serrated,

hockey skates
are sneaky as rum swizzles,
taking you with them
on their own terms.
Since it is impossible
to initiate movement
or stop short of collision
while wearing them properly,
as my friends wore their skates,
I came to rely on
the sides of my feet
for either purpose,
pushing off alternately
with the side of each foot
on the ice,
looking like a cross between
a drunk and golden retriever on skates.

We skated for several hours
playing tag
and crack the whip
until I bit my finger
to forget the pain in my feet.

We had worn our skates
walking to the rink,
and left our boots at home.

My friends snapped plastic
blade guards on their skates
then effortlessly walked
to their homes midway up the hill.
I lagged behind, so they
left me and I continued on,
falling down several times
before I realized I couldn't struggle
up the slick sidewalk,
and took to the dry pavement
of the road.
Scraping sideways against the asphalt
the skate blades set off sparks
as I hobbled up the hill--
lines of sparks
which rasped a noise
like barking dental instruments
along a blackboard.
I saw my friends--
whose houses I was now passing--
gather at their living room windows
with their parents,
laughing at me
behind the curtains.

I have never really learned to skate,
preferring toboganning or

indoor activities
in the winter.
But I do watch figure-skating
on television occasionally,
and when I do,
I look carefully at
the skaters' feet
to see if they push off
with the sides of them,
or if they let off sparks.

Coming Back

The man who lived
across the street from us
was touched in the head,
had been shell-shocked,
and crazy now for twenty years,
I heard my brother tell his friend.
I thought that meant
someone had touched Adrian
with a conch or scallop shell,
though I did not understand
how that could cause a person
to go insane.
I worried that it would happen to me,
gathered the sea shells
my aunt had sent from Florida
buried them in the neighborhood churchyard.

The man
who lived across
the street
paced the sidewalk
in front of his parents' house
along the edges where
grass reached cement so uniformly
it was as if

it had been drawn there
with ruler and pen,
shrubs trimmed into perfect shapes
like helmets
along the porch.
I watched him stride back and forth
with a rhythmic sideways motion--
a blending of penguin and sentry.

The man who
lived across from us
walked to Kum-Bak Hamburger Stand
almost every night,
returning with a shopping bag
of food
which he ate
sitting cross-legged on the porch
watching cars on our busy street,
following them with his head,
and he would rock himself
like a rocking chair, marking time,
back and forth
with no chair.
My brother did not understand
why I refused
to eat any food
carried out from Kum-Bak.

The man across the street
could tolerate no changes
in his life.
One night when I was supposed to be asleep
I heard my mother tell of
her visit with our neighbors
earlier that day.
The neighbors had bought
a new toilet
which Adrian refused to use
since it was a different style,
but instead hurried to the
Town Talk Filling Station
at the end of the block;
he did not always get there in time;
some of the neighborhood's bushes
were turning yellow.
Adrian's parents had to buy back the original
and with it replace the replacement.
My mother then reported
they had purchased him a new bed,
thought he had adjusted well
until his father,
rising in the middle of the night,
looked in to spy him
sleeping underneath his bed
stretched out stiff

like a bayonet.

Adrian still lives
with his parents
though they are almost eighty now.
My father said
they would have to take him to Pine Rest soon,
but would have to get a new car first,
as Adrian would not ride in it
because the color was all wrong.
On a recent visit home
I saw Adrian in their driveway
at ease,
legs braced,
arms behind his back,
as if waiting for inspection.
I understand now
what shell-shocked really means
and question whether
he came back at all.

What Does Not Happen

Late one evening
returning home from work
I drove along a rural highway
alone,
fatigued.
Trees above the still road
filtered scant light
from clotted clouds.
Then a deer flashed
in front of the car--
as one frame of hundreds
splits a second
on a screen--
and was gone,
untroubled by inches of miss.
My foot not yet to the brake,
I measured the pavement ahead
in deer's image,
steered trembling to the shoulder.
Nearby a dog set off barking
to warn my car,
which crouched at the road's edge
like another kind of beast.
Back home,
realizing what does not happen,
I listened to a favorite chamber work,

poured a costly glass of wine.

Playing Monopoly With A Friend

I wanted to slam you
through a giant colander
and spatter you against the wall,
or split you into fragments
with a .357 Magnum,
arms and legs braced
like they fire guns on television police shows,
when you sent me bankrupt by $5,000
as I landed on Park Place,
rolled fish eyes and moved to Boardwalk,
and hotels on each.

You lured me into playing,
persuading me you were
new to the game,
but I saw your smirk
when I said,
"Why, I don't believe I've played Monopoly
in ten years."

After winning the first ten games
you grew too confident and let slip:
reading every book on Monopoly listed
in the Library of Congress and
every periodical as of Oct. 1981

ordering a customized calculator from Shanghai
playing in the tournaments at Lake Tahoe
   and Monte Carlo
winning the tournaments
spending your prize money to icefish near the Arctic Circle
   fly to Aruba for the sun
   re-unite the Beatles.

After the next ten games
I started to worry when I realized
the playing pieces,
   miniscule top hat
   midget wheelbarrow
   microscopic Silver Cloud
were fashioned from solid platinum,
and the houses and hotels
carved emeralds and carnellian.
I wanted to chisel and hang
an effigy of you
so someone walking into the room
would only see the bottoms of your
Converse High-Top All-Stars.

After the next twenty-five games
I imagined violently overturning the table,
watching you thud into the wall,
gloating at how you would look,

insensible,
with orange chance
and yellow community chest cards,
little houses and hotels
popping out of your mouth
where I had stuffed them.

But I have to tell you
what I've just said is a lie.
I cheated and let you win.
I could have beat you had I wanted to,
and will the next time we play.

Phrasing

The principal flutist of the Philadelphia Orchestra
possesses a
solid gold
hand-made
French model
Muramatsu
concert flute
with a
"B" foot
pointed-arm keys
D sharp roller
teakwood cleaning rod
thin walls
hand-tooled Moroccan leather case
all of which is insured for
$25,000.00

Recently during a special broadcast on PBS
the flutist was highlighted
in a rehearsal featuring
"Daphnis and Chloe" and "Prelude To An Afternoon Of A Faun".
The technique was flawless
yet not mechanical,
the tone spinning
and vibrant,
the pianissimos delicate
but replete,

In an interview during a rehearsal break,
the flutist spoke intelligently on
interpretation
coloring the tone
phrasing
articulation.

Sensitively he considered the music of
Ibert
Faure
Telemann
Poulenc
interrupting once or twice
to clear his throat.

The flutist
        whose instrument requires more wind
        than a tuba
smoked for the duration of the interview.
The tips of his teeth
and pads of his fingers
were yellowed
like the gold of his flute

or the calcined ridged
fingernails
of a recently embalmed
old man.

As the orchestra resumed practicing
I listened attentively to
the flashes of flute solo.
My opinion did not change.
It was not evident that the wind musician
smoked.

Yesterday I played my
silver, nearly identical Muramatsu flute
for six hours,
struggling with a five-measure phrase,
rehearsing it at various tempos
124 times.
I practiced Molique's Concerto in D Minor, Op. 69
increasing the speed,
finally playing it perfectly
hitting all the notes,
and able to leap from breath mark to breath mark
without cheating.
Later I wrapped my hands
in ice packs
to stop the muscle spasms.

The Philadelphia Orchestra flutist
is more than competant,
though not considered brillant,
and it is certainly possible

he will never suffer for his smoking,

but there has to be a reason that

only one or two in 10,000 flutists
smokes.

And it angers me irrationally

that I

who have trouble breathing
fast enough
deep enough
often enough

must work for hours

to overcome those problems

while

the other flutist breathes

easily

for long passages

for difficult phrasings,

then lights a cigarette

immediately after the concert.

But whose problem is it?

His?

Or mine?

Why I No Longer Eat Lunch

We dip into steamy bowls of lobster bisque,
the delicate shellfish tender
against the tongue like earlobes,
and you ask me about my current lover,
want to know his name
how he compares with you.
Crisp salads with
slices of slippery avocado
are next, then
rare, aged steaks
sizzling as they reach our table,
and you tell me she's been moody,
won't look you in the eye.
Over cognacs
you show me the most recent of your self-cure books--
this one on zinc--
which you buy at the health-food bookstore
where the woman reads diseases
on the wrists.

Several months later
we sink into a darkened booth
out of town
and savor escargot
sopping French bread
in garlic butter

slicking our lips.
During the Veal Orloff
you explain she wants to leave you for Colorado
or re-decorate the house,
new bedspread, lawn chairs.
We watch the captain languidly
stir brown sugar and butter
until it melts,
then add rum to flame
Bananas Foster.
I tell you my lover
models for life-drawing classes,
tapes the sketches on his bedroom walls,
wants sex five times a night.
You ask the waiter for the check.

The next time it is Dover sole
which the captain filets tableside
slipping a knife
along the ribs
between the smooth bone and white flesh
and it is luscious,
touched with herbs.
Between sips of wine
you relate how she agreed not to leave you
if you would promise her
$2,000.00 a month
and would marry her.

You claim she found bottles of Piper-Heidsieck
at a discount drugstore
at six dollars apiece,
tell me you still run five miles a day,
one hundred push-ups, sit-ups, squat-thrusts.
I explain I left him when
he bought the video system.

When we lived together
you reserved your lunches for
business associates,
former girlfriends:

Trish--who scrubbed houses for a living, bought her clothes at Goodwill, tried to throw herself off your balcony when you asked her to leave.

June--who sold you her furniture when she moved to Alabama, drank a bottle of hand lotion to avoid a drunk driving charge after running into a ditch the night you kicked her out.

Celeste--who buried your custom golf clubs to their necks in sand on the beach at Indiatlantic when you broke off your engagement.

Now I have joined the others
as an ex-girlfriend.
I, who gave you weekly manicures,
worked three jobs to survive

as an undergraduate--
jobs to which you chauferred me in the Cadillac
you paid cash for,
complaining that you never saw me.

But I am not like the others.
It was I who left you.

Beneath The Surface

Scuba divers who dive deep
sometimes instantly lose their minds.
Under the influence of nitrogen narcosis
they swim deeper,
throw away their masks and air tanks,
die elated on the ocean floor
a hundred or more feet beneath the surface.
In a dive manual I read
how the tremendous water pressure
drugs divers
making them mad for water in their lungs:
I know this would happen to me.

Every day in the summers of childhood
I rose at eight a.m. to watch
Mike Nelson on Sea Hunt.
He was so comfortable with the water
as if an extra chromosome had given him
a set of gills he could secretly rely on.
Once, as I sat eating cereal,
I watched him wrestle and subdue
a forty-foot anaconda
from which two men had fled.

The diving instructor,
standing there in a swimsuit,

showed us various scars on his body,
cataloging sea creatures
and subsequent wounds.
Then,
he told of a diver who,
oblivious to warning signs,
dove off the California coast
near an electric company's cooling plant.
There was a tunnel there
over a mile long
which had such suction power that
it could draw in small cars.
The tunnel snared the diver
like a venus fly trap
and slid him through the black mile
until he reached an iron grate
which stopped him as surely as if
he had fallen sixty stories
onto cement.
During an annual inspection,
when the tunnel was stopped
and teams of divers threaded their way through
to check signs of decay,
they found him.
The dead diver,
squares stamped on his skeleton,
had nearly been sent through the grate
by the water pressure.

I have decided that
I no longer wish to explore the oceans.
The breathing underwater,
which I love,
would send me deeper
than the dive charts allow.
I might dive to three-hundred feet
or too close to a luring tunnel,
too close to mysterious danger.
Like the time
at the reptile house
when I watched a hooded cobra
fire itself at me,
leaving a single
drop of venom
rolling down the glass.