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URGENT NEWS FROM THE FRONT

by

Jennifer J. Gray

A THESIS

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URGENT NEWS FROM THE FRONT

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University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Jonis Agee

This creative thesis is an original work in the genres of fiction and poetry. It consists of three short stories and a chapbook of poems. My work focuses on the ways we find to survive, to create meaning, and to connect to ourselves, to those around us, and to the world in which we live.

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The Panhandler

Will was hungry. This was the reason he woke early. Even up on the dry sand a hundred yards distant from the water, the air carried the faint, cool damp of the night river, the musk of clay and wet, mixed with the shadow scent of dust, the dry particles that settled over everything immovable—the cliffs, the stones, even the plants themselves had to bear their burden of earth, at least until rainfall or wind washed them. He drew a breath sweet with morning. He loved to get on the river early, when they could put in and hope for the luck of the solitude seekers.

He went down to see the water, stood there on a vast black stone still warm from yesterday's sun, taking in the morning like a dog getting a scent. It smelled clean, the air still cool an hour or so before sunrise. Soft surges of air rose from the river, which ran strong and deep here. In the low light it was nearly as black as the black rocks that gave this stretch of the river its name. Only glimmers on the shifting, dimpled patterns of the water's surface betrayed its restless flowing. But for a few small, high clouds, the sky was clear, the brightest stars going dim as the beginnings of daylight seeped above the rim of the canyon behind him.

He wanted to jump. He knew this was a spot where, by taking a short running leap, he could land in the deepest part of the river, but this close to the BLM campsites, he didn't want to wake any of the other campers still sleeping nearby. No need to piss off some lousy drunk and his booze cruising buddies.

It was going to be a good day on the river. A short one for his buddy Bryce, who was heading home later. It wasn't more than nine river miles to the Westwater take out.

Bryce had parked his car there two days ago so he'd have wheels back, and his friend Dan followed him so he could give him a lift home to Grand Junction. It would be a longer day for Will. After Bryce took off, he was going farther downriver into the Westwater Canyon with its sweet class III and IV rapids.

Bryce, along with Dan and another buddy Chris, joined him on day one, when he was camping in Grand Junction. Will knew they'd gone out to this rowdy little pizza joint in Fruita before they joined him at the campsite. In former days, he would have gone too. The place was always packed with a crowd of outdoor adventure types, most of them young and beautiful and grimy with good times. He'd picked up his fair share of company there. But when Bryce asked him, he shook his head. "Not my scene, man. Thanks anyway. You camping tonight?" That was when Bryce mentioned that Dan and Chris had plans to race the river on their stand up paddle boards, or SUPs. It wouldn't take them more than five hours to go from Loma to Westwater, so they wouldn't be riding the river with Bryce and Will, who were going to camp one night between, but they wanted to come hang at the campsite. Bryce knew Will tried to steer clear of Dan and found Chris annoying, but still, he'd asked. So they all rolled in near twilight, which came late this far into summer. Fortunately, Chris had brought a pack of joints. Bryce built a little fire, mostly for the pleasure of its noise and light, and to discourage the mosquitos. Then they'd all toked their way to enlightenment after sundown.

Dan was a burly, square-faced guy, good natured by habit, but suspicious of indigents, so he was naturally suspicious of Will. Will had discovered this when he overheard Bryce and Dan talking about him while they were camping this stretch of the river a couple of years ago.

“I mean, what the hell is he doing with his life?” Dan asked.

“Whatever he wants, I guess.” Bryce wasn’t interested in defending Will or anyone else to Dan. “Why does it matter?”

“It should matter to him, at least.” Dan was a lawyer, and a suburban type. The kind who lived in a nice house with some land, hunted and fished in his spare time, voted Democrat on his wife’s principles, but was a member of the NRA. Like most people, Dan was more likeable when he was stoned. “What, he loses an arm and now he’s just excused from the burden of citizenship? It’s shitty. I don’t expect you to defend him, Bryce. I just think it’s shitty.” There was a pause, punctuated with the thud and crack of stones as they constructed the firepit. Will stood behind a cottonwood tree with the gathered wood in one arm, steadied by the leftover stump that was all that remained of his left arm. He considered his responsibility here. He hadn’t been raised to eavesdrop. He should either go back the way he came and leave them to it, or he should step out. One or the other.

He sort of hoped that Bryce would answer before he made up his mind, not because he needed defending, but because he knew Dan listened to Bryce, and if Bryce gave him a good enough reason, Dan would drop it, hopefully forever, and the discomfort Will sometimes felt around him would dissolve. Immediately, Will was ashamed of his desire for something easy, and embarrassed that he wanted his friend to get it for him. He stepped out. Their conversation ceased. Dan, bent over adjusting the circle of stones, looked up. He nodded at Will, said thanks as Will squatted and made a stack of the wood. Will glanced at Bryce. They left it at that.

Chris was a hyperactive loudmouth who liked to reminisce about what he called his “wilderness adventures.” In Will’s opinion, the worst thing about him was that he had done so goddamned many things outside. There was never an end to his stories. Until he was high—then he got quiet.

Last night, sitting on these stones around the fire he’d felt his own bones answer the water and the earth, their call to silence and stillness, so that while Chris rocked back and forth muttering, “It’s hot. Hot. Hot. Hot hot hot hot hot,” and Dan told some crazy story about a guy looking for his lost dog who wasn’t a great swimmer, and Bryce lay unspeaking, Will sat cross-legged in the dark and breathed in, breathed out, breathed in, breathed out, feeling that breathing itself was an activity full of meaning, full of the universe and his awareness of life and consciousness. With each breath he was taking bits of the world into his body.

He’d perceived the world-building of the river, its endless, restless portage of earth and grinding of stone bit by flaked bit, so that the red dust he breathed was the scent of the earth being ground down. It was all interconnected in a web of meaning, of consciousnesses. He understood the noises of the water. They were a kind of language, a song dipping and deep, a song of hunger and patience and power. The stones, the bed of the river, its high boundaries, were the instrument the waters played upon. He could sense the humped resistance of the rocks. Their patient meditation seemed unmoved by water, wind, or weather. Beyond the sounds around their own campfire, he heard the wild calls and whoops of the other campers getting drunk by their campfires in the dark, the low hoot of an owl hunting, the small winds in the cottonwoods. If he stayed long enough he

thought he would hear the high treble notes of the stars in the blue-black sky where they shone with their ancient light, illuminating the chambered universe.

But standing here in Black Rock now, another day down the river, pissing into the scrub, Will felt the hammer of a hangover from last night's beer steadily pounding the nails of reality into his enlightened skull. So much for the day-old meditations of a stoner. Bryce's tent was pitched back against the canyon wall. It was still zipped. He was probably awake in there, Will knew. They'd been camping buddies ever since they'd been undergrads in the same major, assigned the same study group for GeoChem. In the years since, they'd established a comfortable pattern. And according to the unspoken rules, by mutual agreement they left each other alone when they'd gone into their tents. Will considered this as some kind of ancient way they followed, a treaty of sorts between overlapping centers of consciousness. Not that he ever said it like this to Bryce. Hell no. Bryce would stare at him, and roll his eyes, and worst of all, he would feel uncomfortable. No, Will kept thoughts like this to himself.

But this, plus his hunger, was why he rolled himself out of his sleeping bag when the birds first began to warble, and followed the footpath alone down to the river. The path was only lightly worn, and mostly just the default route through the brushy canyon growth. It went by way of mesquite and sage, past spiky, low-growing yucca, through the red dust. It wound its way out of the box canyon where they camped last night, over big, speckled stones unearthed by weather from their shallow resting places. Little winds rustled in the brush. The canyon was lit only dimly by the half-light of a pre-dawn sky. The path ended where the land ended—on a stone promontory maybe thirty feet above the water, around which the river wound in a sinuous curve. Slowly, slowly, the water

was wearing down the stones, making some sandy, beached places where travelers sometimes came ashore. Still, their campsite was usually safe; river travelers rarely ventured a quarter mile away from the water, especially since the BLM prohibited camping outside the approved sites. Even the more adventurous ones didn't explore too far into this particular little canyon. Once they could see its wedge shape, and the wall of nearly sheer cliffs on all sides narrowing to an unseen terminus in the tangled shadows of undergrowth, this tended to discourage them from venturing deeper into the thick, thorny brush. Some wild animal might make such a place its home. No one wanted to inadvertently corner a beast out here.

By the time Will got back to camp, Bryce was up, sitting in an early morning stupor on a rock near his tent.

“Morning.”

Bryce wasn't much of a morning person. He didn't respond, didn't even move. Just sat, elbows resting on his knees, bare feet on the sand. He seemed to be contemplating a stunted juniper in the middle distance.

Will started packing up. This was a process he'd perfected through minimalism and, as his father would say, sheer cussedness. He'd already packed the field mattress he'd had since he'd liberated it from a campsite a couple of years ago along this same stretch of the river. Now he was working on rolling the tarp he used for shelter. It was a nice one, lightweight and simple. He'd taken it last year from a campsite he'd found, close to a trail on the Kern River in California. He reasoned that there was enough stuff in that camp for one dude to solve a little problem like no tarp. Will didn't feel bad about it.

This tarp was a piece of things, and it had decided to stay with him for a while, to travel with him where he was going. No problem.

After a minute he noticed Bryce was standing up. Although he appeared to be stretching, Will could tell by some intuition of self-consciousness that he was looking over at him, gauging his progress. He didn't acknowledge the scrutiny, continued to roll the tarp in the most efficient way he'd found—using his one good arm to tuck, his knees to leverage, and the stump of what used to be his left arm to hold the roll in place as he did it.

Like all of his friends and family, Bryce became hyperaware of Will when he was struggling to accomplish some simple set of tasks that would have been easy for him before the accident. But like all of them, Bryce knew better than to offer help. Besides, there was no need. Will camped alone all the time. Since he'd lost his arm, he'd mostly bummed around the west, paddling and camping and hitching his way between the houses of friends where he'd crash a few weeks before moving on again. Before the accident, he'd been ultra-competitive, had his master plan—not that he told anyone—on a 3x5 index card he kept in his wallet. It said, “retire by 40,” and he knew what that meant. He was going to get a job, get a good steady income from The Man, and in his spare time he was going to prospect for precious metals. One way or another, by living frugally or by striking it rich, he was going to be able to retire by 40. Even if he couldn't afford it, Will had vowed to himself that he wouldn't work a desk job after 40.

He was the fifth of seven children. He knew how to get by on a little, less even, than he thought he needed. He'd learned that he seldom needed as much as he thought he did. His dad was an oilfield worker, and a persistent drunk. He wasn't a mean drunk, but

they didn't have enough to live on after he'd bought all the beer he wanted. Will's mom never said much about it. She practiced what his older brother, now an economist living in Denver, wryly called *radical economy*. Her philosophy could be summed up in three words: God will provide. So, no matter how little they had to live on, it was enough. By definition, it was enough. Her ability to distribute the resources according to the needs of the family was what kept them from starvation and rage. It was one of the few sacred practices Will considered he had ever witnessed. That, and her love, which they'd all taken as a necessity of life. He knew she was a good woman, probably the best woman he would ever know.

When he'd come to after the accident, he found that his girlfriend Sarah was dead. So was the other driver, the one who had probably (according to the best guess of the officer) been distracted, the one who had crossed the center line and demolished Will's Subaru. He also learned that his arm had been crushed so badly that doctors recommended amputation as the best alternative. He never wanted to hear "You're lucky to be alive" again. In the days that followed, he'd known that the life he'd been building before was worthless. Had always been worthless.

Every day his mom was there, by his bedside. One day, filled with rage for his losses, he'd held up the bandaged stump to her. The lightness of it. The grotesque wrongness of it. His mother had looked at him in that way she had. Really seeing him, knowing him, loving him. She'd smiled, shrugged. "I guess one hand is enough for you, then." God. Of course. And even though he sighed and scowled and said he was tired and wanted to be left alone, as she went out he'd known she'd somehow taken his anger with her. What would she do with it? What would he do without it?

Sometimes he thought about Sarah. Actually, more times than he would ever admit to anyone. She had just finished her nursing degree about six months before the accident. She was athletic and playful, and loved to laugh. In some ways she reminded him of his mom—the way she didn't overanalyze, just took things as they came. His mom didn't really approve of her because she was younger than him by almost eight years. He never told her that they were getting ready to split up, that, in fact, he'd hardly spoken to her in a week when the accident happened. He was dropping her off for her shift at the hospital, and hadn't told her that he had a bag packed and waiting at his apartment for a weekend trip into the mountains with his buddies. His plan was to break it off with her when he got back. A little break, and then he'd be able to do it. But instead, that car came over the median. And Sarah was dead. The senselessness of it was the only thing he could feel. It was like a blank—a void that nothing could touch.

He had become a man with nothing to lose. He decided that he would never again work a desk. He quit his job. Figured out an adaptation for paddling with an arm and a stump that involved a strong strap that wrapped around his torso that crisscrossed to hold the paddle to the end of what was left of his arm. He learned how to use it on all kinds of water.

One day, packing up his gear in the shitty little hatchback he'd bought on craigslist, his sister had begged to come along. He was twenty-nine when he lost his arm. Thirty a year later when he was prepping to go, so that would have made Molly, named after their mother, twenty two at the time. Actually, she didn't beg. She just came out and threw her gear in with his, went back into the garage for her kayak. He didn't want her to come; he wanted to go out there and figure out a way to live or die trying. But Molly was

as stubborn in her own way as their mother. And there was a gentleness about her that he hated to injure. So he didn't say anything, just loaded her kayak (one of his castoffs) and gear, and they drove. All that weekend, car camping and him practicing paddling, and learning to roll, she never said anything that made him feel wrong, or broken, or foolish. He remembered the way she laughed at him when he got frustrated with his failure. For his first time out he chose a lake. He wrestled his kayak down to the water. It was even more awkward than he had anticipated. He paddled with an arm strap he'd rigged to his torso. The place where it was strapped onto the paddle hurt a bit, and paddling felt clumsy. Gone was his ease, his control, his intuitive knowing about how to stroke. He went in slow circles and felt ashamed, exposed on the flat water.

Still, he was determined to learn to roll. Beneath his anger, his frustration, his embarrassment, he felt afraid. What if he couldn't get righted? Or what if he learned here, and still couldn't do it when it really counted out on a river? He let his rage fuel the adrenaline he needed to get his ass back up out of the water, to right his upside down kayak and get another breath. So he'd come up swearing, and then would go round, plunging his body into the dark water, then breaking the plane of the water again, swearing at the top of his lungs. Molly had laughed and laughed. Later, when they were at the campsite, with the lit darkness of sky and the deeper darkness of the wooded places beyond the sweep of the sandy shore, she retold the story of him on the water, the barbaric noise of his swearing chopping over the quiet water, the sudden silence as he plunged beneath the surface, the rhythmic pace of it. He laughed with her, even as he wished for his guitar to play by the fire, wished for his fingers and their adept wisdom. Over the course of his healing he realized again and again that he had never known the

miracle of his own body until it was incomplete, how even though he told himself that the loss was a small percentage of his total body mass, even though he practiced gratitude for his working limbs, his entire body had suffered a loss. There was a lameness to him, even to his legs, as though even on a cellular level each piece of him had to register the lack. Will knew Molly wanted to help him. They all did. Wanted to try and carry some of his burden. But they couldn't. He didn't know how to let them. Still, that trip was a beginning. For the first time since the accident, he'd shared water, and fire, and laughter.

"My god, how much did we smoke last night?" Bryce had loaded most of his gear, had only his paddle and day pack. He was swinging Will's pack up onto his back, had the straps of Will's dry bag in his hands.

"I can get my stuff, Bryce. Just have a few things to put in my day pack."

"Stop bitching. I'm bored. I may as well help." He strode down the path, and called over his shoulder, "I'll meet you at the water."

Some might say that for a panhandler he'd picked a tough spot. Then again, he didn't need much help, he didn't suppose. All he really wanted were a few beers for later. Maybe some extra granola bars or snacks, or an extra can or two of chicken or tuna. This stretch of the Colorado River was pretty busy, especially now. July was a primo month for panhandling here. A lot of the river cruisers packed a shitload for a couple of days, and still had plenty of string cheese and beer to take home. It wasn't hard to find someone willing to share. But he had to be up early if he wanted maximum benefit. His stomach growled, reminding him to breathe, to drink, and to go pack up his campsite. He ate his last granola bar, stowing the trash in his pocket. The river downstream was calling to him.

He portaged his kayak to a sandy spit of shoreline. It was blue, a beat up old beast, scuffed and chipped and patched, but still keeping the water out. He loaded his gear, then cast a brief glance at Bryce in his pretty red touring kayak. Will called it the fat cat. Bryce nodded at Will's unspoken question, so Will settled himself into his seat, got his paddle fixed with the strap to his body, and they pushed off. Just a few dips of the oar were all that he needed to catch the current. A couple of half-hearted calls came over the water from early birds catching sight of them, those unfortunates out recovering from their hangovers with coffee or yoga. He steered through the little rapids, familiar with their quirks. Then they were winding through Ruby Horsethief Canyon, the water making little slapping sounds against the kayak.

Bryce knew he'd want to be quiet. He was always quiet when he first got on the river. Getting his bearings, mentally and physically. Down here in the canyon, following the meander of the Colorado in its sandy bed, it was possible to forget that above the rough rim of stone, a harsh desert hostile to human habitation lay open to the sky as far as the eye could see in all directions. But water meant movement, and the possibility of a safe landing, a new place. And arm or no arm—the river didn't give a shit.

When he was afloat on the river, he was seduced by it, by the buoyance of his kayak in motion, the water lapping at its sides, the splash and pull of his oar in the current. The river made the landscape around it seem to be in a kind of stasis, the shore being simply a way of marking passage on the water when you paddled into the current and followed it beyond the next bend. There was just the river, and its flowing toward the sea.

It was quiet, the water calm. The sunrise was setting fire to the patterns of the canyon walls, carved deeper into old horizons of stone, widened in uneven slopes away from the river, some like graduated buttes, others sheer cliffs of striated stone. In some places the stone was the color of sand and smooth, rounded into convex forms riddled with holes one side of the water. In others, the river brushed up against a green fringe of tamarisk flanked by a cliff while the other side opened into a sandy shoreline sometimes dense with shrubby growth. As they paddled by one of these weedy places, three blue herons stood among the shallow vegetation. They observed the passage of the kayaks, motionless but for their eyes.

He let the river take him. Bryce kept pace. They were at ease with each other. Will nodded briefly in acknowledgment of the pictographs as he passed them in their silent place deeper in the canyonlands, marking the coming and going of others many centuries ago. The river passed through this place, yet remained. Just so, those others. Just so, he.

Even this early in the morning, the Westwater landing was busy with groups putting in and heading down into Westwater Canyon and beyond, looking for thrills on the rapids. They steered into the shallows and put in between a group of canoes and a raft. Will nodded to a guide he knew. Greg worked for one of the outfitters. A former skier, he'd blown out his knees and taken up kayaking during rehab from his surgeries. Now he had what Will considered a truly shitty job dealing with newbies and drunks, wanna-be river rats who paid someone else to give them the experience they wanted but weren't skilled enough to earn. Greg didn't complain though. He'd shrug and say, "Keeps

me on the river, man. It's good." While Greg kept an eye on Will's gear, Will helped Bryce load up.

By the time Bryce was ready to leave it was only about eight in the morning. His kayak rode on top of his car, and his gear cluttered the back seat. He rolled down his window and leaned out, looking at Will, sizing him up.

"You putting in right away?"

Will tipped his head in a small shrug, nodded. "Pretty quick."

Bryce nodded, too, but he was considering. "Need anything?"

"A bottle of wine, a beautiful woman, and my left arm." Will smirked. Bryce chuckled.

"Damn, man. I can't help you with any of that."

"Well then you better just get the hell out of here." Will slapped the door of the car and stepped back a pace. "You're going to be late picking up your kids."

"Yeah." There was a silence. "I should have traded weekends with Shannon and gone downriver with you."

"Naw, Bryce. No worries, man." He shuffled in the dust. A group of twenty-somethings passed in front of Bryce's car. One of them was a girl with a long brunette ponytail, wearing bright pink shorts, a white t-shirt, and a pair of chacos. She was laughing at something, and she stumbled against the hood. She steadied herself, and, still laughing, looked up at Will. Their eyes met. He smiled and gave her a slight nod. She smiled back. In this light, her eyes looked blue. But then he saw her eyes cut to his arm, to the space where his arm should be. Her smile stiffened. Will looked away. Bryce was watching him. It felt oppressive, suddenly. Intolerable. The whole goddamned thing was

suffocating. He wanted back on the river so bad he nearly turned and went, without another word. Instead he stifled a sigh.

“You better get. Somebody’s gonna want your spot.” Down by the river, he knew, people were bent over their rafts, stowing gear, checking ropes and coolers. The early morning clouds were dissipating and the shadows were getting smaller every minute. The river was waiting for him. Unsympathetic.

“Do you want to take some of my snacks? I’m just going to stash them for next time. No reason you can’t have them.”

Will did need some more snacks. He had weeks left on the river, camping, solitary hiking, if his own gauge of his state of mind was accurate. And he only had enough food for two to three days at the most. Somewhere down the line he was going to have to get more. But he would bum it off somebody, or panhandle if he needed to. He didn’t want Bryce’s. At this moment he wanted Bryce to be fifteen miles down the highway and getting more distant every minute.

“I got plenty. Thanks though.”

Bryce considered him a second. Then said, “Alright. Well, it was fun.”

“Yep.”

“When do you think you’ll be back up this way?”

Will shrugged, looked down. “A couple months, I guess. Maybe more. Hard to say where the road’ll take me.”

“Well you’re always welcome. Come anytime.”

Will nodded. “Tell the kids hey for me.”

“I will. I will.” Bryce nodded. He looked unhappy to be leaving. But he started his engine.

They shook hands and Will walked back down to the shore. Greg was busy with that crew of kids. Actually, Will thought, some of them probably weren't much younger than him, but he felt a distance between him and them. He used to blame them, whoever they were, everyone else, for the distance. But now he knew it wasn't them. It really wasn't anyone's fault. His mom called it his mark of suffering. Said he wore it out on his sleeve. And every time she mentioned his sleeve, he'd remind her that he didn't need all the sleeve he got for his money anymore. Then she'd roll her eyes and punch him in his right arm, or fling dish bubbles at him, or dirt, if she were out in her garden.

Greg had pulled his kayak closer to the rafts he was leading downriver. Will shook his head, refusing to feel reluctant to go over there by the rafting group. Greg saw him ambling down. He said something to a man Will assumed was the one who'd organized the trip, a tall, tanned man who looked slightly bow-legged. Will saw the girl again. She was hard to miss in those bright shorts. No chance she'd be inadvertently left on the bank, at least. She was talking to another girl, but she kept looking over to where he and Greg were now standing by his kayak. The strap and the oar were stowed; it looked like any river kayak, ready for the rapids. The only thing that might look out of place here was his missing arm. He ignored his urge to stand so as to obstruct her view of it. He wondered who she was, and why was she taking some bullshit rafting trip. Not that it mattered to him. It didn't matter. Why was he even thinking about her?

Greg was holding a bag, and now he held it out. “Hey, Will, it's no sweat either way, but we brought this trail mix for the group we're taking out. It's a lot, kind of, but it

turns out one of them has a peanut allergy.” He handed it off to Will. It was a lot. A familiar mix, packed into big baggies. “It’d be a favor if you’d take it. Imagine if one of them has an allergic reaction on the river.”

Will chuckled and shook his head. “Seriously? A peanut allergy?” Then he smiled, “But I’ll take that off your hands. Sure. Thanks, Greg.”

“Well, yeah. Sure. I’m glad I don’t have to trash it.”

Now Will was holding the bag. “Guess I better stow this and get on the water.” He grinned. “I definitely want to get ahead of these rafts.” He indicated Greg’s company.

Greg laughed. “Well, maybe I’ll see you down river.”

“Yep.”

The Collectors

Down a gully strewn with cedar, ash, and cottonwood, tangled with bittersweet vines, she follows the cut bank of a creek. A quarter mile west she has passed two abandoned farm places. The roofs on the houses are going or gone. Locals date most destruction from a tornado, passed through twenty-some-odd years back. But since then the tramps and pickers have come and come again. The barns are broken open, doors hanging askew or altogether missing, tractors gone or dissected for parts so that the interiors resemble the remains after an autopsy gruesome in its carelessness. Out on the gully's other side, she emerges into a summer silence. A disused road long gone to weeds. Remnants of an industrial gate lashed to earth with bindweed, a fence of metal pipe rusted out so that some pieces lie nearly hidden on the ground among the ditch weed.

To her left she can see another old homestead situated on a rise. A relic of the First Wave Settlers. Maybe built as far back as the last decade of the nineteenth century, nearly two hundred years since. Seeing that the place looks abandoned, and she turns away. Hears a cock crow and turns back. Up the hill she passes through a windbreak of evergreens, can see now the flock strutting and scratching in the yard.

“What you looking for, child?” The woman was stooping. Now she stands, short-handled hoe dangling from one hand, wiping the other on an apron as nondescript as she. Black hair going gray, brown skin burnished by sun and cured by wind. Her eyes are as sharp as her voice is mild. The child is poised to run. They stand a moment more, the

woman waiting patiently. There is a stillness about her which Elin craves. Yet she turns away.

“You thirsty?” Now the woman turns her back, moves through her crooked garden rows like someone stepping stones across a running creek. She moves from dust to dust in the spaces between the green, hiked skirts surging around her legs each time she lifts a knee. At the end of the rows, a massive oak, a shaded place, two stumps, a bucket of water. She sinks to rest with a sigh. Drinks long and slow. Offers the chipped cup to Elin who has followed almost unwillingly, yet accepts the offered cup. Drinks. “Peppermint.” The first time Elin has spoken.

“Good on the stomach. Have more if you like.” The woman stretches her legs out in front of her, curls her feet, wiggles her toes.

Elin sits down, folding her legs under her. There is silence but for the wind in the leaves, the distant mowers.

“You know something about herbs?” The woman is too wise to look long directly at this child.

“What my mother taught me.”

The woman points to a shaggy plant on the edge of the garden. “You know that one?”

“Coneflower.”

“And that?”

“Chamomile.”

The woman shifts her pointing finger slightly.

“Feverfew.”

A few more and the woman is satisfied. In the silence, she is watching the road. She stands just before the child senses someone else has come, and raises her hand in greeting to a young woman, thin blond hair tucked behind her ears, a child asleep in a sling on her hip. This newcomer is too deep in sunlight to see into the shadows, but she comes up the dirt drive as one familiar, welcome. Before she goes down to meet mother and child, the woman glances toward the stump where Elin had been. Her place is empty. There are only the high grasses of the pasture beyond the oak. They whisper and bow, keeping their secrets.

It is only days later when Elin returns, in late afternoon when the work crews rest from the day's heat. This time she ventures around the house. No sign of the woman in the garden or among the chickens. From this side, the house is tilted slightly southward, its shingles curling, a rusty brown streak on a wall where the gutter seeps when it rains. A wicker table and two rocking chairs slump on the crooked porch. There's a bench of potted plants, a few bright spots of red that bloom against the dingy beige siding. A child's bike with chipped pink paint and a torn seat lies in the dirt by the back door. Dirty fabric streamers dangle from the handlebars. The clothesline is full of washing, the legs and arms restless as haunts in the sweltering afternoon wind. A few turkeys walk carefully around the yard and into the dusty corral where a shaggy yellow pony stands gazing at the girl. The girl gazes back.

"You ever seen a queening?" The woman's voice comes from the shadowed doorway of a barn shed. The tilted door swings loose on its hinges. Inside, slats of sunlight record each mote of dust. Elin crouches in a scatter of hay to see the mama cat

birth. One by one the glistening bundles are expelled, inspected. The mother's rough tongue works over each, clearing the caul, biting the umbilical cord, nosing the wet creature into breath, into life. When each has had its welcome, the new mother begins to clean herself. The woman stands.

It is only then that Elin notices another child who has been sitting in the shadows. A small black child who smiles shyly when their eyes meet. Elin does not return the smile.

"My name's Vega. What's your name?" She sounds as if she has said this many times before.

"Elin."

"That's a funny name." As she speaks, the girl covers her mouth. Elin thinks she is laughing. She glares.

"It's a family name."

Vega tucks her hands in the pockets of her apron. "Oh. Well, mine's kind of funny too, I guess."

By this time the woman has gathered her milk pails. She hands one to each child and says to Elin, "You call me Della. It's time for the milking if you're going to stay." Then Della is gone to the garden, harvesting basket on her arm, bumping her thigh with each step. Elin watches her go, wondering to herself how long she will stay.

Elin follows the girl called Vega out to the corral. Vega moves with grace, head high. Her thin arms are muscled. Edging out from the yoke of her tank top and rounding over her left shoulder is a slab of scar tissue, pale and traced with silver striations that gleam in the light. Two wet-eyed cows with soft gray hides and jutting hip bones stand

watching them as they come. Vega runs her hand along the side of one bony cow. She murmurs something. The cow doesn't so much as shift her feet, but continues chewing her cud while Vega squats and takes a sure grip on her teats.

Elin watches. Looks closely at the other cow. Approaches slowly. Raises her hand and runs it along the side just as she saw Vega do. The cow cranes her neck around to see the girl. Her hooves make a sucking sound in the muck as she struggles to raise them. Elin steps back.

Vega glances up, then down again. "You should talk to her. It's what she's used to." She shrugs. "Or sing. She's a good cow. She'll let down her milk for you." For a moment Elin simply stands, bucket dangling from her hand. She looks out past the corral, over the alfalfa field, at the dark tree line along the Salt Creek.

"You got someplace else to go?" It seems to Elin that there's a challenge in Vega's voice.

Elin does not answer. Looks again at the cow. Squats. Begins to sing, off-key, an awkward crooning. She fumbles at the teats, and slowly the bucket fills with milk. When the girls have poured their offerings into the cooler in the little milk shed, they cross the yard to Della trimming greens on the porch. She is humming and rocking. When they are close enough, she extends her bottom lip in the direction of a great wooden bowl heaped with green beans still warm from the sun.

"Beans need trimming."

The shadows grow long and ragged as the three sit unspeaking, peaceable. There is only the rustle of the greens, the snap of the beans, their clatter in the bowl. A lean cat comes purring to rub itself on Della's legs.

When Della rises, she nods to the girls. “Vega, show Elin the chores before supper, will you?” The screen door creaks, slams as Della goes in.

It is a good place she has come to. Their days are long with work, but fearless. It is enough. Elin sees how Vega goes easy from chore to chore. Plays simply. Rides the bike down the road and back again. Elin finds her place slowly. She prefers the garden to the milking, has no knack for gathering eggs. Instead, after asking Della’s permission, she cleans each outbuilding, hauling out all the boxes, dusty crates weighted with their unknown contents, the old and the forgotten—boots and gloves, implements, baling wire, hand tools—all out in the yard where they slump and lean, some seeming to squint in the unfamiliar midday light.

She sweeps the barren spaces until the dust covers her like a veil composed of histories, the remnants of generations, seasons slipped past their caretakers now gone or buried. And when the dust has settled into its new places, it is her great pleasure to choose for each thing a place to which it will belong.

One sunny summer day she chases the horses gone wandering down the back pasture and out a broken place where they’ve leaned on a post gone soft in too many rains. She spends a quiet afternoon roaming, no sound but the sometime thunder of a train passing through, the liquid sound of wind in the leaves and grasses, warbling robin, song of the lark. A creek runs among a crooked line of trees that populate a low place in the meadowlands. It is a shallow ripple of clear brown with glints of silver where the sun finds it. The shaggy grasses of August overhang its cut bank. As Elin wanders along its

path, she sees an old cottonwood lightning struck, fallen over the creek, interrupting its flow. It makes a dam tangled with brush and garbage, now become a thicket with rank algae gathering on its margins. There are tracks around this spot. Coon and coyote. And ahead of this makeshift dam, a little falls where the waters are crowded against the far bank. Elin crouches to inspect the tracks, to listen to the gurgle of water in the silence. Across the creek she sees the junk of an old dumping ground. An ancient washing machine half buried in the sloping hill up the other side of this shallow ravine, a cabinet chewed with weather and rot, an untidy jumble of rusted pipe. Slowly she realizes there's a camp set up there. A faded tent, an old bedspread rigged the make an awning under a sickly elm. A fire pit with ash and logs gone to coal.

Someone is there. Slowly, the way an animal will raise its hackles and turn to look at a place from which its fear emanates, she becomes aware of someone crouching behind the washer. It is a skinny brown girl, black hair chopped like a knotted nest of yarn, dark eyes scared and angry. When their eyes meet, the other ducks out of sight. Though the air has shifted for Elin, the creek goes on pouring over the falls, the sun glittering on the waters. The little winds of summer stir the leaves and grasses while Elin considers.

“Who are you?” she calls over.

Silence. She is watching for movement, ready for it. Nothing stirs but the wind in the leaves and grass. Finally she speaks again. “I'm not going to hurt you.”

A stone comes hurtling over the creek, landing with some force very near her feet. Another follows and finds its mark, striking her on the shoulder as she's rising and backing, stumbling quickly upstream to the meager shelter of the dam and the tilted base

of the tree with its snarl of roots. As she is going, another stone, and another, until she ducks and runs and doesn't look back until she's out of range of any more stones. In the lowlands downstream she finds the horses grazing, chest high in prairie cordgrass, and leads them home.

Sometimes as the waning summer cools into autumn, Della summons the girl to an out-building gone gray with weather, small-windowed and plain. A lean-to porch has been tacked on, and inside of this room several folded cots lean against one wall. There is a cabinet with sheets and quilts soft with many washings, a rag rug on the plain wood floor. A water pump stands like a dog at attention to one side of the door, and a footpath fringed with creeping thyme curves around back of the small building and down the rise it stands upon.

This leads to a bolted door so low that even Elin must stoop to enter. Once inside, a small stairway of brick, a deep room roughed out of the hill, earthen walls framed with wooden beams, shelves lined with bottles, bags, boxes, jars. There is a tall cabinet, locked, and never opened when the children can see. The ceiling is hung with bundles of herbs, their dried heads loosely wrapped in paper to keep them clean, each marked with Della's coded notes of plant name, harvest location and dates, and other information as yet indecipherable to Elin.

Della sets her to tasks of tincture and salve, pleased to teach her what she is willing to learn. Nearly every day there comes at least one visitor to this dilapidated farm on this out of the way road miles from the city. Some the girl recognizes. Many she does not. But always she vanishes before she can be questioned or pressed into conversation.

Della doesn't speak of it to her. Once the visitor has gone, the girl returns to her work. More rarely, she will stay gone, having found another task for her restless hands. Most who come have little by way of money, and instead they'll bring something in trade, take something they have need of. Herbs for fever. Salve for pain, ointments, supplies for wrapping wounds. A seedling or packet of seeds tucked carefully into a knapsack or apron pocket along with Della's directions for planting. In exchange, chopped firewood, meats smoked or dried, cloth for bandages, repair work on the house or roof, books, feed for the horses.

Sometimes Elin sees parcels change hands. Della never opens these when she can see, but sends her out on one errand or another. When she returns, the package is gone, the paper it was wrapped in flattened, lying in the basket to be re-used for wrapping. All things in their proper place. Sometimes, too, a traveler will stay for a night, or for a week of nights. It is not uncommon for Elin to come across a girl or boy her own age traveling through, staying a while. If they are friendly, Vega follows them around to find out all the news she can, pestering them with questions. At night, by the fire, she tells all she has learned to Della and Elin, always curious, her mind hungry for more.

After a time Elin learns to distinguish these visitors. Local, recurring, often walking or riding. Others are travelers who come up over the rough country from riding the rails, eyes tired, clothes ragged, dusty from travel overland on foot. Once a woman comes asking for the midwife and Della goes, taking her black bag of supplies and a great heavy book. She asks Elin to come with her, says she could be of use.

As they drive to get to the laboring woman, over asphalt washed out and broken into potholes and dirt, Elin asks, "Della, why do you bring the book when you have your

Reader?" The Reader is a portable electronic device, charged by sunlight, plugged into the generator at night to keep its charge full.

Della answers simply, "Just in case. Sometimes devices fail. A paper book is what it is. And if I have a little light I can find what I need in its pages. I bring them both."

The child is born in a flood of panting, bellowing, and blood. But a child is born. The mother takes him to her naked breasts, her eyes exultant. It is the holiest thing Elin has ever encountered, this utter belonging. Thereafter she goes when a baby is to be born, and learns from Della how to midwife.

Late autumn and the biting odour of woodsmoke. Pumpkins lie like great intact geodes among the ornate ruin of dried vines and scattered humps of untilled clay that mark the garden's face. The girl spends some days burning thistles and wild mint in an old fire pit constructed from the abandoned metal rim of a tractor tire many worlds from its labor in fields long gone to fallow and weeds. The fire is aromatic with mint, the smoke a screen wavering, spirit-like, each summoning blown or scattered by the fickle wind, then shaping itself again. She does not see Della glance up the hill, or make a sign with her dark hands, muttering. Elin is rocking, staring into the fire with a particular quality of attention. She thrums like a plucked string tuned to the underworld and its lonely inhabitants.

The kitchen and hearth are crowded with produce, jars head-down on the counter. The damp breath of acrid steams inhabits the air space above the stove like a sour genie

released from captivity. The pickling crocks full. Larded meats down cellar. Cheeses in the milk house.

First frost. In the dark days before Solstice they stay near the fire, Della mending, patching, piecing strip quilts. Vega is squatting at a game she invented. She rattles locust seeds in her cupped hands. Sends them clattering over the boards as she rolls them like dice. Studies their patterning, discerning meaning.

Elin is sand-scrubbing a pot, scouring its surfaces until it gleams. In the firelight, her reflection distorted by the pot's roundness, she looks demonic. An angry goblin with her unsmiling mouth. She turns the pot, watching the face change shape. Now the forehead is spread like a ripe melon, eyes shrunk to slits. A slight rotation of her wrist. Mouth again, widened. She bares her teeth, gnashes them. The goblin gnashes its teeth, ferocious. Feral as any creature gone back to the wild.

When a log falls suddenly to pieces, throwing sparks, she jumps, looks to the door before she recognizes the sound. She looks at the room now fallen into a winter twilight. There is Vega, crouched at her game. Della rocks. In her lap the bunched cloth. In her fingers the needle, bright as a minnow, flashing in and out of the fabric, a rhythmic squeak each time her feet push the rocker back again.

"I'll be teaching you girls to read this winter." Della speaks without looking up from her work. The girls are looking at her. Then the bright needle stills. Della's dark eyes take them in.

"I'd like to learn, I think." Elin is shy as she answers. Vega nods, too.

"Good." Della stands, sets her sewing aside. Her back cracks as she stretches.

“It’s time you could read the mail.” Elin’s heart gives a great thump at the thought of news. “Now, let’s start supper.”

Elin saves her remembering for dark. Sometimes a memory will come like a faded snapshot, dim in the daylight. She’ll hold it in her mind, exploring the contours of it, how soft or solid it is, how weighted with emotion. Then she tucks it away to take out again later. Her father, dead of AV, her mother, her brother, and the days when she knew nothing of home except the three of them together, finding their way. She can’t afford to daydream, and memories are costly.

That winter she was thirteen. She read the mail. Her mother had entrusted letters to Della. The first was dated the week after she left. She’d made it to Denver, was heading south, hoping to make Pueblo. She never wrote much. Only six letters altogether. Sometimes the girl thinks she might go too. Set out in late spring when frost is mostly past and head west. But she is too young yet. There are things she must learn, and no one to tell her yet what they are.

Sometimes Della pulls out an old road atlas, edges gone soft, corners frayed or worn clean gone.

“Here is Nebraska. And this here is where we are.” Her brown finger is steady under the small star marking Lincoln. “And here’s Colorado. Denver here, the capital. I’ve heard it’s a big ole place. Folks from a place like that think there’s nothing but empty space between the big cities.” She pauses a moment. Then, “Here to Denver, though. It’s

a fair distance and then some to get that far. Travel isn't so easy these days as it used to be."

"What are the big cities?" Vega wanted to know.

"Out here? Well, girl, there are a few. Denver. Chicago. Minneapolis. St. Louis."

Della pointed at each in turn.

"How far is it from here to Denver?"

"Oh, Lord." Della rocked back in her chair. "You can't count the miles. It depends on how you go. It doesn't take too long on I-80. Maybe eight hours. But to get on the interstates you need official business. And a ride of some kind." She paused, thinking. "And they're all toll roads. So unless you're gonna hitch, you gotta have some money. Or a way of making some."

"Isn't there any other way to get anywhere?" Vega is not convinced.

"Well, other than the SpeedRail, or the interstate? You could fly."

Vega rolls her eyes. "I meant other roads or something."

"Oh." Della smiles at her. "There were other roads. Small state highways and such. But the government has long since stopped maintaining them. They're not easy to get around on anymore. And if you're caught out there, run out of fuel or water, you might find yourself some big trouble. There's all sorts of people wandering and roaming." She looks grave.

But Vega is still curious. "Well, so you could take a motorcycle. That way the holes aren't so important. I could drive around them."

"You could drive around them? You know how to drive?" Della's eyebrows rise.

"Who's been teaching you?"

Vega subsides. “No one. I don’t know how.” She sits up straighter, squares her shoulders. “But I’m gonna learn. I’m gonna learn *everything*.”

Now Elin speaks. “Can anyone ride the SpeedRail?”

“Well,” Della looks surprised, “I guess if you’ve got a ticket.”

Bitter February when all is still and sleeping. The roads lovely and untrod most days. Elin wakes in the night. She lies, wary, unmoving. Her blood thrums in her ears. No other sound but the night itself, the low voice of the wind in the eaves. The cold light of the moon has soaked through the window’s worn white curtains so that they seem lit from within, casting a glow on the old walls, their stains and patina smoothed over the bones of the house like a worn piece of leather, seamed into age, into tenderness. Elin knows now that this has become her home.

Somewhere down the road a dog begins to howl. Hours before dawn, the icy air carries news of the night train releasing its brakes. The tracks screech, the sound a call like the cry of a bird of prey falling like an arrow released. Unearthly. A portent of a long journey into darkness.

Now their three horses are restless in their corral, pacing the fenceline, bunching up, casting shadows on each other. Elin has risen, is watching from the window. She can see their brown coats catching the light as they go galloping suddenly away, heads tossing, flying manes silvered by the cold moon. Then Elin sees the first flicker of shadows and light, something moving south of the pasture, coming up out of the gully where the creek runs subdued beneath its jacket of ice. There are three of them. Three

shadows misshapen by bundles on their backs that rise up over their heads so that they look taller than humanly possible, grotesque block heads, bulging torsos.

They are too far yet to detect her, but still she moves silently through the house to each of the doors. Checks the locks. Turns the handles to test them. Last of all the front door.

“That’s not the way to stop them, child.”

Now she sees Della rocking by the banked fire.

Elin does not try to keep the fear from her voice. “They are coming here. They’ll be across the pasture in a minute.”

The rocker squeaks its rhythm on the floor. “They are welcome.”

At this, Elin does not speak. She stands trembling.

“Come here if you like. I will hold you.” There is tenderness in Della’s voice.

For a moment Elin stands, fists clenched. Then she comes through the darkness, sits cross-legged by the fire. Della’s hand on her head.

She says, “They will not come to the house.”

“What do they want?” Elin thinks of the monster-shadows she saw coming nearer to their home out of the icy night.

“Food. Rest. Warmth. I put some food out in the hay barn. Most of them that come are gone by morning. Just like always.”

In the smoky darkness there is nothing to watch but the sullen coals or the dark door. But some memory sifts up from the silt of her mind, stirred to rising by Della’s remarks.

“I have done that.” Now Elin remembers.

Della's toes in her felted house shoes rise and lower as she rocks as if she is pumping a pedal, or working a treadle sewing machine. She does not speak.

"I've been here before. With my mother. I was a little child."

This time, an answer. "Yes."

"Who are you, then? How does my mama know you?"

"I am no one, child. The same as every woman who came before me. I leave signs for travelers so they know they can come. Your mama knows how to read the signs. And some I help 'cause I know they need helping. Some 'cause God tells me to. Some 'cause it's safer than not."

"Who are they?"

"That I can't say." The room is steadied with Della's rocking as she considers. "Most roadies don't travel in the snow."

The child shivers as if a cold draught had slipped over her shoulders. Begins to rise. "Can I put another log on the fire?"

"Best not."

She is trembling again. Scoots nearer the rocker.

For a long moment the quiet clatter of the coals is the only sound. Surely the travelers are already come. Are in the barn eating the meal Della left there. They will not come to the door here. Will not disturb the house on this night of stillness, of ice and moonshadow.

"What others, Della? What other kinds of travelers in winter?"

"Oh, could be some crazed kids from one of the cities looking for some kind of adventure out here in the borderlands. Those kids don't know danger. Ain't never met

any yet their money couldn't get 'em out of. Or I guess it could be Collectors, though it isn't likely. If so, they'll be up to the house sooner or later." There is something in Della's tone, a subtle hardening, a resolve.

"Collectors? Of what?"

"Strays. Kids lost or orphaned or unlooked after."

Now Elin is up, gone to the window. This is what she sees: the hay barn is dark as always. Its door closed.

"Calm yourself child. It isn't likely they're Collectors. Besides," that hardness again, "there's nothing here they're looking for."

"Why children, Della? What do they do with them? I can't see any sign of them now. Do you think they're in the barn?"

"They ought to be by now, I'd think." Della comes now, looks from the window herself. "Collectors mostly move around in trucks. These folks came by rail. See—the horses have settled. The dogs are quiet. They're gonna stay the night. Most likely they'll be gone by morning. Take some tea with me, child."

Elin sits at the old table until Della has drawn steaming water from the kettle, has doled the tincture by dropperfuls. Then back to the hearth, the faded quilt on the rocker, her hands rounded on the warm sides of the old mug.

"It's bitter."

"Drink it all, child."

Moments pass. She is watching the welter of fire coals. Her eyes won't stay open.

Still—"Why do they collect children, Della? Where are they from? Where are they going? What do they want with children?" Her words begin to slur.

She does not remember Della's taking the cup or the slow stagger up the stairs to bed. When she wakes she remembers nothing, feels only uneasy without reason, until she sees the old strip quilt from the back of the rocker adding another layer of warmth to her bed.

Chore time and Vega feeds the goats. Stamps to the chicken house, her braids blooming above scarf and head wrap, boots complaining on the snow-slick paths, pail swinging.

"Might as well get yours done, too. Sooner started, sooner finished." Della speaks from the stove where she's stirring oatmeal.

"Do you think those men are gone?"

"They're gone."

Elin can see no signs of them, same as in the night. "Where to? Which way?"

"Back down the gully, child. I s'pose to wait for another train. Lord, girl. All kinds of folk come to the place. Why you gettin' spooked by these?"

But Elin cannot say.

She approaches the barn, feeds the horses, casting her eyes everywhere looking for she knows not what. A rustle and thud behind her and she spins, arms flung up. One of the barn cats, indifferent, stalks from the hay where her youngest litter sleeps.

A shadow at the door. It is Vega, careful with her burden of eggs nesting in the bucket.

"What's wrong?"

“Nothing. Choring.”

There is a silence. Then, “Have you checked the cats’ water yet?”

“No.”

They work in silence. Elin is comforted.

A late afternoon burdened with snow. The clouds have sunk nearer the earth. Here and there in the graying light a dry flake buffeted by the wind. As if compelled, Elin rises from the fireside, goes to the porch where she stands chin tilted slightly up like a dog catching a scent, then slips again down the path grown treacherous with January slicks and black ice. Here is the barn door, the grooved boards scoured and bare, fissured with lost splinters. Through a warped join she sees some ghost of light within. Peers closer. Heaves the door open in a sudden spasm of fear. It is nothing. A scrap of light orphaned from the snow-laden clouds.

A barn owl biding on a shadowed rafter turns its head to see the girl standing on the threshold. With unblinking eyes it contemplates her when she steps into the shadows within. She squats to examine footmarks and scufflings in the hay scatter and dust. They’d left no litter. She crosses to a lopsided window, two panes patched with grease paper and two bleared with dirt and condensation like the eyes of the very old. Della’s knapsack hangs slack on a crooked nail. She takes it with her as she goes. There, flicked carelessly into a bank of snow by the door, several cigarette butts nesting in small hollows where for a moment the snow went soft in their heat.

Squatting At The Gates Rubber Factory

Someone was playing *Welcome to Jamrock*. The sound of it—a beat, a voice, moved through the rooms, reverberating on the walls the way a stone drops into water, stirring the stagnant air, easing the ache. It made ghostly ripples of sound that circled lazily through the ruined rooms, undulating into one another, a throbbing of summer night sound. It washed over us, united those of us who'd already arrived, who lay in untidy groups trying to forget whatever shit we'd gotten through to make it back here. This was our nirvana. Everybody knew the factory was contaminated. But who the fuck cared about the poison? Everyone's gonna die sometime. I took a long hit, drawing deeply through the smoke of the joint. I got the city air, too, scented as it was with the acrid residue of pollution.

I sat over by the big windows watching the light change. There was a heavy, bright strain of light going lazy west, building into a golden flood as it sank behind the Rockies. Some of the windows had been broken out. Their bare spaces made a kind of pattern I sometimes tried to decipher. The glass shards winked or made shattered rainbows on the concrete floor. The windows that were still intact were veiled in grime so that the light was thickened with dust, falling in slabs clouded blue or green. Even the shadows were fogged, softened at sunset into grayscale by the polluted air.

I saw a bird lying there in a shaft of light. It was in the process of dying. One of its wings was bent at a bad angle, and it was lying with its head in the dirt and glass and burnt out roaches. It hadn't been there before today. I saw it blink, but it didn't move. I couldn't see it breathing. Maybe I wasn't close enough. From here it looked like a robin.

I leaned back, keeping an eye on the bird. The music throbbed around me, and I took another hit. Nothing else to do. I'd left Marisa lying on the roof, eyes closed, absorbing the sun. Her skin was so golden that I imagined it would be like fucking a goddess. I didn't know when she'd gotten here. Maybe she'd been here all day. Sometimes I thought she never left. She was a big beauty, with heavy curves and lips that could make me beg. She didn't need to talk much, which I liked, and she knew when to stop talking. She didn't care if I left. Never asked how long I'd be gone. When I came back, there she was, and we picked up again. Simple. And the way she smiled at me—I needed it. I came back here now because Marisa was here. She'd made herself a little love nest in me. Sometimes I wondered if I'd ever get over wanting her.

It used to be that I liked a different kind of woman. The kind that was sexy thin and knew she could have her pick. I'd make her pick me. And then after a few months I'd get restless and take off for god knows where. I'd always tell her—whoever she was—that it was the gig. Take it or leave it. I didn't care. I played my bass in a band or two, which meant I didn't have much to define my days. I played when I got bored, or was broke. I'd take any job that'd get me out of town. After a while, I gave up my place. No point in paying rent when I was hardly ever there.

A buddy let me crash with him when I was in Denver. He was big into urban exploration—urbex, for the initiated. We used to get into some scary shit roaming around the city. He liked to go after dark, getting into old schools, abandoned military installations, underground drain systems. Gates was a favorite. It was a big sprawling complex of cement and glass, and inside was a warren of rooms, corridors, manufacturing equipment, not to mention all the shit inside the walls and underground that we could get

into. Once, my mom mentioned that back in the day, my grandpa had worked there, before he and grandma went back to farming. The factory turned out rubber tires or something. Then in the early 90's the company stopped manufacturing at the plant, and since then it's been a mark for squatters, crackheads, and urban explorers.

Nearby on South Broadway was a strip of bookshops, tattoo parlors, pawn shops, gas stations, and more. We'd wait until there was a lull in traffic on Broadway and then sneak in. He liked to take photos and post them on urbex websites, but I just liked to wander. We'd keep going until we found a lonely corner somewhere, skipping the squatters and the shooters, an isolated spot where we could smoke some weed.

And then he'd gotten laid off from his job and had to move out. When he lost his place, we came up with this shit-for-brains plan to camp in the rubber factory. We'd been enough times, knew it well enough. Gates was a big place, and most people kept to the same spots. We thought we could make camp away from the rest of the usual uglies. Anyway, it seemed like a good idea at the time. So we did it. We moved in.

Didn't take much with us. We left most of it in the basement of his parents' place. We'd been there a couple of weeks before he moved back in with his parents. But I couldn't leave. Something kept me there. I don't know what. Maybe the anonymity, or the risk of being found. Maybe it was the way the wind sounded when it blew through the teeth of broken windows. It was like being haunted. I thought I'd work on my great American novel, try out some new songs. I didn't need much to get by.

Mom and Dad live around Denver, too. They'd divorced when I was in junior high, but they'd both stuck around the area. I used to go visit them more, but nowadays I kind of just hung around. I left sometimes, I guess, heading out to go see something new.

Maybe soon I'd have to get a job. But I always came back. Time passed, or didn't. I tried out new sounds on my bass. I was in the moment.

After a while the music stopped. The sounds of conversation faded into whispers that spun like webs above us. It was a big room, leading to other rooms. An emptiness, filled with moon and darkness. I imagined the ghosts of conversations gone by. They flitted in the corners with the spiders and the shadows. Sometimes there'd be a burst of laughter, or someone's voice would rise above the rest, making a yammering, but mostly the dark came on with its mood descending into quiet. We all faded into darkness, too. I began to forget everything, leaning into the night.

It must have been hours later when I opened my eyes. It was nearing the full moon, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that some crazy urbex die-hards were infiltrating our space. They came on slowly, their boots loud in the silence, laughing and talking as they came, their flashlights sending shadows skittering. They probably thought they were alone. God knows how long they'd been in the factory to be all the way back here.

They filed into the room, their group narrowed into a procession by the hallway. One came over by the windows and stood for a minute looking. I saw him stoop by the robin. It was very still. He nudged it with the toe of his boot. Its eyes were open, and white in the glare of the moon. The man knelt to get a closer look.

One of his buddies called to him. He turned, his headlamp illuminating me where I lay. I stood up, facing him, waiting for what he was gonna say. But he said nothing. He looked right through me. In that moment I remembered all the things I had forgotten. All the things I couldn't hold onto anymore. I looked behind me at the wall where I made no

shadow. It was agony. It was what I imagined being burned would feel like. A terrible heat so intense I couldn't tell if it was hot or cold. I just wanted it to stop. And then he stood up. I lay back against the wall, staring at him. Not that it mattered. He rejoined his buddies and they made their way out, moving on.

Haunting the Familiar

A Chapbook of Poems

Horses

The neighbor's horses idle
under the roof
of their three-sided shelter,
looking out at the rain.

Sometimes
one or another
will fade into the shadows
in the corner, maybe
to eat, or drink.

Still, the others stand,
blowing out their warm
breaths. Rain rattles
on the metal roof.

Their hoof prints
in the corral
open gray eyes to the sky,
and wink each time
another drop falls in.

Driving Through Kansas in Spring

An abandoned homestead house
slumps near the highway,
leaning toward the shadowed hollow

where the hills fold to meet one another,
where the sometime creek
is beginning to seep.

Its faded walls gap, giving glimpses
of someone's newly plowed field
on the hill beyond.

The shadows of geese migrate
soft and silent over the barn roof, long ago
buckled, its ridgepole rotted.

Faded shingles curl, lifting
like the heads of dogs
sniffing the damp spring wind.

In the Shadow of the Medical Center

He emerges from the door first, pushing
his oxygen tank at his side. It rides
on a little contraption with a long
metal handle, like the leash for a dog.
They look as if they are used
to taking these walks together,
he, ambling and shambling
in orthopedic shoes, the traveling tank
bumping over the cracks first,
warning of hazards ahead.

His wife waddles behind.
She quickly outpaces him in her own
practical shoes, and then, just before
the crosswalk, she turns her gray head
and waits. She offers him her hand,
and a smile. They step out into the sun,
swinging their clasped hands between them,
and their little dog trots along beside.

Killing Time

In August, I pass him
on our country road.
He is walking his pasture fence
in his pressed jeans, a tucked
plaid shirt, a blue cap
with the bill riding low,
white hair neat on his neck.

No horse in the pasture these days
to switch her tail at flies,
or bend her head to graze,
or raise it again
to keep her eyes on him.

But old habits die hard.
He measures the steps
in his dusty boots, moving slow,
and pausing to pull thistles
and mustard, tossing them
to the side of the ditch as he goes.

Telling Home

Our hearts are rooted things,
looking for a bit of earth to cling to.
We want to say *home* to a place,
dust to dust, that old familiar.

Quiet, the winter night descends
by cold degrees outside our windows,
afternoon geese gone from the pond.
Deer flicker at the edge of trees.

Last before dusk the sunset flares,
licks the cold trees to candles.
They hold out their shadows to us,

long splinters of darkness
etched black from some deeper fire,
telling of longing—
the burdens of earth we call sorrow.

The sun sets its old fires
on the snow-gapped pasture,
and our trees speak shadows, telling *home*.

Ward of the State

The boy is maybe twelve,
small for his age, and he looks
for a long moment
at the group home
before bending to grip the black
plastic bag between his feet.
He follows a man he's just met
up the porch steps. The house
is weekday quiet. A Christmas tree
blinks in one of the windows.

Up the stairs, a woman shows him
to his room, points to the bed
that will be his. He places
his bag there, and slowly folds his clothes
into the drawers she shows him.

When she has gone,
he looks around the room.
Two swaybacked single beds,
two dressers, two desks.
Faded curtains at the window.
The grainy shadows of dusk sifting up
from the corners of the room.

He sees the van return,
pull up to the curb. He counts
eleven boys, some heads down, some
sullen, some laughing, clowning around.
His knuckles are white on his fists. Now
he hears the sound of them coming up the stairs.

Nana

This old Cherokee woman never imagined
nothing. Left the Rez and Oklahoma
to marry a butcher at fifteen,
spent her years in a plain brown house
in a no-account town on the Llano Estacado
and slowly forgot her native tongue.

When the children were gone
to cotton farming, preaching, speculating,
soldiering, she stayed on. She picked pecans
and warm apricots from her crooked trees,
raised her garden, fed the feral cats,
and sat, between visitors, silent most days.

Hers was the gospel of hunger,
of hospitality. She never turned away a soul.
She kept them all around her—mother, brothers,
cousins, friends, husband, daughters—the dead
and buried, too. Everyone's hungry for something.

She fed us just for the pleasure of fullness,
of her table crowded with coffee and pie, with stories,
and sorrow, and always with laughter,
so that the ghosts that fed at her table
could have something to eat long after we were gone.

November Burial, Ralls Texas

Only a few of us stay in the wind to watch
the men turn the winch and lower the coffin
into the grave. The Mack truck waits
off to the side with its load of dirt.

At the edge of the cemetery, cotton fields begin.
The brown stems bristle in obedient rows.
Farmers are stripping cotton for miles around.
Wandering boles settle the roadsides, roam
white among the gravestones.

We are quiet as the crew disassembles
the clanging metal frame, placing its parts
aside on the dry grass. Someone tells how
often at dawn they've seen half a dozen
deer come down off the caprock
to take fresh flowers off the graves.

A Flock of Sparrows

Where are they going?
See how they rise,
their quick wings
climbing the air
with a sound like shoes
clattering on stairs.

When they return, each
pauses a moment
before swinging down
the last step
onto the ground.

Walking a Gravel Road, First Snow

Out of the wind-stripped autumn
thickets of wild plum and lilac,
a deer leaps down onto the road
and stops to look at us.

Fine flakes come gently, settle softly,
as if heaven, blind with clouds,
is feeling each branch, each withered leaf,
each blade of grass, flake by patient flake
taking the measure of this place.

Her coat is shaggy with winter growth.
As she moves to go, each hoof
flings a pat of snow that fragments
in the air, dusting the prints she's leaving there.

She crosses the corner of the stubble field,
goes swift down the gully, over
the leaning grasses, and is gone
among the trees, taking her wildness,
leaving a silence deeper than the snow.

Wheelbarrow in January

Out by the woodpile, the gold wheelbarrow
rests, tapered handles pointing east,
their wood grain grooved to shadows
by old weathers. Salvaged near a thicket
of wild plums, from a barbed wire corner
of this lot, going to rot among stumps
and brush, it now holds in its belly,
a fretwork of rust climbing its sides,
one stick of bark-lapped cedar wood
and an orphaned remnant of last night's snow,
more air than water, fragile interstices
swollen with lilac light from the shrouded dawn
sky, with brooding violet shadows.

Geese

All winter these same geese, though sometimes two, sometimes three, or five, fly low over these acres, moving from field to pond, their wings working in certain, even rhythms, the way I imagine my great grandmother and her sisters used to work their needles, evenly stitching through the layers of quilt top, batting, and back. Just so, the geese go, their wingtips rising and falling, businesslike, over the translucent fabric of sky, honking in the conversational way those sisters used to keep up with the news, steady at their work through all the seasons of our family weather.

Coyote

Midwinter, the coyote
carries hunger in his legs,
shingled with burrs,
with mud-matted fur,

in his tracks
that cross
and cross again
old snow, the frozen creek,

hunger in the way
he prowls the banks.
He sniffs, intent,
at the silent dam.

For now, he fills the empty
sack of his belly
with the tangled scents
of dark, of must, and dung.

The wind whines
over the creek. The rest
is silence, attention

sharp as a blade,
scraped clean
with each pass of the coyote,
each silence between.

Sprouting Grass Moon

It is the kind of soft April night when we are all stilled into sleep
by the soprano song of the moon—
winds doze in the gully darkness of the creek bed,
and birds are brooding chicks in their nest.

But while I am lying near the open window,
thinking of sleep, I can see the moon-bright slope
of that meadow greening with new grass
and I imagine one of the Muses
sitting with her back against a wild plum tree,
painting in watercolor, a plein air study of a larger work—a series
she calls *Spring*. She moves her favorite flat brush quickly,
laying down Quin Gold and stronger Indigo
in a series of soft washes that define the shaggy back
of this high ridge. She paints the edge of the meadow slope
in drybrush strokes—they add sparkle, and tell of the moon's meridian.

With a sharpened stick she scrapes trees, shadows of deep gray brown,
then adds a little Burnt Sienna to her brush and spatters
small calligraphic dots to translate the stubble of new buds
in that young maple by the gnarled rail fence.
Finally, she paints the angular roofs of house and shed—
bleached white, defined mostly by the wash of a Prussian Blue sky
sprinkled with fine salt, for stars, and then, in the deep shadows
of our west wall, she glazes a small rectangle for the angled reflection
of moonlit glass in our open window, and then next to it another—
a dark vertical shape in Payne's Gray—for the gap
where we lie sleeping. She uses the tissue wadded in her hand
to blot the darkness—a hint of a pillow the only evidence we are here.

Visiting My Grandparents

Those bright summers unfold
in sketches of green and gold,
bordered with irrigated fields
smudged with dust from the gravel road.

I open them easy and slow,
smoothing their wrinkles, seeing again
the light of long afternoons sprawled out
in the grass, ripening the berries,
letting Grandma's garden grow.

Here are the ways we cousins played,
inventing badminton rules, chasing the volleyball,
begrudging turns on the tire swing,
practicing our aim with water balloons.

Here, from a vantage point of shade
I watch my uncles measure
their skill at horseshoes against Grandpa,
who was almost unbeatable.

Probably they'd tell it differently,
but for me, I can still hear
their sometimes good-natured jeers,
the squeaky lid on a cooler of cold beers.

Each clink against the stake, each thud
of a horseshoe in the sand
seemed to say *We're catching up to you, Dad.*
And here is my grandpa, tall and thin,
hand resting on his hip, VFW cap
shielding his eyes, which always looked
a little sad. Even his silence seemed to speak
to his sons. *Goddammit. I know you are.*

Preparing for Departure

Grandma's footsteps creak on the kitchen floor,
where she packs me a sandwich for the road,
where our cereal bowls and grapefruit spoons
rest, wet and gleaming, on the dishtowel,
like shells washed up.

I change the sheets, make the bed, place each
patchwork pillow, with pattern names
like Dresden Plate, Pinwheel, Reverse Star, just so.
And now it's time to load.

Down the porch steps, the neat cement walk,
past the bed of landscape rocks and driftwood,
I stow my bag in the cab, while Grandpa
runs his rag down the dipstick, checking again
before he tucks the rag in his back pocket
and latches the hood. The truck rocks a little,
like a boat at a dock, in the wake of my leaving.

A River Tramp in Summer

Waking early, hearing the song of birds,
I take my walking-stick and set out through the dawning green,

forest river fringed with fern and moss,
mushroom-cure shingling the shins of trees.

The sun wheels down the waters. Running high,
froth and foam bridging the banks,

the river pours its clear song over the speckled harmonies
of stones. Far down the valley, dusty roads lead

to dust, the clatter of streets too loud for morning-song silence.
But here, shadows sip slowly the green wine light

under the trees. They lie in the leaves, telling tales of heaven
in tatters around the golden river fire.

With Thanks

The Christmas I was eight, the gift
I most wanted to receive was a real
Cabbage Patch doll, with a plastic face,
a wig of soft plastic hair, and an official
birth certificate with her name already on it.

Instead, watched by my smiling Grandma,
I opened her gift and found a knock off—
a soft-faced homemade doll with yarn for hair
which I knew Grandma had sewn herself.

And though I laid it unloved
among its wrapping paper after I smiled
and held it for the photo, and though
I no longer know where that doll has gone,
Grandma, I want you to know
I receive her now, with thanks.

She Never Liked To Sew

Unlike her brothers
who learned instead
from dad
how to mend
a gutter's seam,
to stitch a roof
with pitch
and shingles,
she learned it
from her mother.

And, raising me,
sewed only
for utility,
but still was
teaching the way
her parents taught
how to pattern a life
and pin it together
one stitch at a time.

The Apple Tree

There is something in the quality of sound
when my neighbor throws back
the old apples, the ones that have fallen over
or rolled under his fence. The way they land
with a thud, or thwack, or thump like the stomp
of a boot to the earth, already littered with damp
apple flesh, creamy or bruised, the ripe skin
splitting, oozing a perfume of rot.

And wire and posts are not enough
to hold back the aging tree, its branches
leaning to see what he might be doing, inquisitive
as any maiden aunt with her apron full, who,
upon hearing a noise, or not, in these hot September
afternoons, leans over the fence to see what
might possibly be happening anywhere but here.

December Dark

In the night a great wind
moves through the sleeping trees,
sweeps over the bowing
grasses, the hayed hills.

Over bare fields
with their furrowed clods,
a cold wind moves, cleans out
the stables of the year.

It tangles clouds
over the moon and stars,
stirs the broken chimes,
washes through the pines.

There go the muds of spring,
the summer green,
the autumn chaff and seeds
that cling in shadowed corners.

And heaven's great horses,
set loose on the pastured plains,
gallop and roll, thundering
through the winter dark.

Divination in Winter

Near the pasture fence after snow,
we find the curled form of a possum,
matted fur bloody with entrails,
eyes closed. What art do we need
to divine these quiet bones?
Or the augury of two geese
in flight from field to field,
wing beats meeting on the down strokes?

On a winter walk, the trees are runes
scratched against a parchment sky,
a vapor of clouds forgotten at the edges,
horizon a browned seam
worn with fallow fields, barren trees,
the distances ebbing into rumors
of color or meaning.

We squint against the light,
the snow a cipher, its scalded surface
pocked with shadows of the fox's nocturne,
his tracks symmetrical past the garden,
scouting the flight of crows,
an omen unfavorable
to some nameless thing.

Barista

Like the sea, she is mostly sound
behind the half-wall—
clink and rattle of dishes,
a silvered whoosh of water.
Her sleeve is just a flash of green,
blind fingers reaching for
the pitcher and plate on the top shelf.

Each object has a place, and she
is curator and keeper of the broom.
She pulls it like an oar
through the ordered waters
as if she's paddling a canoe.

But the more I watch her,
the more I think this stony niche
is a crusted fragment on a coral reef
and she like a swift eel, small,
tidying her little piece of real estate
on the live rock of this shop
barnacled with books in cragged nooks.
The fliers cling like algae.
Her shelves bristle with jars of syrup,
spiny as urchins. And when the current
of commerce settles its sediment,
this quick eel stirs it up, sweeps it away
beneath the tidal flow of night and music.

By The Pasture Fence

Something has made itself a bedded place,
maybe a fox or coyote, finding its way
from field or gully wanderings.

It is an untidy bowl, trampled down
behind the tall grasses
the autumn mowers missed.

I imagine him wintering nights here, folded
to rest, his tail curled up to his front paws,
tucked in a thicket of wild plum trees,
their tangled crowns making
a shelter from the wind.

Enjoying the Quiet

Decades ago she got used to
the kitchen's sloping floor,
always tilting her guests
slightly toward the door,
where she sits now,
with her second cup of coffee
steaming up into late morning light,
no one to cook for,
no hurry to finish.

Around the corner
are the narrow stairs,
crooked as the index finger
on her husband's right hand,
both done with the same hammer
the winter the third baby was due,
and which now only creak
when she goes up each week
disturbing the air
to dust the quiet rooms.

There's the summer porch
with its sunny corner where the dingo
whelped her litters, the screen door
threshold once as scuffed and dusty
as the ranch hands who used to sit
around her table, bowing
their heads to the formica
before each meal, leaning
in the direction of their work.

Here is the small desk, neat
as the corners of her bed, where
she sits twice a month,
working up the bills, filling in
the ledger's columns
in a hand she likes to think
is as steady as always.

The loneliest thing in the house
these days is the dinner bell.
And the telephone isn't much
of a talker, either.

Taking Flight

Out in the winter fields
the geese gather, wings folded,
feathers dun, dark heads bending
among the furrows fringed with fire
from the setting sun.

Then two take flight, wings
flapping, feet pounding earth,
paddling air, necks straining
for the sky, becoming unison,
and now they fly,

their rounded white bellies,
reflecting the light, gold and rose,
like a lit lantern each holds
between those dark
wings beating, so that

they seem to flicker,
dark and bright, so that
they fly like two lights
kindled in the fires of heaven,
to greet the coming of the night.

Homesteading in the Country of Marriage

Like our mothers and fathers before us,
we packed our wagon with needful things:
next to the painted blue trunk,
its brass buckles gleaming,
we fitted my mother's sewing machine,
cast iron green, mute as a sleeping bird
that waits for the light to sing.
Your father's ordered universe
in the oiled hammer and shovel
we stowed beneath the seat.

We started when we were young,
set out easy on a high tide of laughter,
rolled on confident wheels over the terrain,
using instinct and our own good sense
to follow the trail over the mountains,
seeking the blue distance,
sniffing for the sea beyond.
We survived on our heat through the winters,
hunkered down, wise animals,
too swift for predators.

Now we know better—how they come
for the young, how sickness will lay
its hot paw on a flushed cheek, the cough
that scrapes us out of sleep. Now we know
the prayers of our parents, through hail, and fevers,
and want. We have been thirsty and hungry
for the sake of our children.

For them we settle down to claim
a plot of wild. We plant trees,
and a garden. Out of the blue trunk I bring
my mother's lace for the table.
We light the candles.
We give thanks for the light,
finally only as wise as the ones before us.

The Neighbor's Horse

God knows why he kept that horse—
a racer with a healed break
in his leg. He moved well in the corral
but would never race again.

The old man would swear
at him, call him names, bluster

and swagger if he saw us in our yard
when he went out morning or evening
to feed him. But he always took his time,
stooping to fetch the hay into the feeder,
waiting to see the horse tug a mouthful.

Sometimes he'd run his hand
over that long brown flank, crusted
with mud. And if he forgot our windows,
he might stand, looking over his land, while
the horse leaned over his shoulder, looking too.

Yesterday, the neighbor's hired man
backed a pickup into the pasture
and, taking his time, he hitched the trailer.
The neighbor led up the horse from the corral
and they loaded him, his head
nodding with each step.

The truck pulled slowly
through the grassy gate,
gaining speed down our gravel road.
My children watched them
until they were gone.

Making A Doll

I sat in my chair through the budding spring
taking spare moments of quiet,
reading the instructions again each time.
First there was the head, which had to be stuffed

and shaped to look like a head
(you think you know what this must be, until you try to do it).
And then the limbs cut from the pattern, and sewn,
the carded wool tucked in with a chopstick.

I held the feet while I made them, and the hands I tried
to make firm enough, so that when she held her dolly's hand
it would feel comforting, solid as she. After I'd sewn the doll together
she lay faceless, waiting for me to gather the courage
to stitch her a pair of eyes—blue, like my daughter—

who had by now spent quiet hours of her own
through the flush of summer afternoons, standing next to my chair
and watching these scraps of soft fabric fall from my scissors,
or pulling small bits of wool from the cloud of gold on the cabinet.

But for the eyes, I wanted to be alone. The needle is long—
almost six inches—and the instructions said plainly
to push it through the head from the back, to aim
for the small ink dots I'd made to mark where the eyes belonged.

I missed at first, feeling a bit like a new surgeon might,
and wishing I could ask my grandma her advice.
And then, I tried again. I sewed the eyes,
making vertical stitches increase and decrease until they were finished,

and then the pink mouth, which was easier still.
When I got up from the chair, I saw that Jude had joined me.
How long she'd been there I couldn't say, but she went to the cabinet
where the doll lay, and examined her carefully, saying nothing.
When she thought I wasn't looking, in the silence
she picked her up and they looked at each other.

Marjorie

Her last brother died last week,
failing slowly in the nursing home,
too used to surviving
to know how to die.

And she, who remembers
him newborn, mewling,
the way she carried him
until he grew enough
to cast a restless shadow
on the red dirt of the road,

she, who remembers
helping him go for water,
settling the yoke on his small shoulders,
settling the buckets in his small hands,

she, who remembers,
swinging his full sack of cotton
onto her shoulders at the end of the row
where he dragged it and left it lie
and went to rest in the shade,

she, too old to travel
for the funeral,
instead carries her memories
along the shaded paths
of the cemetery, unhurried,
going to tell her husband the news.

Summer Mowing

He has transformed
his Tonka dump truck
into a push mower, using

lumber scraps and duct tape
to construct a handle
on the front end of the dump box.

One brave screw
holds the makeshift
contraption together.

All summer they outline
the edges of these acres,
first Daddy, and then,

behind him
this small echo, each
dodging the same stumps,

pausing to slap a mosquito,
or rest in the shade,
before once again pacing

out into the light,
where first one,
and then the other,

leans forward to guide the mowers
along the bright edges
of this familiar world.

Fossil Digging, Green River Formation

Wear jeans when you come,
and closed-toe shoes. Might want
to bring a hat, and some water.
Head west out of town, five miles
or so, on the only road—a highway
down the middle of the valley.
This country is mostly sky.

Turn south when you see the house.
It's a modified A-frame at the base
of the hill. There'll be a green pickup
parked there. You'll see the road,
unmarked. Since it's rained,
the dust won't rise much, but watch out
for potholes and rocks, and remember
to take the left fork past the gravesite.
Just come on up to the house.

The quarry's a hundred yards up the side
of the ridge. He'll take you up in the truck,
over the busted-out trail to the ledge,
flat as the fossils he digs, the whole space
littered with broken shadows,
fragments of ancient fish and plants,
dumps of limestone and shale.

He's got a stack of stones waiting for you—
big and small lined up
like books on this shelf of stone,
their pages fragile layers a thousand years thick,
read only with a rock pick, a wedge,
and a patient eye. You have four hours
until the glare of the sun,
and the heat coming off the bare stones
drives you all into town.

When you need to rest, sit down, look around.
The ancient sea bed on which you stand
is a wide shallow valley, buttes undulating
in waves as far as your eye can see,
the ridges seamed in darkness,
lined with old horizons.

Seventeen Years After Her Divorce

Now in my own dark house,
with all the ghosts seeping out
of my heart's half-light, I wonder
if I have any cucumbers to slice into coins
for my swollen eyes, and am suddenly
stunned with a childish memory: how often
I would wake in the morning to find my mother,
lying on the couch, her hand at her temple,
cucumber slices on her eyes.
How she would smile, and joke
about missing her beauty rest, and I
never wondered about this until now.

For the Librarian Who Lectured My Children for Running in the Library

It was only a few steps, I think to myself
 as your eyes harden into intention, coming
 heavy around the desk, quickly, as though
 your words cannot wait to find voice. I want
 to defend them—defend myself—explain

that I don't allow my children to run
 in the library, wish (vainly) that I'd noticed
 it sooner, rather than finishing my query
 with this other distracted librarian.
 But I say nothing. I tell myself it is probably

good for them to be chastised by a librarian,
 a rite of passage or something. And so
 I only rest my arm lightly on my son's
 small shoulders as he shrinks back against me.
 And while you are leaning over him, your head

casting a shadow on the stuffed raccoon
 he clutches against his chest, I find myself
 musing about you. Maybe you were
 one of those children who wanted to believe
 in fairy tales, who daydreamed of being the hero

avored by Fortune, or the heroine
 upon whom the gods smile. Now
 the only fairy tale you believe in
 is the one about the child who never runs
 or stomps in the library,

who looks at a person when they are being spoken to,
 who pretends not to feel the blade of your smile.
 The child who says *Yes, Ma'am* when you lean in,
 so close they can smell lunch on your breath,
 to ask, *Now do you understand why we don't run in the library?*

And I wonder if I should tell you
 not to give up your old dreams
 of someday belonging in a fairy tale,
 because I am writing you into one right now.

Digging Clams

Among the snags of shells and stones,
screaming gulls, seaweed's bones,
where the waves draw back
their quiet tongues, we squat
on the dark tidal sand.

We watch the shingled strand
for a percolating crinkle,
a siphon opening to the sky,
where a little clam, shy, is buried
but not dead.

And when we've dug it up, and held
the ridged shell, stroked the glinting
armor, layered luminous as pearl,
and peered inside the dark fissure
wondering

we set it back into the slack hole, already
soft with the seeping sand,
and watch it wait to be buried again,
rocking, rocking down into the dark
to sip the sea.

Neighbor

You spent the morning gathering
leaves, raking them slowly
into piles, sorting out small sticks
into stacks. You collected black walnuts
in their half-hardened husks, and
hedge apples whose warty faces
will wrinkle all winter long
on your pantry shelves, warning
spiders away.

And now, having rolled the garbage can
to rest next to your garage, and left
the bucket of walnuts by our tree,
you sit, still silent,
among the pots of drying geraniums
and the tangle of tomato cages
under your eaves.

And that unfenced slope between us
which you swept clean, has collected
my two children, lying on their backs
and watching the coppery broom
of the oak tree sweep the clouds
across the sky.

Dusk

The neighbor is going out
to feed his horses.

His gate clangs like the bells
of evening,

calling us to cease doing,
to rest in being.

A bat forages the invisible,
sure as flame,

and geese scull the soft gulfs
of air beyond the ridge,

gain the oozing fringe
of the spring pond for rest.

I watch the long light
over the pasture, listen

to blue cricket songs, and the soft nicker
of horses in the dusk.