

zoom lens
54
Buntington '92. November 27
P.M. Harder '93
converted from rider 26

zoom lens
as it went

to Buntington '92 -
A strong semi-
finalist

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THE BEST THING MY FATHER DID WAS LIE

People, all the pretty people lie so well and tell
truth like amateurs in little threadbare theaters--
it all comes out damp and gray, slurred and slurried,
going away and coming back.

Where do you dig for truth? Out on the parallax--
in the center or the middle? There's a difference--
one is this fence I'm on. The pickets
are cut and dried, alternating black and white,
scratching fact sore but not much truth.
People climb up here out of context
to reach boughs of that old tree, maybe the Eden tree
but the whole crop's wormy to the core. My father said
conqueror worms were final ONLY truth.

He polished his lies like jewels, wore one in each eye,
mounted a ruby in his tongue. His skull rattled
with others stored for special events and Sundays.
When some went out of style, he re-faceted.
And none wore dim before he did.
He mined the earth for his rough material;
even polished mine was was dull beside it.

We inlaid his coffin with his favorites;
he willed the rest to me-- never to go
with fence-climbing, fruit-picking clothes.
I keep them here because I don't know how
to get rid of them. Worms have started on the box
but the gems are still gorgeous and whole.
I planned to sit here until all were devoured
but it won't happen. Worms tried
to bite the big ruby, sprung their jaws and died.
Only harder stones can make dust of these.
Or some marvelous ray. Until unequivocal then,
the beasts will eat boxes and bones,
the jewels will glitter, each its own irrelevance
and I am tired of watching.
All the real stuff is down there
in either-sided sludge.
Quasi-I must juimp off right or left
and grope
for nothing absolute.

If only some almost holy wind would push.

TABLE SETTING

Mother, your only daughter has prepared
all your favorites-- wild rice and duck,
rose wine, a centerpiece of mauve asters.

Our small silences spread-- dark spots
on linen and the silver pattern
you like. I pinch my words
for doneness. It takes time to make a meal.

How long do mother/daughter banquets last?
It's been years since I left
your dim vault, your high stairs.
And still we feed at these movable feasts.

Why do you keep saving the torn giftwrap?
--slipping it under my eyelids at bedtime,
crumpling it under my tires on the tollway,
fanning the mustiness of it
as I open my newspaper.

Please. Just eat the good things I've made.
I've sheathed my razor edges, vowed
not to attack your hands.
My voice will not rise tonight.

You sit staring at the cooling food,
the trail of our sentences. I smile
and touch the flowers: "You once
made me a dress the same color."

You say you don't remember that at all,
and purple only reminds you of pain.
You ignore a second helping
of my dated tidbits, then sniff
the current kettle, declining the ladle
designed for your grip.

After the table is cleared, you pick
at the foil-wrapped roll in your purse
and offer me a broken lozenge
coated with the lint of love.

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ZOOM LENS

Glenna Holloway

DESERT ODYSSEY, FEBRUARY, 1991

This endless sea is dry, its wavy crests
 designed of sand, its granulated tides
 eternally unscheduled, owned by wind.
 Or gravity when overburdened heights
 slide down a concave swell. Sometimes disturbed
 by men in motion or their weaponry.
 A mortar shell will spew a mighty splash.
 A hole fills up like leakage in a bilge.

Could be the desert has its own Poseidon.
 And if he chose this realm for peaceful rest,
 his hideaway for secret meditation,
 he's now incensed at savage noisy lights
 that rip the dark and craze the blistered sky.
 If so, this god must be enraged enough
 to pour his bile on mortals setting fires
 that char the clouds, and blasts that crater hell.

My own seaworthy ship: a tank with eyes
 to leap horizons, pierce the dark and relay
 images Athena couldn't conjure up.
 My crew is trained but none is battle wise
 like those Odysseus commanded once.
 I make myself no such comparison,
 no hero. No enchanted sojourns, nymphs
 or ogres-- ah well, maybe counting colonels--

My army unit got called up and here
 I am, late of a college classroom where
 I taught the classics: Homer, Virgil, Dante,
 themselves no strangers to the Fates and war.
 And like all men who fight on foreign ground,
 I wonder when I'll see my wife and home.
 Professional professor, weekend soldier
 eight years-- no incongruity in that--

If one exists, it's in the harpist there
 on my right flank, the best damn driver here.
 A tank-jock's normally a tougher cut
 than he who plays as if retained from birth
 to grace Hellenic halls and royal feasts
 with Meneláus praising his sweet hands--
 those proven hands that bully steel and heat,
 controlling his big thunderbitch with class.

Deployed in battle line, my bulky fleet
 of blunt and roaring vessels sailing sand
 is on alert. Our thermal sights blip full.
 Identified as enemy, I still
 beg instruments for every shred of knowing.
 These guns make pale Lord Zeus's lightning bolts,
 make trash of other tanks. Our radios
 have words. The column is approaching fast.

(cont.)

I give the order to destroy the targets.
Incredible the way our rounds locate
their marks, make tracks and turrets spin and fly.
Grey-eyed Athena gasps, her aegis high
above the rubble, sending us a hawk,
a grey-backed raptor screeching victory.
Her cloud expands more slowly than our eyes.
My crew exults in scores like arcade games.

In thirty minutes, wounded men arrive.
Elation dwindle in a grinding pall;
we watch as one man fumbles on his way
as if to hide a pistol in his sleeve.
On closer look, he holds his severed arm
and dies beside my tank as others groan.
Two more make winedark seas with their own blood,
Iraqi armored troops, surrendering.

This ocean's wretched wrack clings to our wake
as silica Poseidon watches, waits
astride an Arab horse or camel hump?
Avenger riding on the tidal dunes
and hard-caked flats nailed down with tons of light.
Without a trident, does he wield a spade,
this unknown deity whose angst we rasp?
What sacrifice will he require of us?

Back on patrol at dawn, the goddess glows;
Homeric rosy fingers earn their poems.
The crews are sobered from the bite of combat.
Now, animated sights demand decisions.
The shapes we read are not precise enough
to leave no doubt. But if we wait too long
then we'll be in their range. Commanders all
have grappled this chimera in their crows.

"Sweet Jesus, Cap'n, time we oughta shoot!"
the gunner cries, a blonde Telémañhos,
his tongue undone, his trigger in control.
The radio confirms no other tanks
of ours are in this sector. No more choice,
our time runs out, I order the attack.
How many gods and men have we provoked?
Please my dear God, don't let us torch our own!

As images explode we hear the news.
An error. Static, curses, "Hold your fire!"
We hit two U.S. tanks, off course for hours.
No one survived our deadly friendly blasts.
I must not break, must keep my men from breaking.
Penelopes must learn they wait in vain.
And who explains such useless costs to them?
And in this world who can explain to me?

AFTER ACQUAINTING WITH DEATH ON THE DESERT

I've met you here before in passing--
sidewise, lost for awhile on my way
back to ordinary. You've had
some bad press. You're nothing
like mortals or poets imagine--
not malicious, no scythe, no black hood--
just old and overworked.

It was here as a stumbling novice
my half-closed eyes found yours out. Here
on earth's curve swept beige and bare,
slumped under tons of Sonoran light,
you rattled me dry as ghostwood, swelled
my tongue, bubbled my skin. I clamped
my teeth on hard brightness
and refused your advances.

The desert needs no bones of mine.
Built of itself, the grindings
of millenia's mills, it piles and plunges
like a tidal wave over spines of cholla.
A century plant raises its tall finality,
its flowering fin de siecle
riding selected vertebrae
of the planet's arched chine. It offers
salvers of gold-beaded tithes to the sun
reminding you to claim the remainder.

Every hollow is a crucible running over
with light, molten alloy for casting keys
in the sand to open arcane locks. I come
often to the fourth dimension's foyer,
letting the wind scour civilization
from my eyes so I can read the coded maps
of the night-walkers.

My evening footprints cool
and fill with mauve. Ocotillos
comet their color above graven intaglios
like shadows of a spiral galaxy.
Here is my space quest, cordless and alone
out beyond your waiting.

(cont.)

Sometimes I smell you in the trailing fringe
of breeze sliding the dunes.
Deep in the perigee, sometimes you finger
my neck hairs or vibrate the sidewinder
as I cling to the rim of the possible.

I wade an ocean of light, struggling
in its currents until the nearest moon
steals its weight. Blossoming cosmos
withdraw fuchsia rays to meditate on seed.
The skink surrenders its hoarded warmth
to the pygmy owl. I follow coyotes
and badgers through orbiting night, tethered
to rhythms only my blood remembers.

It was here you learned my name, here
I encountered a sand language never spoken.
And when we came gaze to gaze, you and I,
remember-- it was yours that looked away.

Generation Gap

My memory banks bias snippets
from distant moving reels--
buttons I counted on his gray vest,
its tailored points over matching troussers
in a wide-arm willow chair-- the view
from inside a lap. And glasses
that clamped on his nose, but not the nose
although people say I have it.
There is an oval place in my mind
framing gentle obscurities.

I can still see a doctor lightly pressing
a dome of white flesh on a brass bed.
That night I tried to say a new word--
appendix-- over and over
after strangers carried him out flat and slow.

But I don't remember him, my grandfather.
Not his face or anything he said.
Only a pale abstraction in a casket
on a curtained table-- with flowers all over
where only one vase of iris had ever been
in what my grandmother always called
"the reading room" of the old house.

And a silent aunt who refastened the spring
high up on the front screen door the next day
after everyone else was gone.

THE Vining TIME

She didn't mind telling her age. At least
not on days she looked good and the honeysuckle
detonated enough of that possessive perfume
to take over her head, fill her pores,
or lie in wait in her pillows after dark.
Enough to make her want a man around.

But lately, vines bothered her with lurking metaphor.
Some leaned their limpness on whatever they touched.
Some gushed out of her kitchen planters, luxuriant
at the tips, succumbing to atrophy at the roots,
like her hair, losing leaves daily, paling.
Like memories of Jason when the house still smelled
of newly-split cedar shakes and roast quail dinners.

She'd taken to counting the hairs in her comb,
counting tiny lines sprouting around her mouth,
and she caught herself slavishly counting
the clock chimes or stair steps up and down
although she climbed them lightly.

She supposed there was some immutable law
governing the accumulation of the unwanted:
great quantities of papers, drawers
of generic clutter, small somatic plagues--
and the diminishing of the desired: old friends,
her chances for leaving Elm Street-- huge namesakes
stumped, diseased and marked for the saw's whine.

And the honeysuckle smothering
the verbena bed in hyperbole, sagging
the fence, strangling the trusting white iris.
Nobody was interested in buying the place
anymore. Nobody wanted to do yard work
except the unaffordable "landscape architects"
boxed and fancy-bordered in the yellow pages.

She bought a magnifying mirror on a stand
to put on eye liner and a hint of lavender,
redefining eyes that still held the blue-violet
flicker of hummingbird wings. Feeling the sap
and celebration of morning-glories at her waking,
sometimes she still felt the green of promises.
And sometimes
honeysuckle was a whiff of hell.

TWO DAUGHTERS AT HER GRAVE

Mother's philosophy always
sounded like something she pulled
out of a fortune cookie,
bitten into by mistake, damp.

Between intermittent cliches,
hummed tuneless as a cicada,
she tried to nail non sequiturs,
odd out-of-the-air credos
to the loose edges of our minds.

She startled us once, and herself,
like hitting her thumb with a hammer.

I know it shook her. Maybe it hurt.
The thing is
she never would repeat it.
And neither you nor I
caught what it was she said.

LAST UNCLE

In my dandelion days
I had five tall men
who swooped me to their shoulders,
swung me, made me squeal deliciously.

In my frantic floribunda days
they began leaving
and I let them, without ever learning
of the last days of the Cavalry,
without feeling the bees' warmth
against the glass lab cases, meeting
the queens, tasting the special honey,
without watching the wet hands
at the potter's wheel but reaching out my own
for the cobalt blue glazed pots.

Once in my hybrid tearose days
it served me to serve with the cognac
what I had heard without listening--
how one had flown the early U.S. Mail,
had twice met Lindy, had crashed in a swamp
but saved his cargo. A dry box tidbit
with only a faint aroma of rich ragout.
Because I was always singing in the choir.
Collecting carnival glass.
Photographing children in the garden.

And now in my pastel hollyhock days
there is one. My faded luggage
is crammed with empty pages
as this jet eats space from east to west.
And I wonder if he'll feel like talking.

A REASON IN THE WORLD

Once Mama goes
I'll use up the chicory and sorghum, swap
the Mason jar of Kennedy half dollars
for green rectangles, get in the pickup
and just drive. I'll swap steep gravel roads
for fast interstates-- Joe-pye weed
for squared lawns and scalloped bushes--
coon dogs belling in the gap for traffic pulse
and streamers of light like music I can sing.
I'll drive until I find a reason
to stop or a reason to turn around and come back.

Wet tires sizzle, heatless. My rhythm sometimes
fades like the station the radio loses
on the way. The next state's too-early frost
is a ditto of ours, limp crops leaning
like lines of ragbag refugees from some new war.
Old stores with gritty sharecroppers lean
over Pepsis and Moon Pies. Me,
separate as the lone gas pump out front,
not wanting to explain my hurry, not really knowing
the lyrics to "Where you headed, stranger?"

Away from you, I might shout. Away
from what I know and don't know. Away from
familiar nothing to maybe only different nothing
that just replays in another key.
I'm after live songs, trumpets, guitars enough
to fuel my tank to Chicago. I'll sleep
under sheet music, inhale hot jazz for lunch
and wind me in a gospel-slapping choir robe.

Practice runs I call these Sunday gigs
and right backs. Short rolls on the treble staff,
quick upwardly mobile riffs on a limited scale
and down again. Mama's not gone yet.

But I've taken the whole trip
on so many midnight turntables, her words
on my back like a hand-me-down coat
that weighs too much and warms too little.

Yesterday I found a forty-year-old road map
in Mama's Bible, the highways traced and dated
with quarter note rests all the way to New York
in red. And by a different, dimmer route,
all the way back in blue. She never told me that.

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, antimacassars
no one wants, filling boxes,
filling huge cotton prints, sleeves sloping
like tents, buttons unfastened back of the neck,
they string out death in rocking chairs.

Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes,
paying out advice no one needs, paying
out the slow thread, enlarging the old designs,
straining fifty-odd years of wifery
for a mite to impress the young ones
tightening against their webs and cardboard,
closing in with the last lid.

They wait-- frayed sheaths-- used awhile
by knife-voiced kin who own everything in focus.
On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,
picking at the stitches of the days' patterns,
unraveling their mouths,
honing their only weapons.

JEREMIAD FOR A CRUEL QUEEN

Unnumbered songs and sonnets lie at Nature's royal feet--
The sentimental drippings from the maudlin tongues of those
Who try to catch her essence in a pentametric bleat,
Who do not recognize a whore because she wears a rose.

Her ritual rhymes of season seem to charm the fool esthete;
I see a certain sameness to her sins I would expose.
She trysts with Satan at the poles or on some wild arete
Then takes back everything she gives, each favor she bestows.

There was a time I mouthed her songs, believed her cliche-sweet
In days when April softly feathered hidden wrath's repose--
The resting time before the tyrant showed her vast deceit
Concealed in lulling breezes and old streams' unhurried flows.

Her languid sighing promise makes her treachery complete.
As all her panders purify her soul with Sunday prose,
She kills a sleeping village spreading out her molten sheet
To lie and birth a bastard peak where no man ever goes.

Benignly fertile silt and sod belie her ancient heat
While many miles below, the devil's cauldron seethes and glows.
Unfathomed plates and fissures and a sunken gulch compete
In stealthy silent movement of opposing jagged rows

Until one day some unsuspecting residential street
Is swallowed writhing, spewing brick and glass and bloody snows.
And next the waiting sea is seized in manic fists to beat
The fallen shores and hopeless hearths defenseless to her blows.

Don't trust the warming solar rays she hangs out in retreat,
Or feel at peace because a wanton woman changes clothes.
I've watched her fiery ensign burn up miles of prairie wheat;
I've seen the crops I planted hosting hordes of worms and crows.

She saw my need for rain; one day she came to my defeat
With flood. The land and I cry out, but still the water grows.
She leaves her slimy signature, her bona fide receipt
For missing homes along the trails of sorrowing she sows.

She drives the revolution, making rival pressures meet
To funnel down for bridge and barn as though they were her foes.
She builds a pyre of pines to light her masses of conceit
Then sprinkles forest bone and ash with every blight she knows.

I've smelled her perfumed breath and heard the mockingbirds repeat
The legends of her lilded fields, her famous fabled pose.
Oh yes, I've marveled at rebirth, her flaunted favorite feat,
And drunk her moontime magic full of myth and false agos.

She parodies my sadness with her tears of slashing sleet,
Yet I, long bitter, tremble still in autumn's passion throes.
Despite her endless treason, once again I will entreat
Her mercy, all the while recalling cattle that she froze.

She, the brute, the beautiful, capriciously will greet
Each future generation with great wonders and great woes
Until we storm her secret doors and steal the keys to cheat
This reigning house's charnel clutch, this queen we must depose.

WITNESS IN THE PINES

She was a water witch, my great grandmother,
quenching generations of need, dousing
scoffers, dowsing through collective faith,
herself the ranking believer.

Nearing her hundredth year,
she vowed to find
the ancestors her mother disclaimed.
She laid down her favorite hazelwood
to hold a rod of bone-- wishbone
of a giant condor, the tribal thunderbird,
she told me, slyly smiling.
Mad and hollow as March wind,
others muttered behind her
when she began searching for the Old Ones.

I watched her chanting, weaving herself
into the forest, an upright rag
borne on breezes following the fork tip.
Sometimes I'd have sworn no one was under
her cowl, and the voice rose from the earth.

The bony point twitched, twisted, jerked down.
The slender arch leaped from her hands.
"Help me," she called. "They're here!"

My shovel plunged through pine drop,
turning the layers of centuries.
Disturbed shadows jiggled with light.
Crosshatched roots defeated our spades.
She died digging. I carried her home,
hardly heavier than the cloth she wore.

It's been twenty-five years, the land
bought and sold, cleared and squared.
The developer's bulldozer at Indian Ridge
uncovered the spot. The state acted quickly.

I'm told they lie in the fetal position,
trinkets and painted pots at hand.
My grandmother wanted to be with them,
the Old Ones. I'm glad we failed.
The roof of their privacy is laid aside;
museum lights shine on clay-stained bones.
Visitors pay \$2.50 to stare.

TRUCK ROUTE, 5 NORTH

The road mesmerizes with unwinding black,
pulling endless things out of my head
like magician's silk scarves.

Wet tires make a heatless sizzle,
my engine tenors its empty highway note,
the asphalt is sore here and there
with blisters of light. Night
is a leech I can feel fattening on me.

Far back I missed something I need
maybe beside Willapa Bay
or wrapped in Hoh rain forest moss
or deep in Klikitat Gorge. Nothing
I thought I was buying was ever it.

There is not enough of me to make a whole.
I'm riddled with concavities like wax molds
for wings fins fangs claws a soul
and chinks only lost colors can fill.

I'm losing substance, becoming a husk,
stringy as hemlock. Drying papery,
I'm bait for any breeze. My warmth escapes
in gusts of hunger. I see myself
lounging with lizards on a sun-soaked rock.

The Athabaskan moon sheds a long legend
riding the leech's back, cooling my blood.
Somewhere south there are people I forgot,
people I promised, people I owe.
They roll up in wrinkles and folds and wait.

I pack my inside pot holes
with loose dark and hitchhiking ghosts
and never ever close my eyes.

REMEMBERING SYLVIA PLATH, 1932--1963

I saw her once,
poems clinging to her lashes
along with unknown things
she couldn't seem to blink away.
Now when current winds go slack
she tinged the periphery of thought
like cedar smoke.

Her glittering mind,
swarming like her mail-order bee box,
(she examined every inch of its premises)
supported vast confusions and illuminations
on the same sweet pollen while she hefted
the winged weight of the hive.

Whirling with the constancy of stings,
she unwound a bright wake of sparks
from horse's hoofs or maybe unicorn's,
trimming her wick always Charon-close
to joyous fuel's drench,
knowing briefly
free-as-fire stretches upward.

FIRE enough to fry the pit demon, the sheet-COVERED trees, the scalpel-carved moon. Almost FIRE enough to harden living into GIVING up only enough blood to write it all on A WELL and wisely worn scroll of flesh.

BEFORE A POET KNOWS WHAT SHE IS

Eyes wild and light as a puma's,
breast-buds flowered plump, up-tilted to summer,
opal and nectarine heraldry of Erato in jeans.

Graduation brought three marriage pleas,
bottled forest smells, wool and leather
always close, mouths and arms she liked.
New sums to sift at the deep waking.

The suitors spoke hoarsely of apartments
and TV, beds, money, children.
And two promised a car of her own.
She ran alone to wrap night around her.

Without secret pages,
too unsure to say how warlock winds
hurried her blood, how river tongues rhymed
with hers and promised more. Too new
to tell how strings and reeds in minor keys
leaned her on shoulders of granite,
closed her eyes with pine breath
while wilderness sinew held her closer.

And her unnamed babies
already lay in an outgrown box
pressing blue gentians from ditches.

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VOICE-OVER

by
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VOICE-OVER

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FOR FORTY DAYS OF DROUGHT

Sun is the peen of a smith's hammer.
Under its blows
we're heated red but not much reshaped.
Sparks from the forge
bounce off the rim of prairie nights
while old folks call it heat lightning.
Nothing to do with rain.
Aunt Vi visits kin, sharing our Mason jars
and icy cartons of last year's green largess.

The earth rattles like a giant gourd
filled with dead seeds.
Desiccated leaves of our crops
scrabble against each other surrendering
dust of three states to corkscrew breezes.
Wind-coils tighten to etch our windows
with looted topsoil. Hourly it insinuates
into drawers books teddy bears
and coffee cups before we can empty them.
Our teeth grit on all we can talk about.
Late model dreams are scorched incurled
and littered with spores that won't sprout.
Aunt Vi seasons the meatloaf with grated irony.

Stubborn midwest faces refuse to dry
in sketches of rancor. Something in the genes:
saturnine satirical sudden turning
on a private joke, giggle to guffaw to knee-slap.

We listen to Bach Gershwin Little Richard
while anvil-heads gather and great thunderclouds
mushroom without spilling their promises.
Aunt Vi vows to go live with her son in Seattle.

Gravity tugs the cumulus into a shape like Italy.
It sags lean black. The boot's tongue
flops down, licks away our silo. We find it
hours later half a mile off. In one shiny wet spot.

Aunt Vi can tch! better than anybody. Grinning,
she unpacks.

SUNRISE IN ST. LOUIS

Day overwhelms the window,
bias light stretched wrong,
a mulled shade of drab,
dust-textured and streaked
like the failed painting
intimidating my easel.

Together they make
a tinny medley
that might pass for blues.
Such power there is
in unwanted effects.

Still damp,
the painting can be scraped
or burned. It's hard to dispose
of a misbegotten morning.

Old Village, Old Men

The old men sat with the fires
and the flagons and the legends,
selves repeated in every rheumy eye
and scraggled beard and missing tooth
they faced. Their fractured voices raised
in songs they came to hate. The old men
walked aimless by day, among listless women
and children not their own.

It was the old men who aimed the young men
at distant war, pulled back the bowstrings
of their unrest, sent their slender grace
flying to the front.

The old men knew how the young burned
to breed and their numbers kept growing
and the crops grew less. Daily
the firewood retreated further
in the rock hills. And the weary soil
began to blow, spiraling dark
against the always sun, adding
to the barren girth and some far river floor.

And the old men told great tales and sang,
decanting intoxicants of glory, filling
the hollows of the youths until they sharpened
their cunning, their missiles and blades
as the old men fueled the tinder of idle noon,
oiled the evening grinding wheels,
and cheered as they marched away.

Generation Gap

My memory banks bias snippets
from distant moving reels--
buttons I counted on his gray vest,
its tailored points over matching troussers
in a wide-arm willow chair-- the view
from inside a lap. I recall glasses
that clamped on his nose, but not the nose
although people say I have it.
There is an oval place in my mind
framing gentle obscurities.

I can still see a doctor lightly pressing
a swelling of white flesh on a big brass bed.
That night I tried to say a new word--
appendicitis-- over and over
after strangers carried him out flat and slow.

But I don't remember him, my grandfather.
Not his face, voice, or anything he said.
Only a pale abstraction in a casket
on a curtained table-- with flowers all over
where only one vase of iris had ever been
in what my grandmother always called
"the reading room" of the old house.

And a silent aunt who refastened the spring
high up on the front screen door the next day
after everyone else was gone.

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, antimacassars
no one wants, filling boxes,
filling huge cotton prints, sleeves sloping
like tents, hooks unfastened back of the neck,
they string out death in rocking chairs.
Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes,
paying out advice no one needs, paying
out the slow twine, enlarging the old designs,
straining fifty-odd years of wifery
for a mite to impress the young ones
tightening against their webs and cardboard,
closing in with the last lid.

They wait-- frayed sheaths-- used awhile
by knife-voiced kin who own everything in focus
outside the net of squares and wheels.
On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,
picking at the threads of the days' patterns,
unraveling their mouths,
honing their only weapons.

TROMPE L'OEIL

It means deception of the eye,
this unique art form
making the willing
believe nonexistent things.
Your den's north wall appears lined
with shelves of brightly-bound classics,
a bust of Homer, a Ming censer, brass pots
trailing ivy and lavender inflorescence.

Your clever painter lies and you provide
real scent of lilacs to satisfy the nose
while the hand that tries to grasp
a volume of verse or feel jade's coolness
resents being made a fool.
Yet still the eye insists--
forcing another tactile confrontation
with flatness.

So must I resolve you
in the brain's right and left privacies,
in the unlighted offshoots
that don't remember facts.
The artist has blued your eyes
with faithfulness and burnished your skin
with soft premises. Sometimes
my hand finds heat and contoured strength
much more than a match for illusions
of sight.

Yet I know I'll touch again
that one-dimension hardness,
try to hold the light that isn't there,
face that depthless smile.
And all your old false colors
will shame me for my blindness.

WEATHERSCAPE

The northland starts on its old score
with pressure in my head. Outside
stops doing its job of pushing back.
The radio says we'll get fringes
of an anticyclone about ten o'clock.

Miles of sea have scrubbed this migrant air.
The wind tries to pry open my mouth
like an angry nurse with a dose of salts.
Currents of cold tore their tethers from the pole,
spiraled down to harass my window shutters,
planting sand and salmon scales in wood pores.
Mine sting pink with Katmai pumice and oily smoke
of Athabascan cookfires. My teeth grit
glacial silt; my lungs fatten on the breath
of rutting moose. Seals' hair tangles
with my gray as this prelude cry
rolls from throats of Tlingit fishermen,
old grizzlies, falling spruce.

Hybrid rose trees on my lawn
can't resist kneeling. I can't hear
their breaking. But the time is near
and I know what this wind wants
after raking the backs of guillemots,
scraping up swatches of taiga moss,
banking off centuries of guano and granite.

All the vagrant gales converge in the stoop
of a raptor, arrowheaded by an ancient narwhal
nailing me outside on the last barrier
until I feel it going down

and my hand lets go the roses.

BUYING BANANAS

Vivid and verdant as giant pea pods
it will be four or five days
before you can eat them.
If you peeled one now
and left it on the table
it would turn to an ivory tusk.
If you swallowed one now
it would sink like a petrified log
inside your moist tropics, tasting
of gall green and primeval evolution.
Whiffs of warehouse wizardry
have rescheduled their secret golding
after their cut from the mother tree.
Nothing can hurry them now,
time tickles the codes within.

My love, when I brought you home
stiff and unripe, everyone said
marriage would mellow you, warmth
would tender you.

I'm still waiting
for those first freckles of sweetness.

BEFORE A POET KNOWS WHAT SHE IS

Eyes wild and light as a puma's,
breast-buds flowered plump, up-tilted to summer,
opal and nectarine heraldry of Erato in jeans.

Graduation brought three marriage pleas,
bottled forest smells, wool and leather
always close, mouths and arms she liked.
New sums to sift at the deep waking.

The suitors spoke hoarsely of apartments
and TV, beds, money, children.
And two promised a car of her own.
She ran alone to wrap night around her.

Without secret pages,
too unsure to say how warlock winds
hurried her blood, how river tongues rhymed
with hers and promised more. Too new
to tell how strings and reeds in minor keys
leaned her on shoulders of granite,
closed her eyes with pine breath
while wilderness sinew held her closer.

And her unnamed babies
already lay in an outgrown box
pressing blue gentians from ditches.

GLENNA HOLLOWAY
913 E. Bailey Road
Naperville, IL 60565

COMMUTER TRAIN RIDERS

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COMMUTER TRAIN RIDERS

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WEATHER MESSAGE

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with pressure in my head. Outside
stops doing its job of pushing back.
The radio says we'll get fringes
of an anticyclone about ten o'clock.

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this migrant air. Now the wind tries
to pry open my mouth like an angry nurse
with a dose of salts. Currents of cold
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face that depthless smile.
And all your old false colors
will shame me for my blindness.

Alberta, Canada, 1980: A Different Road to Sun-up

My mother would have muttered a secret chant all day.
Omens from old mountain tales appeared early:
Sickly sun plunged wide shafts into the valley,
sucking it dry, giving no warmth, only taking,
leaving a swath of cold-parched earthworms
and rock/clay crumbs. Strange paws signed
the ground by my door. In 4 p.m.'s dimming,
my calendar fell off the wall as something wailed.
The first wind pried the shutters, crashed my lamps,
spilling the oil far from my green firewood.
Alto afterwind crooned and whispered between
slaps of chill and wavy scents of damp animals.
Racing decaying light, my half that is hers
gathered wolfsbane, the reluctant rest of me
swallowed a drugstore round of dreaming. I united
under a blanket woven with my mother's designs.

Awakened by blackness darker than sleep, heavier
than night, I tried to surface, swim up through it
like a cave fish looking inside its head
for its lost eyes. Night pushed up
from all the world's old graves, smelling
of all the world's old sins. A wolf night,
rabid and howling. A night to grow everything old.
I lit a trembling candle. Morpheus had fled,
leaving an empty bottle, floating me in vertigo.
Pluto remained to breathe out my frail flame.
The charred moon smoked, reversed itself,
revealing a death's head just as she always said,
withholding its downshine, dripping
ice sweat wolf sweat grave sweat.
Black stained walls and air. Trackless black
where the wolf walked, bearded reeking black,
silhouette of hills not there, of beasts
clanning moonward, necks fletched like arrows.

I said my mother's name and clutched
the stems of aconite, flung them on the bed.
She rose in me like ether. I groped
for the incantations drummed into my childhood,
stumbled and skidded over roots my father planted.
Some trailing tendril snagged and held.

Weed essence opened the flue; friction made a spark.
Still sneezing, I relit the candle,
snatched up the wolfsbane for a funeral pyre
fueled with her hand-hewn chair. Leftover night
was stilt-legged shadows on a hearthlit stage,
the usual cast with known names. Tomorrow,
I announced to the sniggering flames,
I will move back among my kind.

OLD HOME ABANDONED

It's still upright but terminally gray,
claimed only by beetles and bindweed.
The fence has a falling sickness. My bedroom
window shutter protests against pocked boards
like Sean's fist on the bathroom door.
I wish I hadn't come.

It was easy enough to leave here
when movies and magazines showed us other ways,
made us grump about frigid linoleum,
squawking stairs and hot water enough
for only one bath a night. I never waited
for my turn every fifth night, instead lugged
buckets and dishpans of stove-heated water
softened with hoarded drops of Christmas scent.
I'd soak and sniff my upright knees
and slide my hands over my shiny shoulders
thinking about silk dresses and three-inch heels
until someone, usually my brother Sean,
pounded his impatience, making this bare spot
in the door paint. And I'd yell, "You grew up
with nothin' but the two-holer! You can re-live
the good ole days now the snakes are gone.
It'll keep you humble, sport!" But he'd thump away
just like that shutter clinging to its only hinge.

Dead leaves scudding across the porch
make me turn to look for Mama's shadow in the hall,
tiptoeing, coming to feel my flu-acheay forehead.
I almost hear cows in the barn and Papa calling
pigs or me from the creek. The old swing,
quarreling with vagrant winds, makes noises
like Nickie's asthma attacks. I pull away,
break into a run for my car. The agency expects me
at noon. The shutter's rhythm grows urgent.
Oh Sean, you can't come in!

THE SPIRAL GALAXY

My mother used to dress up and go out the door
in soft fabrics I thought felt like sky,
fanning shadows and glitter, smelling
of moonlight as she swirled by me.
I loved watching her pin a diamond starburst
on black or royal blue, right over her heart.

I'd get sent to my room for touching things
she wore. Only Orion ever knew I got out
of bed when the maid began to snore, drawn
to the magnetic field of my mother's closet.
I'd wrap her sleeves and skirts around me,
a caterpillar making a cocoon, and quiet as.
By feel, I knew the color of each dress,
every step of her room and the night it held.
She kept her jewel box on top of her highboy
holding her favorites and the piece I called
my wishing star. If I could close my fingers
on it once, all its magic would pass to me.
But standing on a chair, I couldn't reach it.

One night she changed her mind, took off
her first dress, star and all, and finally put on
something red. For the first time, I couldn't wait
for her to leave. Just then my blood
swarmed hot in my head, drained down suddenly;
I felt myself floating to the floor.

In Children's Hospital, the maid sat by my bed
nodding occasional assurance between novels.
Feverless and home by Saturday, the jewel
was no longer accessible. Nor my magic theory.

Later I saw a picture in a book-- a supernova
exploding in a spiral galaxy, bright patterned
like a whirling windmill. It pleased me
to decide that's what became of her in the end
when she stopped coming home at all. Sometimes
I still think she's up there-- flaring brooch
on black silk breast, pirouetting
in the eye of luminosity, radiating sparks.
Now and then I go to the library and look,
knowing the page number by heart. I gravitate
to anything with arms that could sweep me in.

THE BEST THING MY FATHER DID WAS LIE

People, all the pretty people lie so well and tell
truth like amateurs in little threadbare theaters--
it all comes out damp and gray, slurred and slurried,
going away and coming back.

Where do you dig for truth? Out on the parallax--
in the center or the middle? There's a difference--
one is this fence I'm on. The pickets
are cut and dried, alternating black and white,
scratching fact sore but not much truth.
People climb up here out of context
to reach boughs of that old tree, maybe the Eden tree
but the whole crop's wormy to the core. My father said
conqueror worms were final ONLY truth.

He polished his lies like jewels, wore one in each eye,
mounted a ruby in his tongue. His skull rattled
with others stored for special events and Sundays.
When some went out of style, he re-faceted.
And none wore dim before he did.
He mined the earth for his rough material
mine polished was dull beside.

We inlaid his coffin with his favorites;
he willed the rest to me-- never to go
with fence-climbing, fruit-picking clothes.
I keep them here because I don't know how
to get rid of them. Worms have started on the box
but the gems are still gorgeous and whole.
I planned to sit here until all were devoured
but it won't happen. Worms tried
to bite the big ruby, sprung their jaws and died.
Only harder stones can make dust of these.
Or some marvelous ray. Until unequivocal then,
the beasts will eat boxes and bones,
the jewels will glitter, each its own irrelevance
and I am tired of watching.
All the real stuff is down there in either-sided sludge.
Quasi-I must jump off right or left
and grope
for nothing absolute.

If only some almost holy wind would push.

SUNRISE IN ST. LOUIS

Day overwhelms the window,
bias light stretched wrong,
a mulled shade of drab,
dust-textured and streaked
like the failed painting
intimidating my easel.

Together they make
a tinny medley
that might pass for blues.
Such power there is
in unwanted effects.

Still damp,
the painting can be scraped
or burned. It's hard to dispose
of a misbegotten morning.

THERE WAS A WOMAN WHO USED TO GIVE ME FLOWERS

When I was ten I heard her called a whore,
the sentence fletched with barbs that stung my spine.
I'd followed her through years of phlox before
that word bored itching in my brain. Define
the user of a hoe: But that could not
explain the rancid tones of voice that fell
like spattered ale-foam on my father's hot
hearthstones. Unfitting with her bouquet smell.
I later learned the meaning of the slur,
through tears watched spots of sun refract with lies.
Then wicked moons mimed coins, men's grins and her--
while rage enlarged to learn what to despise.
My childhood, white phlox petals, all my prayers--
quicksilver dropped on jagged granite stairs.

Long days uncoiled the ancient codes within,
preparing me as resident temptation.
I saw the pausing eyes my next of kin
imposed on me, their sullen fascination
with hip and thigh, my budding breasts. Were they
designs of sin? Oh, for an older friend!
The one I'd cherished so had moved away
when father "had a word with her".... "You tend
your lessons, girl, forget that piece of trash,"
he growled when I inquired. I missed her more
that season watching her garden's backlash
of weeds where beauty used to rise and pour
against our wall. At summer's end, I knew:
What my father called her wasn't true.

But why did he degrade her? Why such hate
a child could feel its pulse? The evening fire
hissed and cracked like a rabbit gun, a spate
of sparks gnawed on the rug. He cursed the spire
of smoke that rose like one ghost finger prodding
prospective hosts. He drained another glass.
He started teasing, yellow-smiling, nodding.
I never learned effective ways to pass
him off. A choking feeling, hot and brittle,
abashed excuses trailed me to my room
attended by his grinding "Surly little--"
My door closed on the rest. The quiet gloom
encased my mind till sleep brought amnesty.
I woke, my father reeking over me.

To the Master Poet From His Student

Knowing how it all hangs on the turn of the lathe,
on the ordinary wooden phrase, reshaped,
I try to miter your favor around my small corner.
I nod like leaves in the breeze
of your observations, answer your questions
with what I hope won't split or you can't chop.
Someone with a louder voice
has already routed the heartwood.

I search the forest for perfect pith
to drop your jaw, make you file me away
in the gray rings of your head--
oh, not near Dickinson or Pound or Jarrell--
I hope for just enough good grain
to make you consume my unseasoned burl
with a hunger-- the hunger
of lone trees for other trunks and canopies,
ferment of kindred humus at their roots.

But the timbre of my pitch bends,
my carved sentences are cut mid-stroke, drilled
by other voices, upended and left dangling
like stringy hemlock participles. My presence
scatters like pine pollen.

"Who?" you will say a week from now
on hearing my name. I struggle to rivet you
with possibilities, rummage my tool box
for sharpness, anything pointed,
find my needles too soft and green.
But beware, long-time hero and summer mentor,
I may yet slip a splinter beneath your nail.

Old Village, Old Men

The old men sat with the fires
and the flagons and the legends,
selves repeated in every rheumy eye
and scraggled beard and missing tooth
they faced. Their fractured voices raised
in songs they came to hate. The old men
walked aimless by day, among listless women
and children not their own.

It was they who aimed the young men
at distant war, pulled back the bowstrings
of their unrest, sent their tall grace
and strong sinew flying to the front.
But what other choice?
The young burned to breed and their numbers
grew and the crops grew less, the firewood
further in the rock hills. And the weary soil
began to blow, spiraling dark
against the always sun, adding
to the barren girth and some far river floor.

And the old men told them tales and sang,
decanting intoxicants of glory, poisoning
the hollows of the youths until they sharpened
their cunning, their missiles and blades
as the old men oiled the evening grinding wheels,
fueled the tinder of idle noon
and cheered as they marched away.

POET DISMISSED AS FABULIST

If this man's master epics were a lie,
Time's tonnage would reveal the bogus pose.
No rhyme or metric foot could falsify
The jagged wedge of life this author chose.
The incunabula of all we know
Derives its breath from witness of the world.
No residential mortal here below
Could fabricate it; neither knit nor purled
Could fiction improvise such vivid facts.
What writer needs invention from himself
To dramatize his players and their acts?
It's he exposed upon the public shelf,
Fair game for book reviewers, pedants, worse:
Empirics crying "Not so!" --that's the curse.

A PASSING ACQUAINTANCE WITH DEATH ON THE DESERT

It was here in my questing place I met you--
sidewise and slowly on earth's sueded curve
slumped under tons of Sonoran light.
Minus black hood or scythe, you're nothing
like poets or painters imagine.
You rattled me dry as ghostwood, bubbled my skin,
swelled my tongue. I clamped my teeth
on hard brightness, refusing your soft advances.

The desert needs no bones of mine.
Built of itself, the hoarded grains
of millenia's mills, it piles and plunges
like a tidal wave over fallen spines of cholla.
Flowering agave rides selected vertebrae
of the planet's arched chine.

The light is molten alloy in a pouring crucible,
casting keys in crevices and fissures
to unlock the fourth dimension's doors.
Wind scours leftover civilization from my eyes;
I can read the coded map of the night-walkers.

Sometimes I smell you in trailing fringes
of breeze sliding the dunes. Deep in the perigee,
sometimes you finger my neck hairs or vibrate
the sidewinder as I cling to the rim of the possible.

Wading an ocean of light, struggling
in its currents, I wait until the nearest moon
steals its weight. My evening footprints fill
with mauve in granulated layers of always.
Blossoming cosmos withdraw fuchsia rays
to meditate on seed. The skink surrenders
its fading warmth to the owl. Ocotillos
comet their color above graven intaglios
like shadows of a spiral galaxy. I'm tethered
to ancient rhythms only my blood remembers.
Here is my space quest, cordless and alone.
Out beyond your waiting.

It was here you encountered my name, here
I learned a sand language never spoken.
And when we came gaze to gaze, you and I,
remember, it was yours that looked away.