

ABSTRACT

MCNAMARA, MARJORIE SCHRATZ. *SIMPLE FIRES*: a creative thesis of poetry and short story. (Under the direction of Dr. Thomas Lisk.)

“Suspended in Mid-Air while Looking under the Bed” begins and loosely foreshadows this collection of poetry and short stories. I am a storyteller, pulled by both family and place in my life. In this thesis, I play impresario and sequence each short story with poems which resonate with that story. The first poems and short story speak from places in my life: Ireland, Prague, and Malawi. Then my storytelling comes closer to family with a fictional account of my great-grandparents Wilhelm and Ana Krane, who immigrated to Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, in the 1880’s. My story of family continues through relationships, reunions, my parents, and ends with the contemporary world when my translation of Charles Baudelaire merges into a poem about Iraq.

The poetry is a sampler of original work, set forms, and imitations. Much of my poetry has evolved from a close scrutiny of well-known poems. Some of these creative impulses are transparent. Others may not be. Simply as a matter of birth relationships, I have listed the creative prompts at the end of the thesis.

Simple Fires

by

MARJORIE SCHRATZ McNAMARA

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Charlotte Gross

Dr. Nick Halpern

Dr. Tom Lisk - Chair of Advisory Committee

DEDICATION

To Mother and Dad whose “gold from heaven” gifted me with graduate school.

I felt you with me.

BIOGRAPHY

I grew up in a close-knit and constantly moving Navy family, got a BA in English from Wheeling Jesuit University, then joined the national student strike against Vietnam and dropped out of graduate school at Michigan State in 1970. Marriage followed and my husband and I went to Malawi as lay volunteer teachers, where we lived in the bush, taught full time, and had the first two of our eventual nine children. For the last 25 years, we have grown good roots in the know-everyone town of Burlington, North Carolina. I stayed home with the children, absorbed in all their activities—and enjoyed it. In slivers of time, I also took a few writing classes, taught mini poetry sessions in the kids' schools, and won prizes in the local writing competitions. My only consistent writing was the family newsletter, an attempt at beat-the-genre, mailed out without a gap since 1983. When my parents died, they left me a little mad money, and after my husband retired in 2000, I decided to try graduate school again. I dove into classes in a cannonball tuck and have wolfed down the class discussions, the research, the writing and even the mind-honing deadlines. Last year, I was inducted into Phi Kappa Phi.

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Thanks to my husband Terry who filled in for me as Mom, especially during all those evening classes, and whose computer expertise enabled my transition into the wizardry of school after typewriters.

Thanks to Dr. Tom Lisk, my thesis advisor, whose door was always open to me, especially when he should have been eating his lunch.

Thanks to the professors at North Carolina State who fed my hunger—there was not one class I did not enjoy—and to the State students who erased my age and welcomed me.

Thanks especially to my children, my riverbed of inspiration and renewal—a tight squeeze to each of you.

Credits for first versions of poems: “Becoming” won first place in the Burlington Writer’s Club Competition. “Wherefore” was published in Judy Hogan’s Watering the Roots in a Democracy. “Doughnutting for *Fastnachts*” and “Rondo in Concert” will be published in Kennesaw State University’s Golden Poetry: A Celebration of Southern Poets 50 and Older, Volume II.

Table Contents

Suspended in mid-air while looking under the bed	1
Ballinamora: 1996.....	4
To Sid in Galway	6
Snow	8
Prague: Jewish Cemetery.....	9
Simple Fires	10
African Beauty	19
Marble Cake.....	21
The Cement House.....	22
Doughnutting for <i>Fastnacht</i>	35
Dovetailing	37
Ode to Parsley	38
Mr. Allen Gets a Taste of Gardening.....	40
Driving from Annapolis to Cancer.....	42
Pepper Pat.....	43
Sleeping Beauty's Awakening.....	49
To a Heartbreaker	50
Conversation with the red planet is not part of the food diet	51
Five O'Clock Commute.....	52
Christmas Greetings	53
Wherefore	54
Unkempt: Words from a Teenage Daughter.....	56

Helpful Hands.....	57
Becoming.....	58
Coupled	60
Family Reunion	62
Go Fish	63
Rondo in Concert	64
When Mother Died in Cloisonné Vases	66
A Note from Mother—afterwards.....	67
Call for a Thesis Statement: A Non-Roquefort Midnight Awakening.....	68
What Conspired: 15 February 2003.....	70
From Spleen et Idéal.....	72
The Owls (a very literal translation)	73
The Owls (a rhymed translation).....	74
The Invasion of Iraq: April 2003.....	75
Creative Prompts (in the order they appear in the thesis).....	77

Suspended in mid-air while looking under the bed

I celebrate myself in my birthing and birthed, in the movement of memory,
I am a part of the coming together, continents of me straining to connect the past
and the present,
Where huts on an African savanna dot the dust-choked landscape and
cows are walked to nowhere, their humped backs rocking,
Where the North Carolina coasts grasp the Atlantic and I swim the ocean in
hurricane surfs which roll me in water, gasping for air,
Where Hawaiian volcanoes erupt in a slow ice cream melt down green coned
mountains on a hot day,
Where the dark-sheer of California cliffs become black-pebbled beaches
on the Maine coast,
Through the land from center to coast to continent, it is myself,
Pleased with the cry of the babe who sucks the milk from my tight breasts,
Pleased as I fall asleep on the white sand, the sun burning freckles into my back,
Pleased even as my arms are pinned to my sides, becoming one with the crowd
blackening Pennsylvania Avenue in protest,
It is all me, I have been there, I have become—
I lie beneath paving stones in Paris pulled from the walls of the Bastille,
and limp the cobbled streets of Prague, smelling the flesh
of heretics and Jews,
I float the coal in barges on the Monongahela, past Pittsburgh, where my grandfather's
white collar was blackened by noon,
It is all me, dug deep under my skin, where it grows into written words
and garden conversations with flowers,
I am she who wraps my legs around the pulse of life and remembers to laugh
With the life that throbs in the rock striations of a Swiss mountain,
becoming flaked patisserie in the setting sun,
With the life of the termite I swallowed whole and still wriggling, a gift from the boy at

the lake in Malawi,
With the life of the tide pool in Sausalito, trapping refugees from the pound of the surf,
With the life of the Navajo and her pots on a mesa, close to the sky and days from a river,
With the card games played late into the night around the dinner table not quite cleared of
dirty dishes,
With the life of the drums which beat into the night, of thought which speaks to the
drum of dreams,
With the life gleaned from cat naps in a doctor's office, a library, leaning against the wall
in a lawyer's office, and anywhere in the car on the side of a road,
It is all there, as we nit-pick lice from each other's hair, sitting monkey-style,
one in front of the next,
As I search for the child who hides in the dust under his bed, afraid of the dentist's drill,
As I work long hours into the ninth-month nights to finish the last Raggedy Ann doll
before the next child is born,
As the dining room table is stretched into cheeses and home-baked cakes and breads,
Feeding mouths stuffed with words from graduations and baptisms and birthdays
and weddings,
As the children stand with bodies circled and arms stiffly out passing the newest baby
from child to child until each is satisfied,
As we flour the kitchen floor while rolling pasta or cutting holes in doughnut dough,
or make cookie recipes multiplied by six,
Jumping from one bed to another in a determined leap to fly, trying to recall the way
I did it in dream, floating against the ceiling,
Assigning the class of all black faces into set places to cover my confusion
at not being able to tell them apart,
Reconstructing every TV movie backwards from the ten minutes of the end when I sit
down to watch,
Shifting from foot to foot as my mother braids my hair, ready to bolt from the house
to get to school on time,
Gathering at the top of the back staircase as mother rings the bell from the kitchen
for morning prayer, showing only my head at the door because

I am not yet dressed,
Playing games of Park and Shop, Life, Clue, Hearts—dealer's choice--and five person
Spit, cool on the wooden floor on a long July day,
And knowing in the end, that Grandma always got Dirty Kate,
It is together, stitched into my patchwork as woman, becoming and becoming.

Ballinamora: 1996

I

A stranger, I knocked,
my heart thumping, at the
low green door hidden by
dark night and high hedgerows:

II

he was elfin and balding.
I believe we are related, I said.
He swung the door to and invited me in

III

I sat in the middle of
the room in the only chair.
I kept my coat on.

IV

He sat on a cobbler's stool in the fireplace
he could stand up in,
beside four pieces of peat
not bright enough to cast shadows.
A small book lay abandoned on the cement floor

V

I saw the dirt floor in the next room
as he opened the door to
get his tin box of letters.

VI

He turned on the one light, a bulb
on a long cord hanging from the ceiling.

VII

I could see the stained orange
wallpaper above the fireplace
where his clothes, tools, and mug hung
on nails.

VIII

My feet were cold in my wet shoes.

To Sid in Galway

Take my son to your kitchen table
from this far land where I have kept him
in fixed answers with no in-betweens;
nipple him now into the fey world
and tidal pools of your liquid land
where fairies slope stones into white cottages,
lining the coast like trail markers.

Slant your cap on your head,
stride with him, fast friends,
to the bay brimmed in bracken hills.
Your words in ovals fall like cursive Kells,
story-strokes of linked illumination.

Walk him round to Nora's blue door
where Joyce knocks--with few full stops,
smell ships as they keel in the black Spaniard's wine
and galleons that shiver in Irish mists,
stand where Columbus dreams to the western wilds*
from an in-drifting savage, embalmed in pirogue,
see blessed Brendan and his cowléd crew
picnic atop the Leviathan,
while Brian Boru slakes the Viking glut
and men run naked to the fair Fionna.

Open the door to your house on the water
and slow over breakfast of dry toast and black tea,

* There is a massive statue of Columbus in Galway's harbor because he conceived of sailing West from a native-"American" who drifted into the harbor on the Gulf Stream.

feed his search, while windowed out,
I long for you in Galway.

Snow

In Prague, the snow gossips
on the cobblestones,
the garnet granite
in the cemetery
drips through a late dawn.

The snow keens on a bed of nails
as churches shiver with cold toes,
and the diaphragm-thrust of
Bach in concert sends the song
to huddle in dark corners.

The snow drips in urine
on bare flesh,
the branches of trees
drag the crystal tips
of the Vltava river,
burning.

Taxis are pushed
from the queue at the airport--
there is no gas.

The marionette hangs out
a casement window
to lick its finger to the wind.

Prague: Jewish Cemetery

Slabs pierce the pathways—
you will number as the stars.
Headstones gasp for space,
calling to generations
who take the earth in boxcars.

Simple Fires

Ouch! Cassie dropped the burner and put her finger in her mouth. Smoke from the wood-burning stove poured out, stinging her eyes. She backed up against the screen of the cooking porch. The smoke began to curl towards the inside kitchen and the rest of the house, painting yet another layer of black on the white ceiling. Worse, the smoke threaded its way outside through the holes in the screen. Cassie imagined her neighbors, once more with smiles and head waggles, because the white “Dona” had ruined another fire. *I’m a camper. I’ve always been a camper. Why can’t I build a simple fire in this stupid stove?* And the reply came immediately: *Call it Africa and it gets difficult. Nothing is easy here.*

“Loveness,” she called out without turning her head. “Stove no good again!”

Cassie got a stick from the cement floor and used it as a lever to lift the heavy round burner cover. The weight of the cover snapped the stick in two and it fell, hitting her pot of beef stew on the way down and just missing her toe in her worn yellow flips.

“Shyster,” she yelled and turned to the kitchen, squinting into the late afternoon darkness in the house. Loveness came towards her out of the shadows.

“*Paypani*, sorry, sorry, Dona.” Loveness opened the side firebox of the stove.

Cassie smiled at her in relief. “Loveness, you don’t have to paypani me. It wasn’t your fault. Course it really wasn’t my fault either,” she added under her breath. “It’s this stupid *stove* that should be apologizing.”

Cassie had asked her boss at the hospital about this paypani word that everyone used when something went wrong. He had explained that it shielded them from being blamed for a misfortune. “Sounds like voodoo and sticking pins in dolls,” Cassie had commented. She was so accident-prone that apologies from Loveness strung her days together.

Loveness tucked the faded blue cloth wrapped around her hips between her legs, squatted down and stirred the smoldering wood. It caught. She stood, handed the burner cover to Cassie, and smiling, refastened her *chitingi*.

Cassie had no idea how old Loveness was. Gray hair mixed with the dark frizz that escaped from the red scarf on her head, but her face was smooth and unwrinkled,

round like her body. She always had a child or two in the house helping her with the laundry and the cleaning. Village children, Loveness had explained, and everyone in the village seemed to be family.

“You are magic, Loveness,” Cassie commented. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Loveness started, looking away from Cassie. “Magic, Dona?” Loveness repeated. She began to back away from the stove.

She thinks I’m accusing her of witchcraft. Cassie had read of the evil eye in West Africa, of people dying suddenly because an invisible death plane—filled with bones—had collected them. She wondered if beliefs like this tied into the bodies that Idi Amin kept in his freezer. An insurance policy, for when the death plane came looking for him?

Cassie smiled at Loveness. She hadn’t seen any witchcraft here in Malawi, just this fear that it could materialize. “Yeah, magic,” she explained. “Like a lucky charm, good luck—good one too much,” she finished lamely, slipping into the simplified English the two of them communicated in.

Loveness seemed relieved. “Yes, me magic good one too much. No bad one magic,” she stated, shaking her head from side to side in emphasis and wiping her hands on her *chitingi*.

“Loveness, you are always good one too much for me,” Cassie said in a gentle voice. She wondered if Loveness understood even half of what she said to her. Cassie moved the beef stew back on top of the now hot burner. “Why is it that the stove works for you and never for me?” she complained.

“*Paypani*, Dona,” Loveness said simply.

That night at dinner, Steve served himself from the bowl in the middle of their dining room table. “Same old, same old, I see.” He sighed. “We need to talk about these meals.”

“I’m sorry, hon. You know I’m caught between an old cow and a hard place. This one must have walked till he dropped.” Cassie could only cook when she *didn’t* think about where the meat came from. “Boil or grind. Those are your *haut cuisine* options.”

“I know it’s tough, but there must be some other way to season it--or something. Porridge every morning for breakfast and stew for dinner. I can’t take it much longer.”

“Ditto. But what can we do?”

“How about hiring a cook?”

“A cook?” Cassie smiled. *I could will him the wood stove.* “You know, that’s not such a bad idea.”

Steve reached across the blue formica table and took her hand, noticing a bandaid on her thumb. “The stove again?”

“Yeah, another firehouse rescue,” Cassie laughed.

“What if we tried to get a guy that’s been trained by one of the European families? I could ask around. Maybe someone’s going on leave.” He moved his thumb across her knuckles. “They certainly eat better than we do.”

“But can we afford two people, if we want to save money to travel?”

“I wasn’t thinking of having two people.”

“You mean, instead of Loveness?” Cassie pulled her hand away and Steve paused and shifted his weight in his chair.

“You said it yourself. We can’t pay two people.”

“I like Loveness, Steve. I’d have a hard time here without her.” *I can’t get along without her. I trust her, laugh with her. She’s my friend,* Cassie realized suddenly. Steve wouldn’t understand. He liked the Malawians as employees, not friends.

Steve hunched his shoulders towards the table and spread out his hands to include their dinner. “But she can’t cook.”

“She’s not supposed to cook.” Cassie’s voice took on an edge of defiance. “We hired her to do the laundry and help me around the house.”

“Precisely. Couldn’t we pay a bit more and hire someone to do the laundry *and cook?*” he said as he pushed his unfinished stew across the table.

“It’s the stove, Steve. We could buy a new stove.”

“That wouldn’t change things.” He got up, scraping the metal chair legs across the cement floor. “Whatever it is, this meal is nothing to come home to.”

Cassie’s eyes filled with tears and she forced them to stay under her lids. Was he criticizing her or Loveness? Both hurt. Without Loveness, she would be alone in this

country again. She got up and started stacking their dishes, making as much noise as she could.

“I’m going over to the Club,” Steve said. “Feel like coming? They have a new movie in from Stateside.” Her head was down and her long ponytail had fallen in front of her flushed face. “You could use a bit of electricity.”

“No,” she said shortly.

“Suit yourself,” Steve said. “You always do.” He walked across the living room, and glanced over at her as he kicked the corner of the straw rug which curled up in front of the door. He opened the door and banged it shut.

Cassie carried the dishes to the kitchen sink. Loveness went home by five, leaving her and Steve by themselves for dinner. These days, Cassie felt more alone at night with Steve than during the day with Loveness.

She began to wash the dishes in cold water. It was after six and nearing darkness. There were no slow evening twilights living so close to the equator. *Time to light the paraffin lamp.* Darkness fell like a stage curtain.

Cassie thought back to their bus ride from the airport with its grass landing strip. It was night, and the bus headed into the bush and their new home in Chitipi. For first time in her life, Cassie knew total darkness. The headlights of the bus clutched at spots in the outside blackness. People walking in single file, many with bundles on their heads, jumped out at her from the dark, floated towards her in the light and then vanished when the bus passed them. It was unsettling. She had felt the land was grasping for her, trying to drag her into its heavy black—and wondered about their wild decision to spend a few years in Africa. She was to volunteer at the hospital while Steve would work at getting a co-op going. She was not a part of this land but rather bobbed on the surface like a piece of white styrofoam.

Cassie took the leftover bowl of stew and bent to shove it on the top shelf of their waist-high fridge. It bumped a bottle of orange Fanta which tottered, then righted itself. *Paypani. Great, now I’m apologizing to a bottle of soda!*

Always, Cassie checked the ceiling as she closed the fridge door, making sure the small chimney at the back wasn’t smoking. The stove smoked, the fridge smoked, even their lamp smoked. But she and Steve — No smoke, no fire? We are like two shadows,

groping towards each other in darkness, and losing ourselves on the walls. She went into the dining room to light the paraffin lamp.

Steve came back from the club in a different mood. He came up behind Cassie and put his arms around her. “That guy Barker over at the government school told me he knows this guy Kaunda who’s a great cook and we’re in luck. He’s looking for a job.”

She arched her back “I told you. I like Loveness.”

He dropped his arms. “I’m looking out for you too, you know.” Steve paused. “Though we will have to pay him more.”

Cassie turned to face him. “We should pay Loveness more. What she gets can’t buy her a teapot at the end of the month.”

“You know we can’t. She’s unskilled labor. If we raise her pay, it upsets the apple cart.”

Cassie turned and walked away from him. “Maybe it needs a good kick,” she shot back over her shoulder.

He was right, though. They were like mannequins in a display window. When they moved in, children had lined up in silence along every window. The eyes were always there until she had borrowed a treadle sewing machine and stitched curtains to shut them out.

A few days later, Loveness asked permission to use the stove. Cassie agreed. Loveness asked for so little from them. After Cassie cleaned the meat, Loveness took the fat home to make a “relish” to go with their cornmeal *nsima*. And when they got fish. Loveness bowed and bowed in pleasure —“thank you too much,” as she left with a pan of staring fish heads and bony tails. *She’s always grateful, even for our garbage.*

Loveness wanted a bed, something made of ropes. It was good one too much for her back, at least better than the floor. She had found a man who could make one. “Me makie sconie,” was all Loveness had said about the stove.

During her afternoon tea break at the hospital, Cassie went home. From the road, the front of their house was quiet. With its gray cinder block walls and shiny silver roof, it looked like a tin-man’s hide-out. She could hear voices in back and went around the corner of the house. She stopped short under the guava tree.

A group of women and children stood at her back porch or squatted on the narrow strip of grass which separated the house from a tangle of uncut bush and banana plants. She didn't recognize any of them. They looked like church picnickers, settled to last all day. The women chattered in quick beats of words and laughter, oblivious of their children slung in a cloth pulling at a breast or sitting beside them with crumbs on their faces. Everyone was eating scones. Cloud-light, tender, ambrosia-like scones.

She's making scones on my stove and selling them! From her look-out, Cassie felt like an interloper. Busy at the stove, Loveness' laughter called out to the different women. *She seems so different with her own people.* Their voices rose and fell and Cassie only understood an occasional word. *What are they saying?*

An old man came from around the far corner of the house and walked up to the back porch. His face was gray with dust and torn pieces of cloth hung from his cotton suit coat, showing the striped lining underneath. He put his hands together, palms up, towards Loveness. Cassie knew this gesture. It's what children did when they asked for something.

Loveness bowed to the man, motioned for him to sit on the back steps, and handed him a scone. Cassie noticed that he sat in silence and that he hadn't given Loveness any money. A quiet eddy in the river of noise whirled around him, not touching him. Cassie stared at him. There was something peculiar about him. He slowly lifted his head up from his scone, turned to look out across the yard, found her under the tree and returned her stare.

Cassie left quickly without talking to anyone.

Later, when Cassie asked, Loveness said she didn't know who the man was.

"But Loveness give man scone and no take money," Cassie said.

"*Njara*, Dona, *njara* too much," Loveness had explained in surprise. He was hungry, hungry so she had fed him.

When Steve came home that night, he began quietly, almost tentatively, to talk to Cassie as they sat down to dinner. "They told me at the warehouse that our woman was selling scones today from our kitchen."

Cassie jumped. She had hoped he wouldn't find out.

“Where did she get the flour and the shortening from?” he continued. “Did she use ours?”

“No, she didn’t. She bought her own.” Steve didn’t need to know that Loveness had told her so little. Cassie didn’t even know that Loveness could make scones. *The times she must have laughed at the hard rocks that I make.*

“Are you sure?” Steve’s challenge snapped her into focus.

“About the flour?” she hedged. “Not exactly--.” Cassie could not stare down a lie. “But I know Loveness, and she wouldn’t take our food without asking.”

Steve looked down at his silverware, and crossed his knife carefully over his spoon. He was silent.

Cassie blurted out. “If she had asked me for flour, I would have given it to her for free.”

He looked up at her. “You spoil these people, Cassie. They take advantage of you because they get what they want from you. I know from the warehouse. They won’t respect you. Sure they’ll like you, but --.”

“And you are so hard-hearted that you keep track of everything. I’m surprised your aren’t measuring the bread and counting the rolls of toilet paper to make sure she doesn’t *steal* anything.”

Steve sighed and looked away from her. “I am, and she does.”

“What? You measured the banana bread?”

“Since the other night. Other things are missing as well. I know you like her, Cassie. But it’s time to let her go.”

“Maybe it was the kids that did it. Maybe at least talk to her first,” Cassie retorted.

Life without Loveness. Cassie saw her rough hands winnowing the rice—arcing it from the flat basket into the air and then catching the grains, letting the hulls fall over the side.

“I don’t trust her, Cassie. The rule of thumb is: don’t believe them until they prove they are not lying.”

“But I do trust her. And even if she has taken things, I don’t care!”

“Can’t you see, sweetheart?” Steve’s voice was the quiet of a voice calming a lame horse. “What you said makes absolutely no sense?”

The next day, Steve talked with Loveness and gave her notice. He thought she was taking things and besides, they needed a cook and had found someone else to do her job. Cassie made sure that she was not in the house during this talk. Loveness would see that she did not agree with her husband. Steve said that Loveness had looked sad, but seemed to understand his position

“Did she say she had done anything?” Cassie asked him later.

“No, but she apologized, which comes to the same thing.”

“How’s that?”

“She said *paypani*, as she was leaving the house.”

Steve went on his usual tour of the house before they went to sleep that night. He put the latch on the screen porch, turned the bolt on the front door, pulled the middle of the curtains together to overlap the opening, and turned the knob of the pantry door to make sure it was locked.

They lay in bed, sweating in the heavy night air, rigid on opposite sides like poles of dissension. After Steve went to sleep, Cassie tossed. She dreamed she was at the bottom of a cliff and it was dark. The cliff began to grow, stretching higher and higher above her so she had to bend her head back to see the top. Then thousands of black crabs with bulging white eyes began to fall off the cliff, landing on top of her. Cassie jerked awake.

It was light outside. She sensed immediately that something was different, but what? She lay in bed, trying to piece it together. The quiet—that’s what. *It’s too quiet. Where’s Nyirenda’s rooster under our bedroom window and the laughter of the women on the road?* She turned to the dresser to look at the clock. Maybe it was still early. The clock was not there.

“Steve?” He always woke up slowly, but this time, he turned towards her, happy that she was talking to him. What was she supposed to tell him? *Hey, honey, I have this weird feeling in my gut?* “Did you put the clock somewhere else last night?” she asked him.

“No, why?”

“It’s not here.”

“You woke me up to tell me this? You probably knocked it on the floor last night.” He rolled over on his stomach and put the pillow over his head.

“No, Steve.” Cassie sat up in bed and took a quick look around their bedroom. “And the clothes you always leave on the chair at night? They aren’t there either.”

Steven got out of bed and went to the window. He pulled apart the Java print curtains strung across their bedroom window. “Looks like someone didn’t clean up after a binge last night.”

Cassie jumped up to stand beside him. Things were scattered on the ground across the front of their house.

“There must have been some fight out here last night. I’m surprised we didn’t hear it.”

Papers, clothes and dishes lay in scattered islands all the way to the dirt road. “That’s our stuff,” she said quietly.

“What!”

“Look.” She began pointing things out in a flat voice. “The can opener, your white sneaker. . . .” She paused. “The clock.” It lay face up in front of the window-- its black hands seemed fixed in a leer.

Cassie saw a man walking along the road in front of their house. He wore an old brown suit coat, ripped so the striped lining underneath showed through. He stopped and turned to look at her, then brought his hands together and moved them up towards her in an obvious gesture of giving. Then he smiled.

Cassie didn’t believe in witchcraft, not really. But she knew that Loveness would get her job back again.

She let her side of the curtain fall and turned to Steve. “*Paypani*,” she said, trying without much success to look sad. He stood frozen at the window, his hand still holding up his side of the curtain.

African Beauty

In the purple shade of a jacaranda,
petals inking the red dirt,
she sits on a chair
dragged from the big house:
Come here and plait my hair.

Two young girls, like monoliths, one to a side
of the deep-hollowed mortar
planted at their mud hut, slow their pounding,
their kettle-drumming of the hard maize,
the down beat, up, the down beat, up,
Please come plait my hair.

They fetch string to wrap and round
her hair, no comb needed,
and giggle at the feel,
her strands like the fish-slip
of minnows
running from their rough fingers.
While she sits silent beneath
their hands,
they cluck their tongues and shake
their heads from side to side:
ya-yi not made for Africa.
ya-yi not bent to the pulse of the land.

They take minutes not hours
to wind her hair in strings.

Pleased, she runs
to the house, for the mirror, to marvel.
But the strings, with nothing
to hold them,
release,
and fall
to her feet.

Marble Cake

--for Bryn and Bako

We made one once, me and my
Jessie. Just a try like them prissy
cookbook photos in separate
swirls--not shooters, not cat-eyes, child.
You went to hoard that bowl of
chocolate batter: I'm thinkin' what does it matter—
you always did like them chocolates,
even then. It says alternate colors,
meanin' keep 'em separate. So we laid
that batter straight, no thumb flicks,
in perfect checkerboard pattern, then
tongue tipped determined between your teeth,
you dragged that chocolate through plain,
and laughed when all turned brown like this
one boy you now mean to marry.

The Cement House

It was Wednesday. Wilhelm pitted the lurching motion of the electric trolley against his own sense of balance. He did not hold on. To give himself leverage, he stood with his feet wider than his shoulders, toes splayed out inside his spit-and-polish brown leather shoes, knees bent, head level, and stomach muscles contracted. The trolley was on its steep five mile descent from Pitt University to the bluffs overlooking the Allegheny River. Even on days when the trolley jumped the track, pulling screams from older passengers and cheers from the university students, Wilhelm Krane tried not to grab for one of the straps which hung from its ceiling.

He loved this raw land of steep hills and deep hollows, folding one over the other, their giant feet plunging in steep banks to a thin toenail of land along the river's edge. It was alive, ready to face the excitement of a new century. If only Ana could see it as he did. She was still pasted into the ruts of the old country and he could not pull her out. It would be different for their two girls, their *kindern*. They would grow up to be more like Lily, independent and sensible.

Once he got off the trolley, thoughts of Lily turned his feet toward the cobblestones of Federal Street. She lived in Mrs. William Thaw's rooming house, a three-story construction in the middle of "Millionaire's Row." The top floor of the house was an elaborate ballroom and he longed some day to take Lily there to go dancing. He had started meeting Lily on Wednesdays, often walking his daily constitutional with her before he headed home for lunch with Ana. Wilhelm drew in deep breaths of air, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Pittsburgh was one of the healthiest cities in the country and doctors had theories that the carbon, sulphur, and iodine particles in the air must have somehow killed the malarial disease which used to infest the wetlands along the rivers.

He stopped in front of number 23 but didn't bother to knock because he had seen Lily's faced framed by the white curtains at the window. She waved and signaled she was on her way out. He thought again of how she reflected the spirit of this country, not dropping her eyes, but looking levelly at him from beneath her dark eyebrows. Her hair

was caught up in two combs on top of her head, business-like, but Wilhelm knew that if he lifted the combs out, her hair would cascade down her back in ripples of darkness. She was tall and long-legged and had no trouble keeping up the brisk pace which he set as they now walked side by side. One of the new bicycles passed them, its smaller back wheel spinning furiously in what looked like an attempt to catch up to the enormous wheel in front. Wilhelm began thinking of a way to design the contraption that would make it more stable.

He and Lily headed for Bellevue Park where the one-armed care-taker was busy shooing kids off the grass. “I don’t know why they just don’t let the children run free on the grass,” Lily commented. “Imagine, they only let them on the grass twice a year.”

“The last day of school and the Fourth of July,” Wilhelm added. “Rather appropriate, don’t you think? It is the little things we find to do which celebrate our freedom.” He smiled down at her, reached over and pulled her hand through his bent arm.

Lily flushed. “William, what does Ana think about you seeing so much of me?”

“I don’t know. It seems I don’t know anything that Ana is thinking these days. I used to be able to tell.”

“So she does know, then.”

Wilhelm thought of the times he had seen Lily in the past few months. At first, it had just been a relief to find a woman who talked so sensibly. And then, he couldn’t stay away. His Dutchtown was not so very far from her Ridge Avenue. And he knew they made a striking couple. She with her brown hair piled high on her head and he with his starched collar and well-pressed suit.

“I suspect she does know. But what am I to do about it? More and more, she is silent, shut up in her memories of Alsace and the old French way of doing things. I have made a life for myself in this city.” He turned to face her and slowly tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. When he felt her pull back, he dropped his hand.

“Lily, I’m an ex-soldier and iron-monger with a knack for doing things. This land has let me be who I want to be.” He laughed and turned to look at her. “It’s still hard for me to believe. Imagine, with almost no education, I’m even teaching at a university! In Germany, this never could have happened.”

Lily smiled and squeezed his arm. “You’re surprised that they’ve discovered you? I’m not, William.” She looked at him sideways and slowed down. “You know why? It’s because you know how to do things.” She paused. “Many things.”

Her last words fell between them in silence. They had turned back from the park towards the rooming house that lined up with others along the top of a bluff. From their hill, these houses looked out on two different worlds: Allegheny City and Pittsburgh. The front parlors of the houses saw the green hills of Allegheny City. The Swiss and the Germans had carved parks, gardens, even a famous observatory out of the steep hillsides. Carnegie, Westinghouse, and Heinz all lived here, moving about the city like any other citizens. The back windows of the houses looked down on the dark island of Pittsburgh, the city between the rivers.

“What was it that first attracted you to Ana?”

Wilhelm was surprised by the question. It was strange, talking to Lily about Ana. “It was her voice. People used to come from miles around to hear her sing. But she doesn’t sing any more.”

“Doesn’t sing any more,” Lily repeated. She shrugged and began walking again. “Perhaps she’s homesick.”

Wilhelm wanted Lily’s opinion about Ana, but it was an awkward thing to ask for. *Tell me, dear, what do you really think is going on with my wife?*

“Why would she be?” he asked. “She was happy enough to come over here when I sent for her.”

“Yes, but that was because of you, not because of America.”

Wilhelm remembered the way he had thought of to get around Ana’s parents and their disapproval of him, this coal miner from Germany who had eyes for their daughter. He had shown Anna how to hide messages written in milk between the lines of their letters to each other. Her parents hadn’t wanted her to go to America. But he had won. “Why would she be homesick?” he asked again. “She has a good life. I have given her children and built her a house with my own hands.”

“With your own hands, William?”

Wilhelm needed no encouragement to tell Lily the story of his house, the invention that he was the most proud of.

“I made her a house of cement.”

Lily pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose. “Poor Ana. The fate of being married to a modern man.”

“No, but you misunderstand. It’s a wonderful house!” And Wilhelm told her of how just when he was ready to build, the brickyard had gone on strike. No bricks, no house, everyone had thought. But they had not stopped him. He had found another way to do it—he had built the house out of cement, mixing in the ashes from the steel mills to strengthen it. “It is the only three story cement house in the whole city. Everyone predicted it would collapse from the weight, but it didn’t.”

“Does Ana know that people said it would collapse?”

“Of course she does—everyone talked about it—but I built it well. It is my achievement and will be around for my great-grandchildren to see.”

Lily said nothing. They had come to the rooming house and she ran her hand slowly along the top of the wooden hitching post in front of the door.

“When can I see you again?” Wilhelm asked. “Could we meet for lunch next weekend, say at the rooming house for beer and scrapple? I don’t think I can wait until next week to see you.”

“Not yet,” said Lily. “You are getting a little too anxious. Let’s just keep it to Wednesdays.” And she went inside.

Wilhelm’s house was on Langtry Avenue, along a narrow road between two mountains. The land squeezed the houses in like boning in a corset. The upstairs was cold, so year-round, he and Ana lived in the large kitchen on the ground floor. On every night except mid-summer, Wilhelm would take a hot brick from the cupboard built on top of the stove and carry it upstairs to warm their cold beds.

As Wilhelm neared the front walkway, Karoline toddled out to meet him. “Well, little one. And how big are you today?”

Karoline thrust herself on tiptoe with arms stretched straight over her head. “Soo big!”

“I think you are even bigger than that!” Wilhelm challenged her. “Stretch up from your stomach and give me another inch. Grab at that sky like you’re climbing a rope!”

Karoline scrunched her nose, reached up higher, and lost her footing. Wilhelm caught her in his arms before she fell. “That’s excellent,” he said, setting her back on her feet. “Let’s go in and see how your mama is doing today.”

He saw a spoon lying on the walk. “Karoline. Pick up the spoon and bring it inside. Our flatware is not for digging holes in the dirt.” He looked down at the child to try to explain something that her mother did not seem to fathom. “Spoons stay in the house and are for eating; shovels or even sticks belong outside and they are for digging.” Karoline understood and held the spoon up towards him. “Good girl, Karoline.” He smiled at her as he took the spoon. “It’s time for lunch now. Let’s go in and wash your hands.”

Wilhelm slowed his pace as he and Karoline walked towards the brown front door. He never knew what to expect when he opened it. It took his eyes a few minutes to adjust to the darkness. First, he always saw the stove which took up almost the entire back wall. It was chilly in the room. This meant that Ana had again forgotten to keep the stove filled with pieces of coal. Today, he saw noodles, glowing white in the inner dimness. Ana had set them around to dry after she had cut them. They were draped on the backs and the seats of the four chairs around the table, in lumps across the top of the table, and across the front of the china cabinet. It was not that she had made so many. There were a few here, a few there, rather like chalk tally marks from a game of hopscotch.

Ana did not come up to him, but stood by the stove, cutting onions into their big frying pan. That was a bad sign. That meant that the meal was nowhere near ready. Because he had just seen Lily, he found himself really scrutinizing Ana. How had she gotten so short, so slump-shouldered? She was wearing a loose dress which, instead of hiding the weight she had gained from the babies, made her look even rounder. Her green apron was full of brown smudges that he suspected was dirt from the garden. She turned to him and picked up their biggest reed basket, full to the top with new lettuce, and held it out to him, her arms stiff like levers.

“Wilhelm, I made you noodles for supper! And I went to the farmer’s market and got you spring beets—and look here, new lettuce!”

“Ana,” he began slowly, keeping his voice level. “The fire is not hot so you can’t possibly boil the water for the noodles and we will eat all that lettuce you bought before it wilts!” He hadn’t meant it to come out that way. But she was so impractical.

“Oh, Wilhelm. Her eyes filled up with tears. “It will only take me a minute to get the fire going again. You will see. Only a minute.”

“Ana, but we have to eat. You were outside too long, weren’t you?” Wilhelm saw her start and look away. *She knows I can’t stand tears and is trying to hide hers. There must be some way to focus her on what needs to be done.*

And then a solution came to Wilhelm. “I’ll tell you what, Ana.” As if reasoning with a child, he began, his voice speeding up as he realized how good this idea was. “I can move your flowers to the roof of the workshop so you can see them, even while you are doing your inside chores.” And though he tried to stop himself, he added, “And you will get more work done.”

Ana’s face drained. He could see that she did not understand, so he began to list the details that were piling up in his mind. “There are already steps up the back of the workshop. There is enough wood stacked against the house to box in beds. He felt like he was pounding facts into her head with an anvil, but she stood there in silence. “Ana, I don’t know why I never saw this before. It would be like the widow boxes in Alsace. We could have a whole roof of flowers. And the flowers would grow better outside the shadow of the house.” Ana twisted her apron in her fingers as Wilhelm began to walk the floor, three steps and turn. “It is a good idea, Ana. Another invention.” Then, drawing himself up straighter he added. “I could even fashion some type of equipment and do my exercises while you gardened. ”

Ana came to life as if she had been slapped across the cheek. “You bury me alive and now you want to take my flowers away from me to go on my tomb!” She began to talk so fast that the words tumbled out of her mouth one on top of the other. “You have your woman, I know. Are you surprised? I know things.” She backed up into the stove and looked down on the cold skillet of onions. “And I build fires for you, to put coals in

the iron to press your stiff white shirts before you go to see her! I know things. I know things.”

Wilhelm’s voice rose loud across the room, trying for control. “Ana, get a hold of yourself.” Karoline began to cry, which set off baby Henrietta in the bassinet near the stove. He couldn’t take this chaos. He barked in terse syllables through his teeth. “What is wrong with you? You are scaring the children.”

Ana closed her mouth and slumped forward. She walked slowly across the kitchen and picked up Karoline. The child stopped crying. She did not look up at Wilhelm. “It was going to be so nice with you, Wilhelm,” she whispered, as if she did not want him to hear.

Wilhelm pulled his coat to straighten out the wrinkle Karoline had put in it. *I need calm. I need to see Lily.* Let Ana settle down and then she would see the beauty of a rooftop park, neatly ordered with paths in between. Wilhelm abruptly turned away from Ana and headed for the front door. He raised his voice to cover the baby who was still crying in the bassinet. “There is no time left to have lunch with you,” he began. “I have to get back.” He wondered if he had enough time to eat at the rooming house. He wondered what Lily would think of his idea. “You force me to find my own food in town.”

Ana walked towards him, looking out but not at him. As she passed the table in the middle of the room, she caught her dress on a chair and looked down. Noticing Karoline there, she picked her up. Karoline stopped crying. Then she seemed to realize that the baby was still crying and she went to the bassinet and put the one child down to take up the other. Wilhelm appreciated the silence, but felt the need to restore order. “You daydream your way through the day, Ana, and nothing ever gets done. You need to be more practical, to figure things out more.”

“It is the sun,” said Ana.

What was she talking about? She truly made less and less sense these days. “This has nothing to do with the sun. This has to do with a simple thing like getting some food on the table. Something has to change. Soon.”

“Yes, Wilhelm. I understand.” She walked slowly towards him, holding the baby in one arm, with her other hand tightly gathering her skirts against her body.

He was relieved that he had gotten through to her. “I could start today. Your roses need to be moved while they are still dormant.” He did not even know that he had tensed up until he felt the muscles behind his neck begin to ease out. The explanation was clear enough and the idea was solid.

“You will see. It will be good.” Ana seemed not to have heard him. He felt awkward. “Well good-bye then. I’ll see you later.” And he bent to give her a kiss on the head but kissed the baby in her arms instead.

He went out the door and pulled it to behind him.

It was Wednesday. Ana scraped her fingers along the ground under the rosebushes to get up all the weeds. The first buds were already formed at the tips of the branches and she was tempted to squeeze one open to look for fragrance inside. She was pleased with herself. She had remembered to go to the farmer’s market early that morning and had found beets and new spring greens for Wilhelm’s lunch today. She had bought a whole basket of the greens and had also made noodles. Wilhelm would be pleased. She stroked a bud with the side of her finger. When did roses begin to smell and where did the fragrance come from? Karoline was using a spoon to dig some holes and finding stick people to put into her village. Ana jerked back into time. The baby must be ready to wake up. Worse, it could be time for Wilhelm to come home for his lunch. A thorn poked into her finger. *I know, mes petites, I have to go inside now. But I will return when I can.* Ana pushed against the ground with her hand and straightened slowly, easing her knees into place. She must have been out here a long time. Little Karoline didn’t want to come in either, so Ana left her outside until her father came home for his lunch.

Ana paused on the outside stoop, face to the sun, willing its warmth into her body. She couldn’t stand to be in the house for long periods of time. She worked a little inside, then escaped to tend her roses along the front walkway. She picked up a withered petal from last fall, crushed it to crumbs between her fingers, brought the pieces to her lips, licked them, kissed her fingers to the air, and turned slowly to grope her way inside the dark house.

No matter what she cooked, the house always smelled of urine and moldy potatoes. Did he think he could seal her up in this mausoleum and then do whatever he wanted? *What would Miss Lily think of this house?* She knew about Lily, she knew. The wife at the market, she got around the city, she had seen Lily and him together. Ana ached to smell her mother's kitchen: the coriander and onion from sausages, the cinnamon and nutmeg from a Kugelhof cake in the oven. Ana paced round and round the big kitchen. *Hold your skirt, away from the walls, even worse, when your hand against them falls.* It was a charm she had made up to defeat the demons in the house. She stopped at her mother's porcelain dish, green-patterned with gold handles like cream puffs on each side and on the lid. The dish nested on the sideboard like a tiny garden, waiting for her to open it and release its smells. *Roses on my shoulders, slippers on my feet.* The petals in the dish were her favorites. *I'm my papa's sweetheart. Don't you think I'm sweet?* Each petal she lifted still had its own scent, even after years. She closed her eyes, chose a petal, and held it to her nose like the cork from an expensive bottle of wine. No, not this one. Her eyes filled with tears. It was from her mother's garden, the spicy red rambler that covered their fence in the summertime. Ana felt the room's clammy fingers on her arms and shivered. Even the lace curtains hung limp at the small windows.

Ana walked quickly to the stove to put water on to boil the noodles and saw the basket of greens on the heavy oak table. She hesitated, then plunged her face down into them. They smelled like Wednesdays and the market, like the black dirt on the farmer's shoes. But Wilhelm is coming! She pulled the heavy skillet down from the pothook on the cement wall, put in a pat of butter, and cut up some red onions. Her mother's advice: the smell of fried onions in butter will trick your husband into thinking the meal is almost ready.

Wilhelm stomped in with Karoline, but not before he stopped to have Karoline scrape one foot then the other on the bristly mat outside the door. Ana jumped. She wondered when it was that he had stopped kissing her. *I'm my papa's sweetheart.* He never smiled at her but then, she could no longer laugh. *Don't you think-- I'm sweet?*

But she had noodles for him! The fire is out? She let go of the potholder she was holding on the handle of the skillet and felt the stove. It had gone cold while she was

warm in the vineyards in Alsace, remembering village chimneys cupped with stork nests. She pulled open the fire door—he will be angry with me—and bent to grab small sticks and shove them in. “It will only take me a minute to get it going again. You will see. Only a minute.”

What was he saying about her flowers? That it was their fault that she could not stay in the house to get work done? It is their fault that I am still alive. Ana felt a chill run down her back and sweat break out on her forehead. She was afraid of this man. *Pull up my flowers?* Would he really rip up her roses--and put them--on the roof? *Put their feet in cement? It would kill both of us.*

Wilhelm was talking faster. What was he saying? His voice filled the space between them and she felt there was not enough room here for both of them. She had to block his voice before it flattened her. *He wanted her to exercise? On the roof?* Outside where everyone could see them? Ana was happy when winter came and she could wrap her body in layers of material so she became lumpy and Wilhelm lost his urges for her. Like a cabbage---you peel leaves to get to the core and find it to be bitter.

Ana felt words rattle up in her throat, words about flowers in cement and ironing his shirts for other women. They just burst out. Who was this man? What was this place she was living in? He and Pittsburgh belonged together. A hell-hole of a city, never light, never dark, with smokestacks leering like teeth, belching fire. And the land, what are they doing to the land—the hills like smallpox, all pitted and mutilated from tunneling out coal.

She felt his anger and wanted to hide. “Please, Wilhelm, don’t yell.”

Ana wondered if people talked about him and Miss Lily. Wilhelm with his straight back and stiff way of walking, his clipped mustache and sharp blue eyes, stands out in a crowd. The women liked him because he is cleanly dressed, never smelling like the stockyards on the island or the steel mills. *Don’t they know I am the one who presses his white shirts? Don’t they know what he changes into when he walks into this house?* Outside, smiles and bows. She could still love that young man who had come to hear her sing in the biergarten in Alsace. Alone here, he whittled her down with his scorn. He was always right—

“Ana, you are scaring the children. Get hold of yourself.” It was always her fault. Please Wilhelm, don’t yell. If she got the spaetzle done right, he would say nothing. But when it turned to blobs of dough in the water, he could go on and on about it. This time cracked her song.

She noticed Karoline was crying and went over to pick her up. She couldn’t bear to have Wilhelm touch her. Was it this city which had spoiled it, or do marriages just go that way when a woman gets fat with babies and begins to have an opinion of her own about how things should be done? Ana suspected that her Wilhelm was not fashioned for marriage, but only for flirting and courting. She never knew someone to work so hard on building muscles and keeping in shape. While she rounded and drooped. The man of her dreams, now only a dream. “Yes, I understand,” she said. And under her breath she added “It was going to be so nice, Wilhelm.”

He hovered close to her and then went out the door and was gone—to find his modern woman, no doubt. Let her figure it all out, Ana thought grimly.

Mon Dieu, the baby still crying. Ana rocked her. Even this. Two girls when Wilhelm had wanted a boy. She began to say prayers she knew by heart from her Confirmation prayer book. Wilhelm said the old church needed to make way for some of the changes going on in America. Change electrified him, that’s what.

This land was too fast for her. Her eyes filled with tears again. *What is wrong with me these days? I must get out.* Had her mother ever felt this loneliness? No--she had others to talk to as she wrung out the week’s laundry at the village trough or went to the bakery with her loaves of bread to be put into the village oven.

Wilhelm left and Ana thought about what to do. Karoline stood by the table, picking at the stiff noodles and eating them. *I must find the land and the sun.* She would take the trolley to the farms just over the hills from Allegheny City. With no meal to make, the day was suddenly open. Frau Heissinger would watch the little ones, leaving her free to wander. She would leave a note just in case Wilhelm got back, but she would surely get home before he did. On Wednesday afternoons, the bier cart went through town. She could buy a loaf of fresh bread, take an empty flask for the beer, and that’s all she needed.

Ana walked the roads with clean dirt under her feet, smelled manure on early spring fields, and felt the wind pushing against her face. She sat on the grass at the side of an empty hill, crushing the new green between her fingers until it dyed her hands. She put a blade of grass between her fingers and blew on it, making a shrill sound, then laid out and rolled side over side until she came to the bottom of the hill, out of breath. Then she walked to the top of another hill, stood at the top, chest up and arms out, and threw her voice over the land singing children's nursery songs: *Fais do-do Colin mon p'tit frère*. She heard the clear notes come back to her. *Yes, I still have a voice.*

It was getting dark. She came to a farmhouse. The light was on in the kitchen and she saw shadows passing back and forth and heard laughter in voices. She stood there and couldn't move. A dog in the courtyard began to bark at her, the house door opened. An old man came out, his eyebrows wrinkled into his nose as he tried to see into the evening light. *If only it was a woman. Maybe, I could talk to her.*

"Who's there?" he demanded, and then he saw her. "Are you all right?" he asked more gently. Ana wanted to cry, *no take me in*. "Were you in an accident, child? Is something wrong?"

Ana gave a start and looked down at her dress with grass stains and dirt. She could feel her hair hanging down in pieces from its bun. She pushed the hair back out of her eyes. "Maybe, if you had a glass of water?"

"Sure, come in." And he opened the door enough so she could pass in front of him.

Ana sat in the house. She felt the warmth of the fire, saw its glow on the pots and pans. She smelled the wood oil on the carved furniture and the window frames and the bread baking in the oven. The setting sun caught everything aflame. She felt cocooned, protected, and ran her hands back and forth, back and forth, she couldn't stop, across the top of the rough bench she sat on, feeling the paths of the wood grain, where they went straight and where they intersected. It was suddenly quiet and she looked up to see the farmer staring at her. She looked down at her hands and watched them as well. She was surprised to see them running back and forth across the top of the bench. She stopped them and forced them to fold and lay quiet in her lap.

The farmer asked if there was anything else he could do for her.

“No, I suppose I must leave.” She was hoping he would say to please stay a little longer or to come back anytime. But he didn’t. The man opened the door for her and she had to pass beside his sentinel shape and go outside.

It was dark. She had to hurry. The closer she got to home, the more nervous she became about her trip to the country. How could she have done such a thing? How could she explain it to Wilhelm? He would be so angry. She had left the children with someone else, and he was always very careful never to be indebted to anyone. And the house would be clammy cold when she got back, noodles still hanging all over the kitchen. By now, they would have picked up the smell of the walls and be ruined. She had no energy to cook them anyway.

She dragged her feet towards the house and then froze as she turned into the dirt road at Langtry Avenue. Her roses, her roses, along both sides of the front walk had been dug up and thrown into a pile, their roots clutching the sky. They were knobbed, twisted, silent in the dark. She could not walk into that cold darkness without first hearing the voices of her flowers. She couldn’t go on.

Ana turned around, went back down the hill and got on a street car. But where could she go? Not back to the farmer. He had been kind, but he didn’t want her. There was no place. *I only have this trolley.* She stood inside, clutching at the ceiling strap, knuckles white. Most of the people were already at home and the cars were running empty. A few people in the other cars were tented under their newspapers, absorbed in the day’s news. She held on to the ceiling strap, feeling the sway of the machine beneath her. She was alone. It wouldn’t be so hard. She had heard others had done it before her. Many others. The city had even talked of taking the straps down from the ceilings. So it must be easy to do. Not hard at all. Not as hard as keeping a fire burning, not as hard as cement. She would be like her roses, her feet in the air. She climbed up on the wooden seat, put her head through the strap and jumped. The rope caught her, and she hung there feeling it tighten around her neck. The carriage swayed, rocking her body from side to side and took her wherever it was going.

Doughnutting for *Fastnacht*

I've done it again, this immensity of dough
just happens, gathering yeast to grow
beyond the rim, inviting in kin,
we taffy-pull it from the wide silver bowl
to cut, fry, and sugar-shake. Doughnuts,
our one German custom, we eat as we make,
each child with a station to slather the doughnuts
in fantasy finish: cinnamon, chocolate, lemon
or glazed but never ever just plain.

Remember, Mother, when you came for my fiftieth,
my surprise gift, this day before Lent?
Together we measured to make the dough, laughing,
sistered, words on the run to catch
our thoughts, we muffed the measurements;
fifteen pounds of flour, more than ever before,
inviting in neighbors and kin, to cut, fry, and sugar-shake,
working in shifts, every surface with doughnuts
in excess, tenemented on trays, and finally finished,
we collapsed, generations petalled around you,
on chairs and on floor, foreheads crossed in flour,
and you sang for us the pat-a-cake rhyme
of your grandmother, who spoke no English.

Now old and tired, when doughnuts in boxes
would suit me just fine, my children demand
a continuation. Our one German custom,
we eat as we make; the sweet smell sticks
to the walls, pushing out to the damp winter air.

Stuffed, sugar gritted in the treads of shoes,
each leaves with a brown bag of extras,
never good the next day.

Dovetailing

He sits me in a measured house: its gate
in plumb to fit the minutes of the clock
and roof in pitch to slant along the stock
report. Within, I learn to modulate
my voice, excising from it any bursts
of sound. He listens to me now and asks
me surface questions I can rarely answer—
but there's no harm in this—as I distract
him sometimes from his morning TV news
when he will interrupt my language on
parole. Reciting iconographies,
I pass precision testing. It's a relief:
we can converse as I no longer think
to cite the raggedness of feelings.

Ode to Parsley

Curled hair
and quick to smile,
her party dress
belies her shy
beginnings
when day after day
the garden spot sown
with her tight black seeds
stayed bare:
long after
all lost hope
the soil broke open.
Once begun,
she grew
in meditations
upon stars,
sunlight,
while her roots
scavenged the deep loam
to build her inner
strength of nutrients.
Not tall,
no brilliant flowers,
nothing but curls
as fashion,
yet she is caught in a whirl
of social invitations
to grace entrées:
the haughty Beef Wellington,

the cliques of escargot,
the peasant ratatouilles
demand her presence;
in rare humility
admitting
her acrid taste
and simplicity
contain
more benefit
than all their
complications.

Mr. Allen Gets a Taste of Gardening

You can't eat flowers:

why grown them?

I cram them down, my mouth full of nasturtiums.

Here, they taste like radishes.

You grow roses.

Only for my wife, he says.

And I pick the petals of a red rose winner, 1994.

They are cinnamon-flavored—try them on French toast.

I look across at his beans, loomed like a Navajo rug.

Ironed flat.

And I begin to pick:

Field peas, English peas, butter beans, limas, crowders.

What, you've picked peas for thirty years and never eaten them raw?

I crunch each between my teeth.

He takes one from my fingers.

I was brought up in an orphanage, he says. *Me and my brother.*

Things take over.

The flowers start to move in slurries of color.

They call out their names.

Can you still hear me? *What's that?* he says.

My fingerprint becomes the flower-press of wind.

Do I have one? he asks

Why not?

Because stones wait in the soil.

Stones sing in riverbeds.

Can we grow pitches?

Yes, and open G makes the whole violin vibrate.

He takes my hand.

The rain fiddles our fragrance.

Color-spilled, we sit down in the red dirt.

Carnations, gardenias, angelica.

We eat flowers.

Driving from Annapolis to Cancer

The blue eye of your garden sucked
me in and I swung the car off the road
to find myself surprised yet pinioned
before your door, my hot throat
like a bruised lark, fought
to say: Hello, it's wet today.

Surprised, you thought at first you knew
me, then curved your wavering belief
into a soft smile, swung open the door
to let me in for a cup of hot tea,
blanketing my shoulders while I dripped
dog puddles and tears on the stone floor.

This slow slag of red mud you kissed
into trellised walkways and flower-twisted
telephone poles—I had to stop.
Do you mind? Across the table
you took my hands, yours leathern, and
cradle rocked me into silence.

Pepper Pat

I knew right away it was Patrick. He sat at the corner of our yard, the black shine of his hair blending into the dark shadow under the juniper bush. He was calm, settled, as if he knew he would have permission to stay. “A dog!” the kids yelled and they named him Raisin, and he stayed. But from the very beginning, I knew it was Patrick and the ache that had filled me since his death a few weeks before dulled a little. I was a drain blocked with memories, now finally able to let through a trickle of water, because he had come back to me.

The dog’s colors were right, black with a splay of white on his chest. Through four years of college, Patrick had worn a black and white checkered suit coat, white shirt, and black string tie, the accepted packaging for an eccentric genius. And, I thought, it was just like him to show up like this. Alone as always. No announcement. No forewarning. For years, my marriage was punctuated by Patrick’s random visits to North Carolina—from Michigan, from Ohio, from Belgium or New Zealand, from wherever he was in his roamings. I would look up from peeling veggies at the kitchen sink and see him salute me through the window, or open the front door on a rain-driven night and find him dripping on the front porch.

At first, Pat had hitchhiked to our house. He would stay for a few days and then I took him out to the Interstate 85 and dropped on the shoulder of the highway. “Where are you going?” I would ask and offer to make him a sign.

“Real hitch-hikers don’t carry signs.” So he stood there, slight at the edge of the road as the trucks drove by him, their wind lifting the black hair off his forehead. And I drove off. I never stayed there to make sure that he got a ride. That too, seemed to be against the rules.

Pat never said why he came to visit us. That wasn’t Patrick. He didn’t operate in a world of cause and effect and rationality. He had no strings attached. Maybe this is why Richard enjoyed his sporadic visits. Pat showed up at our house every few years and then turned into an occasional postcard from far away places. And I never wrote to him. Richard respected his intelligence, clinched many years ago when Pat figured out exactly

how many hot dogs he would have to cook to justify the expense of buying one of those new microwave ovens. For Richard, Patrick was like a question left unanswered from one of my 60's philosophy classes, someone I had befriended and taken pity on—like a stray dog.

Yet Patrick was the side of me that saw faces in telephone poles, refused to wear a watch, and went for a walk in pouring rain without a coat on. Pat's visits surfaced my conflicting emotions towards my marriage, which I kept stuff-sacked deep inside myself. Someday, I planned to loosen those strings and look inside. On his next visit, or when we had more time to ourselves, or after my kids grew up.

Of course, I couldn't tell the kids or Richard that this stray dog that had immediately begun to follow us around the yard was really Patrick. From the beginning, Raisin laid claims to me. He waited for me to come outside and then followed close at my heels as I pinched back the winter pansies or planted spring lettuce and beets in the garden. He never went beyond the property boundaries. Richard couldn't figure this out. We had absolutely failed to yard-train our other dog, Prancer. She stayed fastened to a chain bolted to the doghouse, a chain stretching thirty feet to the end of our driveway because I hated the idea of limiting her freedom. Prancer chased chipmunks and birds, running after them until she played out to the end of the chain and it snapped her head back. Richard took a dislike to Raisin, preferring Prancer on a chain to Raisin at my heels. I was thrilled with Raisin and his innate sense of yard boundaries. Richard grumbled about that mutt being always underfoot.

Because of Richard's attitude, I tried to be quiet in my devotion to Raisin. But I couldn't help myself from getting up at night, to make sure he had not run off somewhere.

Richard would roll over in half sleep. "Where are you going at this ungodly hour?"

"I can't sleep."

"It's that dog again. You're checking on that dog, aren't you?"

"No. I mean, not much. While I'm up, I might as well."

And Richard would pull up the covers, punch his pillow, and complain that the dog got more attention than he did.

When Patrick visited, family rules vanished, swept into a vial of proper parent decorum and then ignored. The kids nicknamed him “Pepper Pat,” and the name stuck. He was company and we ate dinner in the dining room with serving dishes, and salt and pepper shakers, immediate signals to the kids of a switch to formal etiquette. Because “food was cooked to perfection in the kitchen and needed nothing else,” the salt and pepper were ornamental, like a bowl of flowers. One dinner, Pat began to pepper his mashed potatoes, turning the top of the pepper mill in quick twists. He paused, feeling ten eyes riveted on his hands. Seemingly oblivious of this scrutiny, he continued twisting the top, until his potatoes looked like black Midwestern loam. Pat ate the potatoes, licked his fork, licked his plate and earned his nickname.

Pepper Pat juggled oranges with cans of beer, squawked passages from *Paradise Lost* in a Donald Duck voice, slunk from tree to tree outside like the mustachioed bad guy in old cartoons, yet quieted as he sat on the couch with the children, listening to me read the evening bedtime story.

When I opened the kitchen screen door at night, Raisin was always waiting for me. I sat on the curved steps that led down from the back door, feeling the cold brick through my pajamas. As Raisin sat between my legs, I ran my hands down his back, probing, feeling his muscle slip beneath my fingers and feeling his shivers. Raisin would turn his head, looking at me with deep eyes and I talked to Patrick, picking apart the tangles inside me which hurt so much.

“You know, after you died, I bought that record, the Simon and Garfunkel one you played that day.” It was our last summer visit before he went off to the Peace Corps and Uganda. The last chance for something to happen between us. Because after that, I met Richard and got married.

I shifted the dog on the step. “What was I supposed to do? Force you to talk to me about your feelings?” Patrick had sat on the screened-in porch, a rickety affair in a rickety house on a hill in West Virginia, playing a record with a bite out of it. The only song intact was the one on the inside band. *Old Friends: Preserve your memories; they’re all that’s left you.* Over and over, he lifted the needle as it skidded across the end of the record, putting it back at the beginning of the song, at the edge of the bite. I

banged cupboards and drawers in the kitchen, trying to find us something to eat, wanting him to stop my hands, to pull me close. No more of old friends. I wanted more.

I came back to the present and looked out at our back yard in North Carolina. It was very early morning and I was alone in the world. The lower half of a crescent moon hooked into the oak tree by the garage, and the limbs pierced holes through the soft white. “We didn’t make much of our last chance, did we?” My eyes filled. What would my life have been like if I had spent it with a guy like Patrick? A question I still couldn’t answer in the twenty years and five children since that day.

I hunched over and hooked my arms around Raisin, bending his legs under him so I could pull him to and pillow my head on his neck. There was a last question which was even more difficult for me to face, a question growing from a haunting inside me. I thought of Pat’s long visit with us last New Year’s when he was sick, spending all day on a bottom bunk bed, coughing, getting up to eat a little only after the kids had gone to bed. I remembered his strange request that if anything happened to him, would I check up on his only nephew. And the letters. I found them in his apartment after the funeral, neatly filed between pieces of cardboard cut from cereal boxes. He had had girlfriends, slept with them. Even long ago in Uganda. All the talk these last few years of AIDS pushed it to the forefront, a poison dripping in my head. Had Pat driven, not skidded under that semi? He couldn’t have died unless he had chosen to. My storybook prince crumbled into a physical yearning. All those women and never me. I felt exposed in the early morning hours.

Things got worse between Raisin and Richard. Whenever Richard came near me, Raisin would bark him away. I thought it was amusing and felt cherished. Richard didn’t. Then Raisin began to lord it over Prancer. Little Raisin made the big shaggy dog cower, blocking her in the doghouse so she couldn’t get out. The ultimate blow came in June when the winds picked up and Richard began to clean his boat to go sailing. He was out by his boat when he yelled for me to come, holding a red and a black wire across his large palms, calloused from repairing machinery at the mill.

“Look at what your damned precious dog did now!” Raisin had chewed through the electric wires on the boat trailer.

“Can’t you get new wires to fix it?”

“That’s not the point.” And it wasn’t. Raisin was carrying around all that was wrong between Richard and me. I talked to him out loud now, as I walked around the yard, saying silly affectionate things I never said to Richard. I was afraid of dogs, so at first Richard laughed. But then he grew jealous of Raisin, and the strange power I had over Raisin gave me power.

“But that’s exactly what I like about him.” I watched Richard’s lower teeth, which only show when he’s angry. They are crowded and look menacing. I stepped back.

Raisin had hidden as soon as Richard began to yell. “I don’t like that dog around here and never have. There’s something strange about it, the way it seems to have this fixation on you.”

I couldn’t say anything.

“I want that dog out of here. After I fix the wires, I’m taking the kids sailing on Lake Jordan. When I get back this evening, I want that dog gone. And don’t you weasel out of it. Take him to the pound.” I was totally deflated. Inside me, my practical voice spoke out saying the dog wasn’t worth the fight.

Richard left and I sat in one of the bent willow rockers, with Raisin on my lap. Pat and I had sat in these chairs just six months ago, before he had died on the highway. I had laughed because his cough seemed better, he was singing for me, and--we were together, away from everyone else. *Hit the road, Jack, and don’t come back. No more, no more, no more, no more.* It was one of those times to look back on, and question.

I didn’t know much about dog pounds; they were places where kids go to find pets. Now I read the statistics on how few of the animals are actually adopted. I carried Raisin to the car and drove the two miles along Church Street to the Animal Shelter, Richard’s words pressing into me. Raisin had managed to find our house by himself and he would surely charm some child into loving him. It came down to a case of belief.

I gently scooped Raisin up from the front seat and carried him in my arms to the low red brick building. “I’m sorry,” I whispered into his neck, feeling my breath curl round and come back against my nose. “I hate to let you go, fellow, but someone will love you, you’ll see.” I had an uneasy feeling that this time it was Patrick who had asked for love from me and now I was the one refusing it.

“Can you please put a note on his cage and say that he’s really obedient, gentle, and doesn’t run off?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, no signs. It’s against the rules.”

“Oh, I see.” She had to reach between my arms to take Raisin because I couldn’t let go of him. From her arms, Raisin calmly looked back at me. I never checked back with the pound to see if Raisin was adopted. I couldn’t. I left him there, got into my car, and drove into a black and white world drained of color.

Sleeping Beauty's Awakening

Aurora descends
the spiral staircase;
her birthday slipper shows below
a flattened dress,
her satin foot
points down, groping
for the tread, while she stares
down.
Slowly she descends,
the flushed prince close behind her.
She sees her parents: worry lines smoothed
from her father's eyes,
her mother's twisting hands
relaxed.
Trapped between lives,
she leaves the tower room
and a century of dreams where
unguarded and alone, she splashed in puddles,
swung from trees.
Aurora hesitates, then embraces her parents,
chaining herself to an eternity of
happily ever afters.

To a Heartbreaker

You,
so just, hold me
clenched,
birthed between your teeth,
in fire black
without movement.

Belief, I feel
the shake of
your head
which calls youth
in the marketplace.

Send me your dream
in night-falling silence
with the sky, jelled
and flowing, dying love.

Come,
the new but not
to you
the first,
growing your control
of small things,
you lead me
from misery,
inexperience,
and let me see.

Conversation with the red planet is not part of the food diet

--for Mary Hennessy

Some day, you said,
words jumping the railings between us,
I would be in your poem,
with the hummer at your feeder
and the trains on Stanhope Street,
my nose spread flat
against the screens of the little room
where you write
without curtains.

klop-footed, we kept the crows to
the wires outside your porch,
hobbledehoy,
the gardenia you floated in water,
the tangle of antique rosebuds,
our fortunes at the bottom of
your coffee cup.

we lorca-leapt, me out of breath,
and snagged our pockets on the doorknobs
of pantoums,
the purple slurry of mis-remembered words
slipping from our lives, the taste
of time not enough
always
in my mouth.

Five O’Clock Commute

In straight lines, vans cram
the interstate:
none dotted with stripes and feathers,
or with trunks pulling tin cans
and balloons,
no hoods have shadow beards or
frizzed hair curled tightly
around their headlights,
they are not strapped with red bantams
on their way to Mexico,
or rolling with grass-stuffed tires
bound for Africa.
Only a tramp with backpack
and dreadlocks takes the path
to the side and disappears
into imbroglio.

Christmas Greetings

So glad you volunteered to write our Christmas letter, a word or two is so much better than an empty card, but you need to fudge a little on the academics of the kids, and make more of our vacation so people think we went somewhere, and for heaven's sake, make sure they think we get along or they'll suspect we're suing for divorce, and then you know to talk about my mom or she'll be hurt--and I'm in merchandizing not in sales, and then the accident, why don't you leave it out and also that my heart's dependent on a pill. It's so nice you volunteered for this because a letter always beats an empty card.

Wherefore

Follow me to shut the door
and stretch out on the family bed,
where we've been before,
follow me to ease the tedium of married years,
the days together which blur the fears
with a quick flick of the lock
before the late night milk run.

the door is locked, is it not?
The baby knocks, is it
the restive sleep
in grotesque images locked
though children clamber for more
to nurse as I open
teasing legs in flight
which run for milk
late at night
to wet the cereal
which begins the day.

We each take a colored stream of paper
and dance about
the day's spectrum
weaving in and out
we bump and tangle
in botched paper routes
and soccer games
and schedules with an ever

different angle
the shreds of paper
whirl.

Come and follow me to close the door
as we explore
the possibilities
that unravel
the yet unseen before.

Where is the time
to shut the door
against the babies
that nurse for more
and grow into pimples and stilted laughter,
while the grays of memory
throw years into question
and doubts,
as what you do to
these children becomes
your confidence in life.

Unkempt: Words from a Teenage Daughter

My dear mother, mistress of this house
 yet master of none,
whether you tear my posters off the wall
 and fling them to the winds
 where they will flutter in ruptured agony,
whether you reclaim the new clothes you bought me
 which lie in heaps on the floor,
or throw out my prized stuffed animals
 won by pockets of quarters from the machines at the mall,
whether you make good your ultimate threat, and take a black garbage bag
 to sweep up the tumbled contents of my floor, my dresser, my desk,
whatever you do, you will not persuade me.
 I will not clean my room, for it is my domain, not yours.
If this bothers you to a great extent,
 if this causes you sleepless nights and constant thoughts
 of failure and frustration,
 if all this bothers you so,
simply shut the door—and let me be.

Helpful Hands

He vacuumed the living room and family room, not moving any chairs but directing the power nozzle in defined patterns back and forth across the shagged carpets. Then he left the machine, its two pieces upright, against the wall of the last room he had finished. The machine said, “Look, I have just vacuumed this room. Doesn’t it look nice?”

His wife came in and put the machine away.

He emptied the dishwasher, taking out all the dishes and stacking them neatly along the tops of the white cabinets, the bowls inside each other, the pans together. He put the silverware away, all in one drawer. The dishes preened as they sat on the cabinets and said, “We sparkle in the sunlight, washed from the last meal. Aren’t we clean?” His wife came in and sorted the silverware, then collected the various pots and pans and put them away in the cupboards.

He ironed, leaving a pile of pressed handkerchiefs on the table beside the ironing board and the shirts on hangers, suspended from the hook on the wall beside the ironing board. He never ironed trousers. The clothes said, “Smell the freshness in our seams. See how military we look!”

His wife came in and put the handkerchiefs in the handkerchief box and the shirts in the proper closets.

Then one day, the husband cleaned the glass on the front door, using a wet rag and a dry rag to get all the fingerprints off. After he was finished, he opened the front door and walked out, measuring his steps down the length of the front driveway and along the street. He did not look back. The open door said, “See how the outside gleams without seams or divisions or fingerprints?”

The wife came, smiled, and closed the door.

Becoming

He leaves—to work the weekdays out of state,
and I begin to sleep, the doors unlocked
and bedroom shades curled up, without his fears
of narrowed nighttime eyes that spy on him.
Instead, I revel in the slant of moon,
cutting patterns on the darkened walls.

When he sleeps, he times it by the clock,
and holds me to him, bolstered in his arms.
I sleep now only when I feel like it,
drop quickly into dreams and then refreshed,
I wake at 3 and turn on all the lights,
no longer forced to stumble in the dark
and block the lights, which anger him in sleep.

He leaves—and I begin to paint the house.
Successively, the colors grow more bold,
I rip up carpets layered deep with dust
and pull down heavy drapes and bag them up
(Salvation Army takes them readily).
Our meals become erratic, very plain.
The kids slide quickly with me into this
new life: a blend of want to dos and when
we want to do it; and we stop his rules
which boxed us into lines on debit sheets.

You know, we have been married twenty years,
and I have tried to go his way, and bend

into the life he formats with such care.
He sees the gaps and not the come-togethers,
my failures, not the efforts in my trying--
but as he leaves me weekdays for a year,
I find the self of me that lay in hiding,
the self that knotted his perverse attempts
to make me into one of him, not me.

Coupled

Evenings they sat in the lawn chairs, set squarely in the middle of the cement path that led to the front door of their house, with their feet tightly pressed together, careful to avoid contact with the grass. They had moved from their rowhouse in the city to a new house in the suburbs. From the chairs, they would comment on what happened in the dead-end street.

“Don’t you think habit is a form of addiction?” she would begin.

“No, not necessarily. Watch that one over there trying to ride her tricycle. Certainly her habit of falling over when she comes to the point where the down-hill driveway meets the street is not addictive.” He always cited facts to corroborate his opinions.

Whereas she addressed the problematic side of life. “Perhaps we should talk of habits as in the form of tics. Something you do without knowing that it is done. Like your habit of saying no to every request before you perceive the reality of it.”

“I don’t do that.”

“Exactly.”

It was 7:30 now. Time to return inside the house. The couple slowly balanced themselves in order to get out of the chairs. He had a stiff left knee so he shifted his weight to his right hip and swiveled it, then pushed against the chair, making sure not to unbalance the chair and topple it. She had stiff toes, so as she stood up, she hobbled a little along the walkway before her feet began to work properly. Neither helped the other to get up. They were like wind-up toys with sprung parts that moved askew. They each reached back to get a chair and fold it, making sure to tuck the fabric in between the aluminum legs. Her chair was red and white striped. His was solid green.

“Someday, we must really get heavier chairs to set out in our yard,” he said.

“Yes, but then we won’t be able to carry them.”

He paused. This time she had sprung the negative instead of him. “This is correct,” he countered, pleased with himself. “And we couldn’t leave them outside with the neighbors roaming around so freely.”

“Sometimes, it is so challenging to adjust to life in our new house,” she said
“But it’s worth it. Look at all the room we have.”

Family Reunion

I sit tucked on a corner stool--
these are not my people
around the long white kitchen table,
leaned into chairs and memories
of how the boys spelled trouble,
how Dad didn't know all,
and how he called his belt George.

at the low window
the heads of zinnias tumble
in my garden, a calliope
of pink red yellow purple--
free like my children from
Midwest constraints.

his Dad nearly ninety
turns cards in an endless game of
solitaire. A pause, and his voice arcs over the talk to
splay into my lap. *I would have beaten
your husband to an inch of his life
if he had done like your kids.*

Running from the room,
I hear him slide cards
across the table for
another game.

Go Fish

caught
outside
I watch the
remembering
of
my life
shape
into a deck
of cards
which won't fan
into numbers

all
the past
sticks
to the edges
and rubs
off,
I feel it
flaking
in
pieces
between my
fingertips

Too soft
to hold,
too small
to read.

Rondo in Concert

My father died and I bought his violin,
not knowing if I would ever learn to play,
but to have it cold-bartered outside the family,
out of my touch and owned by one not in love
with him was too painful. Yet the question of his life
still remains for me— why did he stop his music?

Through a Navy career, wherever we moved, the music
finger-fretted us, focusing us, he and his violin
a part of every city's symphony, and during life
in that place, with us duty-seated in the audience, he would play.
I learned melody without names and silence in love,
and to nod asleep, head on hand, without showing the family.

Long before Julie Andrews, we sang in family
rounds and harmonies, in Latin, in French, our music
called out to entertain guests at cocktail parties, the love
of the whole overcoming my own off-pitch voice, like a violin
with slipped pegs. Seven of us, grouped and sectioned, we played
up to their friends, pretending this was the meaning of life.

Each child also trained in an instrument, something about a life
lesson learned, though only I of the family
was lucky enough to have piano recitals to play
with my father. My hands shaking, my piano music
mis-measured and froze in wet ivories, and the violin
sang solo, as my head hung, I betrayed his love.

Was it my teacher Miss Nason who dampened my love

of performance, her shaved eyebrows ruling my life.
She said what an honor to accompany my Dad's violin,
as she spooned me sugar for energy in her kitchen, and my family
sat three recitals with the Bach minuet when the music
stopped, and my hands, never "limp like marshmallows," refused to play.

A grandmother now, I begin lessons again to play
not the piano but instead to bow the strings of my father's love;
my own children never heard a note of the music
I grew up with. At my age now, later in his life,
Dad retired his fiddle and nothing the family
could do ever coaxed him to unlock his violin.

He lives in the violin and as I play,
I bring him into my family, and with my love
and trembling for life make music.

When Mother Died in Cloisonné Vases

I start it--
snipping pieces of her life
which I pocket
as she always rooted dozens of cuttings
of philodendron, of
angel wing begonia, just in case:
the dented metal measuring spoons,
a cotton pillowcase aged to softness,
the nightlight in the hall--
and no one sees. So I inventory and take more:
the silver Revere bowls from the piano
(when I practiced they stood me on my head)
the wooden box I climbed to brush my teeth,
and when they look askance, I drag her
bed and all, scented with Shalimar,
out the double front door,
leaving the pumpkin walls
oozing orange
between the slitted eyes.
There are stories to tell,
broken notes which still need mending,
and under the brown leaves, a red
strawberry, sweet in the frosted garden.

A Note from Mother—afterwards

swing low and I'll be back
in sweet chariot and ajuga purple,
walk the hallways sugared in hard sauce
and sit a chair of twisted demitasse—
sing to the mockingbird's key

and I'll dance, dance low,
watch me, twirling crescents of
pink nail polish in red azaleas,
and primrose-line the kitchen floor—
song in the mockingbird's key

home, yes, and on the grass,
where children run on ironed damask,
we'll drink high tea in sleeping bags and
toast the health of falling stars—
play to the song of the bird

can't you hear me singing,
I write letters full of crumpets
and plant zinnias for the moon,
the buttered breath of laughter—
I come with the mockingbird

Call for a Thesis Statement: A Non-Roquefort Midnight Awakening

--for Jon Thompson

From the secure sallies of your astute connections

I bring you my thesis.

In a broad band of tiered words,

I bring you my thesis.

Citing the indentured importance of each thought

forged to gather momentum from images

in stolen outposts,

this is my thesis.

Like seedlings burst from thistled dandelions,

your double asterisks correct my words,

tumbling each other in heathen glee

as precursors of Baptist certainty

and your Tuesday class proclamations:

where is your thesis?

I bring you one glutinous gathering of words which tempts the god

like opium to read beyond the first paragraph

this is my thesis.

I display my thoughts with mounting heroism

beyond the forays into linked images

beyond suggestion, beyond escape from a world

fractured in conflicted consequences,

I drive with certainty into the underlying prognostication, and beg please

take my thesis.

You for whom the words in drilled measure
are crushed in hobnailed logic
and like skins hang flaccid and depulped,
you for whom aesthetics and lyricism are dragged before
male patterned blandness,
take this thesis.

We can sit down and weep, we can go shopping
or play a game of constantly being wrong
with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore, but I must
hand in a thesis.

What Conspired: 15 February 2003

Not like the peace rallies we had
in Vietnam years and not even inspired with
a slogan to paint on a sign, I drive to Raleigh
anyway and meet my two kids
at 11:53 at the Capitol building, placards all
around us. It threatens to rain and I make a peace sign
with wide gray duct tape on my black and white striped umbrella
in lopsided triangles—I am out of practice, and we run
across Calla and her husband from Turkey (**Drop Bush Not Bombs**)
with their child in a stroller (**Not in My Name**) and feel the vibration
of a bass drum. Its beat moves two peace cranes on
stilts, and five women with flushed lips and flowing
middles (**Bellydancers for Peace**). We cannot hear any
of the speakers and find that Linda had her baby (**How Did Our Oil**
Get Under Their Sand?) and that Carol is engaged (**It's the Economy, Stupid**).

At 2:16, we begin to march, after my bathroom stop
in the Museum of Natural Science, and the police on foot
and on horse stop the cars at all intersections. I walk
beside a man covered in plastic fastened with duct tape
(**Tape His Mouth, Not the Windows**) and get his reference to
the run on duct tape because of the danger of nuclear fallout and I
start thinking that the peace sign stuck on my umbrella with duct tape might
be clever. I see Lela Faye (**Use Law Not War**) on the sidewalk and
she calls across to my daughter Maureen that she had marched
with me for ERA in 1981 and that our picture was in
the newspaper but I don't remember it and tell Maureen that if
Lela Faye says so, maybe it is true. And behind us singing begins

“We shall not be, we shall not be moved” and I look around
and it is a woman with long gray hair and I sing with her, glad
to finally know that it is a “tree” that is standing by the water—I
wasn’t sure 30 years ago—and people look around at me. There is
a woman in “burka” but my son Terence says no, she is an anarchist
and doesn’t want to be identified. And Jake (**Resistance Is Fertile**)
has a bandana on his face because sometimes he is an anarchist
but he takes it off when he talks to us. And we find Chris caped in
an American flag with peace sign in white instead of the stars
(**True Patriots Want Peace**) and he takes the flag off
to square it on his shoulders.

At 3:05, Maureen, Terence and I begin the three-mile walk back to
the NCSU campus with Chris, his peace flag flowing out behind him,
and as he walks, Chris gives every passing car the peace sign and my feet hurt
so I walk with deliberation, bending my stiff toes more and it helps. We stop at
the Mellow Mushroom for a pizza—though I thought
it was the Blue Mushroom but that is the color of the sculpts outside.
A blue mushroom is not appetizing. And Chris enters the restaurant on display,
flashing fingers in peace from side to side, but I say “Cool it,”
and he sits down at a table, flips the flag over the back of his chair, puts his head
on his arms, and goes to sleep.

From Spleen et Idéal

LXVI Les Hiboux (first published on 9 April 1885)

Sous les ifs noirs qui les abritent,
Les hiboux se tiennent rangés,
Ainsi que des dieux étrangers,
Dardant leur oeil rouge. Ils méditent.

Sans remuer ils tiendront
Jusqu'à l'herure mélancholique
Ou, poussant le soleil oblique,
Les ténèbres s'établiront.

Leur attitude au sage enseigne
Qu'il faut en ce monde qu'il craigne
Le tumulte et le mouvement;

L'homme ivre d'une ombre qui passe
Porte toujours le châtiment
D'avoir voulu changer de place.

The Owls (a very literal translation)

Under the black yews which house them (tree them),
The owls hold themselves in a row,
Like foreign gods,
Casting their red eye. They meditate.

Without a sound they hold themselves
Until the melancholy hour
Where, pushing the sun obliquely,
The shadows will establish themselves.

Their attitude teaches the wise person
That is it necessary in this world to fear
Tumult and movement.

The man drunk with a shadow that passes
Carries always the penance
Of having wanted to change his place.

The Owls (a rhymed translation)

Tucked under yews in black shade,
The owls sit in formation,
Like gods of a foreign nation,
They cast a red eye. They meditate.

Without a sound they wait
Until the plaintive time
When the sun casts oblique lines,
And the shadows wake.

They preach to those who will hear
That in this world man must fear
The tumult of a restless dance.

The man drunk with the passing shadow
Will forever bear remorse
From his yearning to be some place else.

The Invasion of Iraq: April 2003

The owl flies, silent,
wings feathering between the dense trees,
then resting, ears cocked, plots
a scurried softness under snow.
Its talons connect,
leaving the nest unharmed.

The owl set sea in a pea-green boat
In beautiful camouflage,
With plenty of gold and a pussycat
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

Caesar, listen to the curse
of the owl
crying in darkness;
catch it, burn it,
spread its ashes on the Tiber.

Shadows cross the land
in stillness,
idols of a foreign land,
the owls meditate;
beneath the yew,
their eyes glitter like berries,
shining in blood.

In Babylon, the owl
curses the night,

a woman cries,
dead in childbirth.

Creative Prompts (in the order they appear in the thesis)

“Suspended in mid-air while looking under the bed” -- Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” / “Ballinamora: 1996” -- William Carlos Williams’ “Nantucket” / “To Sid in Galway” -- the alliterative caesura form as used by Sylvia Plath in “Suicide Off Egg Rock” / “Snow” -- Federico Garcia Lorca / “Marble Cake” -- Gary Miranda’s “Horse Chestnut” / “Ode to Parsley” -- Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to Tomatoes” / “Mr. Allen Gets a Taste of Gardening” -- Thomas David Lisk’s pantoum “A Catalog of the Ponies of the Pyrenees” / “Driving from Annapolis to Cancer” -- a Theodore Roethke writing assignment including word bank and rules for line length and rhyme / “To a Heartbreaker” -- a blind transmogrification of Horace’s poem / “Five O’Clock Commute” -- Wallace Stevens’ “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” / “Wherefore” -- T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” / “Unkempt: Words from a Teenage Daughter” -- Catullus / “Helpful Hands” -- Lydia Davis’ Break It Down / “Coupled” -- Lydia Davis’ Break It Down / “When Mother Died in Cloisonné Vases” -- Keith Flynn’s The Book of Monsters / “A Note from Mother—afterwards” -- Federico Garcia Lorca / “Call for a Thesis Statement: A Non-Roquefort Midnight Awakening” -- Elizabeth Bishop’s “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” / “What Conspired: 15 February 2003” -- Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” / “The Invasion of Iraq” -- Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”