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CHAIN STITCHES

By

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

CHAIN STITCHES

By

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The chain stitch is the most fundamental of the crochet stitches. Yet when a piece of work, perhaps an afghan, is laid aside, it is also the least discernible of the stitches. It is the first step you take in the making; it is what holds it all together in the end.

Each of these poems represents one stitch. Together, they are a very small part of the tapestry of human existence. But the people and the encounters they portray are vital in its weaving, and have been vital in my existence. The emotions and experiences they depict are known to many of us, and I believe they are some of the roots that link us in humanity.

To Leonore Hendryx,

with love

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Survivors

You used to tease me.

Waterlilies

in the pond
on our farm.

You said they were so
out of place.

Something delicate,
exquisite,
quietly surviving
our common lives.

I think about the pond,
its water.

The many rains.
The years of accumulation.
And the lilies--

they survive like buoys,
life preservers.
Even after a heavy rain.

It's been three years
since you drowned.
And eight months.

I have never quite forgiven you.

This morning,
the lilies are misted with dew.

They seem less clear,
like I sometimes wish

my memories were of you.

Mrs. T

You went to the same church
every Sunday
for the seven years I knew you,
never missing one service.

It was the church you grew up in.
It was the church
Andrew Borden attended
until he was murdered with his wife
on August 4th of 1892.

They said his daughter did it,
said Lizzie took a hatchet
and hacked away,
delivering ten blows to her father's body,
nineteen to her stepmother's.

And I'd never even heard of Lizzie Borden
until I met you.
You found my ignorance appalling
and quickly straightened me out,
sharing second-hand accounts of the trial,
taking me to the Fall River Historical Society
where they had photographs
and blood samples

and the axhead,
showing me the site of the murders
and the home Lizzie lived in
until her death
and even the family graves.

I was ten, then.
Your name has been synonymous to me
with Lizzie Borden's
ever since, and you
were the only person I've ever known
who sincerely believed in her innocence,
who agreed with the jury who freed her.

It was not until five years had passed
that you told me of your own parents' deaths
just one week apart,
just one month after your wedding.
It was a marriage they had forbidden,
despite your age of thirty.
You walked out of the house in anger,
after an argument,
and never spoke to them again.

And it was on that Sunday
I understood
why you attended that church with such regularity

what kind of religion you practiced there
why you claimed Lizzie Borden was innocent
and why you clung to that conviction
for life.

The Letters

We have set the distance
between us now,
perhaps finalized it,
with these letters,
mailed
even the same day.
Like two dragons
we have sent them--
one Chinese, in celebration,
and the other real,
spitting flame.

You write to me,
saying our friendship is over.
I write to you, asking
if we can begin again.

Now, the relationship
is vague as clouds,
and I am not wanting
to relinquish you as friend.

Two more letters?
Will you answer what I send?
Since you moved,

things have become so unclear.
I was angry with the distance.
Are you angry with me
for letting you go?

Your words burn,
like a glassmaker's flame.
I want the glass whole,
but cool, clear;
I want to hold it,
look through it,
to see what we can find
and renew.

First Snow

Flurries scar the sidewalk,
color melting
like the bad witch
at water's touch.
Soon, there will be nothing left.
Flakes growing like tissue
to mend some hideous sore.
New skin, pure as a baby's,
stretched on a frame of old bones.
Whiteness struggling to smother the creaks.
A human steps through, carving
a wrinkle--not even earned.

Mrs. Willis

There was the time
Mrs. Willis had attended old Mr. Bailey's funeral,
and he sat upright in his coffin
in the middle of the eulogy.
This was back when embalming
was still considered a "new" procedure,
and the town undertaker
was also the town furniture-maker.
Mr. Bailey's rheumatism crippled him so badly
that he walked all hunched over.
They had to tie him down with ropes
to flatten him out enough
for a regular casket.
But the ropes couldn't take the pressure,
and half-way through the service,
they broke.

And it was also true
that a childhood friend
had died of the ague,
had been placed in a large family tomb.
Twelve years after her death,
when they reopened the vault
to place the child's mother there,
they found a tiny skeleton

huddled next to the door
--eight feet
from where her body had been laid.

But, at ninety-three,
eccentricity and claustrophobia were blamed
for the demand in her will
that an electronic buzzer
be installed in her casket,
her casket to be stored
in an above-ground vault.

The control, complete with lighted dial,
would be placed between her hands

--the way some people hold flowers,
or a Bible.

Granddad

White hair.

Creviced face.

Clothes disheveled.

An overlay of flab at the belt,
pulling at the last notch.

He walked old,

the flat ground--too steep.

He came slowly toward me.

Broad, yellow-tooth grin,
and eyes--

even the blue was faded.

You.

I had wondered why you had begun
to treat me so young, so suddenly.

You, who had been my best friend,
with no time to listen now.

You send out words,
not seeming to care
if they're found.

Words, piling up between us.

I'm sorry for my silence.

I've always known you'd die,

but I never thought
you'd grow old.

Conquering Fear

I wish I could follow Faulkner's advice
when he said we should recognize our fears
and then forget them.

Not the little apprehensions--
like dinner turning out right--
but the major fears
that affect me
and my life.

When I was eleven,
I lived next door
to a ninety-seven-year-old woman,
still living in the house she was born in.
She was a cantankerous woman,
and I was afraid of her.
Mrs. Leland, I soon learned,
was not afraid of anything.

One night,
a man broke into her house
searching for her Social Security check.
Mrs. Leland, asleep upstairs,
was roused by his noise.
She rose from bed, and hollered
to her long-dead husband:

"Albert, get the gun.

There's a man downstairs!"

I want to be able
to call to someone long dead,
to some imaginary friend
with a non-existent gun.

The burglar, frightened,
left.

The Seer

In a row of dreary shops
shadowed by green awnings,
yours was the one that offered life.

We came to you as children
because of the bright garments you sold,
because of the windows of cheap jewelry which sparkled,
and because we liked the challenge
of browsing under your stern eyes.

You dressed as we thought a gypsy would,
and we imagined you had special powers.

When I was eleven,
you had a booth at our church fair
reading palms behind black curtains for a dollar.
You seemed troubled when you took my hand,
hesitated before saying
I would not reach nineteen
in this life.

I was startled by your words
and by the sincerity of your voice.

I kept your prediction quiet--

where it would haunt me--
thinking it foolish to be upset
by an eccentric old woman.

Perhaps it was just a cruel joke.

Three years later, you were brought
to a youth group meeting as speaker, told us
of cases where you'd help the police locate bodies,
of how they now came to you for help.

You demonstrated your talents,
telling one boy he repaired trucks and cars,
telling a girl her parents had recently divorced,
telling another her father's injury would heal.

No matter what you said,
you were right.

And there was nothing I could do
except wait.

By the time I was eighteen,
I had grown used to death.
I had grown used to carrying its threat around with me.
And I had created my own vision of death
that left me nothing to fear but dying.

As that year drew to a close, I was torn
between increasing anxiety
and self-mockery
that I had listened to you at all.

And now, I can't help but wonder
why you made that prediction.

Has some fatal incident been foiled?
Or were you simply helping a young girl
to accept her own limitations
so she could learn to live
within them?

Oedipus

The pin slips through
--no eye of a needle--
but easily, gently.
Lids open, accepting.
A violence
well-intended.



Great Aunt Esther

There is blood before resurrection, but in death there is only darkness.

We used to visit you
after church on Sundays
at the Home for the Aged.
You couldn't get around very well,
and weren't able to attend
the regular service.

You had a Southern Baptist upbringing,
and found religion in everything.

Your one inconsistency,
I had thought,
was a checkerboard set up in your room.

We used to ask if we could play.
You said never on Sundays.
We visited you on other days.
You said never then, too.

It was always dusted.
The pieces perfectly lined up.

It took me years to understand
what you saw in that game,

that it was not the game you were protecting,
but the people who might play it.

You loved us too much
to let us lose.

Beaten

I could feel nothing
except his open hands slamming against my face
and his fists pounding into my body
and I could hear
only his shouting
his swearing
at me, pouring over me
I could see
a blur of this massive flesh
encompassing me
burying me
I could taste
the blood in my mouth
I could say nothing
I could only cry

Then
as the storm continued
and I, blinded
my hands found what they were searching for
without my mind knowing what that was
or my heart
and I picked it up
and he stopped
and he fell

without meaning to
either him or me
and it was over
and he was gone
and I thought I was free

But the people

But the people
didn't understand
that he wouldn't stop

that he wouldn't stop

and that I didn't mean to hurt him
but that something had to give.

Was it supposed to have been me?

Chain Stitches

I knew her,
when a child,
as the lady down the street
who made the pretty coat hangers.
She and my grandmother
would spend hours together,
crocheting beautiful covers
in delicate pastels,
always with tight yarns
and thin needles,
so they were soft and touchable.
They didn't look
like coat hangers
at all.

Six months ago,
my grandmother was called
to her friend's deathbed
to hear something
"no one else would understand."

She told
how she had twice
performed abortions on herself
during the Depression,

with seven children already
and her husband
out of work.
"No more hungry eyes," she said.

That night she died.
When my grandmother came home,
she was carrying bundles
of her friend's hangers,
hangers they had crocheted together
on long, silent afternoons
when I had wondered why they were so quiet,
why they didn't talk.

Then my grandmother
led me to her own attic, pulled out
boxes of all the coat hangers
I had ever seen her make
and more.
She packed her friend's there,
with her own,
treating them more gently
than old family photographs.

That done,
she pulled her friend's crochet needles
from her apron pocket

and handed them to me.

"You need to know about crocheting," she said.

"You're old enough now.

Every woman

should know how."

Uncle,

I would stuff your mouth
like a pig
with an apple
for roasting.

It is too empty.

Too many teeth
frame the hollow.

You lean back
 laughing
 laughing
and never
 stop.

Your mouth gapes, like an eye,
trying to swallow me,
me or anyone else
within hearing.

They tell me it's a tumor.
You don't know what you're doing.

But even after you're gone

with your laughing,
 laughing...

I'll still hear it.

Aftermath of an Argument

With a puff of smoke from your cigarette,
I try dissolving into air.

Your cool manner betrays.
The paper you so gently filled,
carefully rolled,
jiggles in your hand.

Your eyes withdraw
sitting solid, glazed.
Words slip between us.
I am paled by your voice.

The cigarette leans on the table.
I sense its quick, round burn.

Parting

Your face goes blank
as a still bell.
Silence
cushions the clapper--
it hangs mute
as our tongues.
Wordlessness
resounds,
tugs our eyes
to the table between us.
We do not see each other.

It does not matter
who first said goodbye,
or why.

It only matters
that this will be
our last meal
together,
that the closure
of our time
is cast
with a dumb toll.

With air still devoid of sound,

I watch your sigh.

You push your chair back,

consider the costs,

leave

to pay the bill.

First Born

This pain should unify.

I give myself to her.

The child within me, gone.

Two children, if you please,

now one.

The child I was,

that wouldn't grow up,

then her,

new thing

the doctor holds out.

I play inspector.

Do I want it to keep?

It's a girl.

Oh, I see.

Two of each.

Five of these.

She'll do fine.

Comes complete

with a role

I must try,

a new name

I shall wear

all my life.

My new life.

For a part of me's
gone.

Child.

I can hold.

This one

I can touch.

Yet she wanted out.

Or did I want her out?

Something's empty
inside.

Funeral Home Feast

Surely, death must become me.
I was never so pretty alive.
People gathered around,
staring and talking,
as if I were the turkey:
a Thanksgiving feast,
garnished with flowers.
The dressing, my best.
Tears, basting me
in a rectangular pan.
Lid open, I am exposed
to critical eyes.
Where are your forks
and your knives?
I have heard the grace said.
Now why the delay?
Is it my temperature
that betrays?
Neither hot nor cold.
A skin difficult to brown.
Yet try me. You see?
I am all juice.
And my meat, so tender.
But the oven's still warm.
You may cook me more.

Make me pure to eat.

The heat, the heat.

I am not too big.

You may cut me in half,

if you choose,

so I fit.

I have lived for this feast.

Do not bury me.

Marionette

My mirror betrays.

The reflection is light:

white skin,

moon face.

There must be a candle inside,

incandescing.

My appearance,

not real.

I feel nothing:

darkness,

stuffing.

A miner hollowed me out,

chiseling, picking

me barren.

He dug to the skin

before stopping, afraid

I'd collapse,

killing.

Now I dance.

A marionette,

you or anyone can control,

pulling strings.

Watch me respond.

See my legs,

how they flop?

Limp arms bend.

A hunched torso moves.

You would think me alive.

Do I fool?

My show's free

for the asking.

Under Pretense of Infanticide

It is 5 a.m.
and I have slept three hours
in as many days.

You came into this house four months ago
like a miniature Trojan horse,
hidden beneath white cotton
and Pampers.

Your cries have been scraping my ears
like fingernails on a chalkboard,
and I want to turn my fingernails
back on you,
across your jugular.

Most would call me viscious,
uncaring.
But this impulse is as "natural"
as motherhood.

I know I betray
all the madonna and child portraits
American advertising ejaculates,
but somehow
they keep pictures of

colic
and fatigue
and single-parenthood
in the reservoir-tip.

It's not like I've done something wrong to you,
or you're doing something wrong to me.

This is as natural
as beet-stained bibs
and dirty diapers.

This is part of having a child
and growing up with one.

So while I wear away
my fuzzy bedroom shoes
and the eggshell carpeting beneath your rocker,
help me to remember:
my mother did this for me,
and the legacy must go on.

But for now,
just please
let the crying stop.

Periscope

The mirror catches
a kind of reality

and passes it
down,

within,

to another mirror,
then to eyes

that feel.

If there were no need to hide,
would there be periscopes?

I slip down
down
into myself
and curl.

A ball.

A knot.

A fist.

There are no eyes in a fist.

I tighten,
tighten.

The world is above,
beyond.

And I want to see.
I need, to survive,
to see.

Yet also,
to survive,
I cannot
extend
unroll
reach out.

The periscope,
a kind of thumb,

surfaces
for me,

because of me,
with

a part of me.

Safely, then,

I can survey,

and the fist

begins opening.

Clinging to Bannisters

In my grandparents' house,
a vine crawls up the stairs,
encompassing
one by one
the rails.

My grandfather,
retired barber,
tells stories of his days
behind the chair.

Photographs abound on walls and tables.
Frozen moments of childhood.

You would think their grandchildren
were still young.
The most recent shot of me, at age twelve.

My grandmother keeps newer pictures
in a drawer.
He will not look at them.

I talk to my grandfather,
feigning the innocence
of the young

to please him. He will not accept
I'm growing, have grown.

He turns the television off after Welk
to share more tales;

clips my grandmother's vine
so it cannot reach
another rail.

Progress

Great-Uncle Fritz was a man
who did not believe in change
simply for the sake of progress.

He allowed electricity into his home
because it was safer than kerosene and candles.
He allowed a telephone
because sometime his wife might need help
and the closest neighbor was more than a mile.

But indoor plumbing was for the lazy.
Uncle Fritz considered it foolish
to run water into a house
where a spring ran fifty feet away;
to hook up a toilet
when the outhouse wasn't much farther
than the spring.

Besides, every year he dug a new outhouse
and on the location of the old,
planted pumpkins.

And every year, Uncle Fritz
grew the biggest pumpkins in the county.
He laughed about the small ones
he saw in town, and said

he guessed they were signs
of progress.

He once confided in me
that his greatest disappointment in life
was knowing that his sons
would bury him in a bought coffin.
His children were city-folks now
and they didn't understand his ways.

It was a tradition in Uncle Fritz's family
that the sons always built their father's coffin.
He recalled working on his own father's
with his brothers,
refusing to rush despite the July heat,
carefully smoothing and fitting the pieces.
He felt they were building something good
from their sadness, worried his sons
would carry their grief with them.

I cringed at the funeral,
his lanky, ninety-three-year-old body stretched
in a polished grey casket with satin lining,
a hard bed for a man
who always slept on feathers.

First Words

I watch the wheels turn,
pushing my grandfather's wheelchair
around the hospital grounds,
trying to avoid
stones and holes and bumps.
I remember the tires
on the wheelbarrow
he rode me in
when I was a child.
Such a difference in size,
the speed of the turn.

My grandfather is trying
to recover from a stroke,
trying to overcome the paralysis
which keeps him confined, quiet.
He has always been
a talkative man,
telling stories and jokes.
He has always been active,
working in his barbershop,
teaching Sunday school,
tending garden and henhouse.

He used to push me around

in the wheelbarrow,
partly because I enjoyed the ride,
partly because I was too little and slow
to keep up with im.

He would stop to point out
flowers, trees, birds;
would repeat their names
until I had learned to say them,
in the broken syllables
of someone learning to talk.

Now we go through the gardens
and stop to examine the flowers,
struggle with the sounds
in the name
"rose."

But When We Know...

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Last summer, my grandfather
again told me
of his arrival in a South Carolina town
on a Saturday night
some sixty years ago.
He had come to accept
his first position as barber.

Leaving the train station,
he heard shouts, saw lights,
and followed them
until he found a mob
of twenty angry white men
preparing to lynch a black man
for the rape of a white woman.

He knew he could not stop them,
felt the power in their fervor,
and turned to walk away
when his eyes were caught by the black man's,
terror-filled eyes that understood
why there could be no help.
"The look of a man
who knows he's going to die,

knows why, and knows
it doesn't make sense."

My grandfather directed his feet
away from there,
but heard the snap of the rope
as it pulled tight around the tree limb.

Then he opened the Bible on his lap,
showed me a drawing of Christ on the cross,
of people gathered around his feet,
wanting to help.

I hate that my grandfather
didn't stop that night.
And I hate what not stopping has done to him.
I hate knowing
that I would have kept walking, too.

Magical Healers

My grandfather has become
quite eccentric about moles--
in his yard, his garden.
Spring and summer, he is obsessed
with tracking them down, these creatures
whose tunnels he regards as scars,
marring ground that should
appear perfect from his labor.

His efforts are quite practical,
and he stays updated
on the latest poisons and traps.
But the moles keep appearing,
like bad memories, recurring nightmares,
and my grandfather
keeps plotting.

I thought he'd forgotten
that his own mother
only killed them for a purpose,
when she needed
their magical healing powers;
they were considered special
because of their resemblance
to the buried dead.

It was a mole's paw,
strung around his neck,
that cured his croup as a child.
And when he burned for days with fever,
she feared he was lost
until she strangled a mole with her thumbs,
and the fever broke.
These remedies, recorded
in her recipe book.

Later pages held her thoughts
of a son who went to war
--or so I'm told.
Those pages missing,
torn out by my grandfather
when he returned from Europe.
Those months: lost time
about which he's never spoken,
about which my grandmother's
admonished me never to question,
only saying
something must have happened.

Now I realize my grandfather
is following his mother's tradition.
Moles do have special healing powers

--or he must wish they do--
as he struggles to keep them dead,
where they cannot forever haunt him.

Peppermint Sticks

He moved the barber pole
from outside his shop
to his basement door
after the stroke, and continues
to cut the hair of friends
in the styles he learned at barber school
sixty years ago.

Like my grandfather, those men
have been wearing their hair
the same way those sixty years;
the only alterations,
attempts to cover thinning.

He keeps a jar
filled with peppermint sticks
on the counter
above his drawer of shears.
They were his favorite candy
as a child, and his customers
love to suck on them and talk
while waiting their turn.

My grandfather is not
a man of changes, and not

a man we can show change to.
I still pound out his favorite hymns
on the piano
every time I visit,
hymns his mother raised him with,
hymns he still sings
at the Presbyterian church
every Sunday.
He drives the same black Chevrolet,
"Old Betsy,"
he's had for thirty years.
He still calls his wife "Mother"
although their youngest child
is over forty.

He's spent his life
in a small mill town, hemmed in
by the mountains of North Carolina.
Now, his doctor has told him
he can never go up, into the mountains
and out of the town, for the increase
in pressure
would kill him.

This came as safe news for a man
who's never wanted to leave,

and this advice he follows, ignoring
the doctor's prescribed diet
which prohibits his sucking
on peppermint sticks.

Remembering Megan

My arms are light
in their empty circle,
though you never were heavy:

a hug of intricacy and softness,
maze of promises,
and love--
love you returned,
understanding?

Now the air
lies stagnant in your room
without breath to stir it,

and I still hear your cries at night,
yet have no reason
to get up.

To L. H.

Is it better
to talk about it,
or do you try to forget--
as much as you can?
If you can?

I want to ask you,
but hesitate.

What does it feel like
to know
you only have a few months
left to live?

What do you need
from me?

We live in silence.
We live
day by day.
Day by day towards...

Is it death
or dying
that scares us?

What do you feel
besides fear?

--I make assumptions.

Leave the dead, they always say.
But what of the dying?

What of love?

In Memory

Slipping your picture off the wall,
my fingers caress your face, trying

to recall curves, textures, warmth.

Instead, there is only

the cold of the frame,

the smooth hardness of glass.

Beginnings
In Anticipation of Starting Again

Why is getting close
always so hard?
Hmmm?

We seemed to do it in spite of ourselves.
We tripped, yet fell in the right direction,

landing on top of each other,
literally.

One of us had the decency to laugh.

Then there was the fumbling
and apologizing,
when we weren't really sorry at all.
(The kind of accident you hope keeps happening.)

Next came the
oh-how-do-I-meet-this-person-again
dilemma.

Well, I hadn't really
read the book you were carrying.
Yet.

Hurry Home

I never knew how much I missed you
until every person I saw with sandy hair
was suddenly transformed into you,
arriving home, early,
for a surprise.

I went to the shopping mall today.
There were swarms of you there.
I only missed you more
as I noticed their walk different from yours,
their hair parted neatly,
hands that didn't hide in pockets,
the many differences that made them not you--
things I don't even notice when you're here.

Tonight, I lie alone,
wondering for how many days
strangers will mean so much to me.

The Apple Poem

It's been two weeks since your move.

The bag of apples you left in the refrigerator
is starting to rot.

I can't bring myself to throw them out.

I know it doesn't mean
I'm throwing away our relationship--
what we had.

But the apples are a reminder of you
and throwing them out, well,
that takes me--

me alone.

It's something I know
I have to do.

But,
if you're not busy
Tuesday night,

the apples
will still be there.

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