

WEDDING NIGHT REVELATION: A COLLECTION
OF POEMS WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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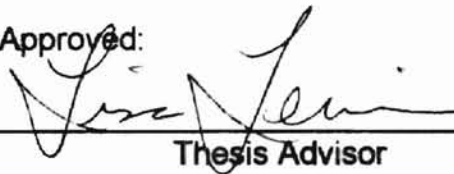
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Introduction

"...It's the truth even if it didn't happen."—Ken Kesey, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

At the age of three I began telling stories about the Little Green Mouse, an imaginary friend I invented to be my scapegoat. If a piece of German chocolate cake was missing in the morning, the Little Green Mouse ate it. If I spilled a glass of pop, the Little Green Mouse took the blame. My mother and her friends laughing at the stories I made up involving the mouse motivated to invent more. I write poetry today much for the same reasons I told stories as a toddler—to entertain myself as well as to amuse others. Honesty was not nearly as important to me then or now as being interesting or poetic. Yet the illusion of pure honesty is a priority in my writing.

As I grew older I realized that instead of being called a storyteller I was being labeled a liar, with all of its nasty connotations, because of my antics. From early adolescence on, I learned that to abandon the imagination and root oneself in factual reality was more socially acceptable. I wrote short stories and poetry only when asked to in high school and chose to study more pragmatic subjects like trigonometry and zoology. Even though I was encouraged by teachers and friends to explore less objective fields, I felt choosing to do so

would be an unsafe path. It was not until my junior year in college that I began to feel dissatisfied with not only the major I had chosen but the life I was living, one in which I insisted upon a safety net with every step. A chronic people pleaser, I had become disgusted with myself for doing only what I thought was acceptable to other people for the last fifteen years. Instead of opting for the security of a yes and no world, I decided to march to the beat of my own drum as Thoreau suggested. A line I had first read in a composition class became my anthem.

My need for order has not completely dissipated, though, as the following poetry proves. My poetry stems from that incessant desire to make order out of chaos, words out of experience. Where that desire comes from I can only speculate, but I believe it at least partly comes from being human and partly from the fact I grew up around a lot of disorder. As a child of a teenage mother who often sought solace in the arms of several men whom she happened to marry, I learned at an early age that most if not all things are temporary. The day my father killed himself, I began preparing for the day everyone else in my life would follow his footsteps right out the door. Much of my poetry attempts to reconcile the feelings I have about growing up in such an unpredictable environment. While I often mourn the absence of a world which is constant in my poetry, I also celebrate the possibilities of a world in which nothing is definite and everything is possible.

“...To Talk of influences for a writer is essentially to trace the development

of a psychic and spiritual history....” –Tess Gallagher, “My Father’s Love Letters”

At a recent lunch with a few of my colleagues, I threw out the question, How do I acknowledge my influences when I’m unsure of who or what exactly has influenced me? Music heard at a lakeside restaurant, billboard signs, words mumbled in an airport, orders yelled from an upstairs bathroom. All of these minute bits of stimuli, along with poems, novels, and plays, must have helped shape my own poetry. My friends could offer no real solutions, but we deliberated upon the possibilities for a few moments before turning to our own plates. I still have no final answers, but since then I have recalled moments, places and people which partially answer the query. I know undoubtedly that the nursery rhymes my mother read to me as a child had a profound influence on my love of rhyme in poetry. When I read “Humpty Dumpty” or “Jack and Jill” to my daughter before bedtime, I recite the words with the same intonation and fervor my mother did. Poems in this ensemble like “Mother’s Toilet Is a Flower Pot” share many stylistic characteristics with the nursery rhyme. They are flip, seemingly trivial, and use a rhyming pattern. Yet, just as in the nursery rhyme, there is a tension between the literal and figurative in many of my poems. On one level, “Mother’s Toilet” is a humorous narrative about a mother trying to escape to the bathroom to read and take a bath. On another level, the poem is a comment on the inadequate amount of time a mother has to cultivate her own hobbies or tend to her personal needs because of the time she spends on

domestic issues. While the rhyme adds an element of intentional playfulness, it is also meant to underscore the seriousness of the poem's underlying subject by pitting the rhyme and subject matter against each other in order to create tension in the poem.

The irony I hope to achieve by juxtaposing the playful rhyme with the serious subject is something I at least partially learned from reading Plath, especially "Daddy." I'm not sure where I heard or read the poem first, but it has called me to read it several times since then. Though Plath's poem is powerful enough on the page, it gains an even newer strength when read out loud, much like the nursery rhymes I was read and later recited to my younger brothers. Like Plath's poetry, I want mine not only to look good on the page but also to resonate in the ear of the listener. Part of the pleasure of reading poetry should involve enjoying the actual experience of moving from one word to the next, feeling the words drip off the tongue, not just perusing it for a meaning.

Yet another lesson I learned from Plath is that writing poetry takes courage. Reading the bold poem "Daddy" for the first time empowered me. I thought, if this woman can write this plainly, perhaps I can too. At that point I learned to quit disguising my emotions with images (though I have by no means abandoned my love for the image) and be more candid in my poetry. This boldness can be seen in a poem like "When I Never Told You of Sleeping on the Floor," where a granddaughter confronts her grandmother's insistence on adhering to the rules set by a male-dominated society. Confrontation is also a key element in "reply to a mirror," where the speaker encounters her own body in

a mirror, thereby facing her own fears about her self and its image. What Louise Gluck says in her essay "The Idea of Courage" is that courage implies spiritual jeopardy for poets, that what is at risk is the possibility of shame (25-26). At least in my case, she is correct in her assumptions. Before reading Plath's poetry, I kept an arm's length distance between myself and the persona in my poetry—I cared more about what people thought about me because of what my poetry said than I cared about revealing a poetic truth.

There are at least three other female poets besides Plath who have directly influenced my work and helped me not only be confrontational at times but also to confront issues and subjects, personal and technical. In various ways, Nikki Giovanni, Molly Peacock and Sharon Olds have both impacted the way I think about writing poetry. Like Plath they have given me courage to uncover and discover the language with which I may express myself to an audience. More than courage, though, they have given me the tools necessary to my development of a specific voice within that language. Giovanni showed me, especially in her poetry which addresses being female, how an attitude, a certain tone, or the pacing of a poem can affect its reading. Consider an excerpt from "A Certain Peace":

it was very pleasant
not having you around
this afternoon

not that i don't love you

and want you and need you...(21)

The direct address is a technique I use in my own poetry, as seen in "When I Never Told You of Sleeping on the Floor" ("Why do you not say this, / Grandest of All Mothers") as well as "reply to a mirror" ("you can see right through / see how hard I try / to ignore what you think"). As a means to achieving an overall attitude toward the subject and creating a more realistic persona, the direct address is something fairly new in my own poetry, effective, I think, because of its appropriateness in dealing with the particular subjects I examine.

If Giovanni was the first poet who forced me to address the overall tone and pacing in a particular work, it was Molly Peacock who first made me truly pay attention to the sound of the individual words and lines in my poems. Reading Peacock made me question how or why I use assonance and consonance; repetition of words and lines; eye, near and exact rhyme and if I use the techniques effectively. Most often I read a poem by Peacock and admire her use of these techniques, especially rhyme, but there are also times when I read a few lines where rhyme makes the poem seem contrived and cheap. I remember one poem in particular, "The Gown," in which a daughter deals with her mother's cancer. A stanza which begins beautifully ends with the lines, "...It's a hospital, after all. / I head to the mall" (Original 58). Even though I often like her use of the rhymed couplet, she achieves the exact rhyme of all and mall too easily, as it works only to undermine the seriousness of the subject matter. I am not by any means saying my poems are without problems, but I have taken careful consideration in my revisions to ensure I have pegged the right word or

phrase for the meaning or idea I am trying to capture. For example, in "Anyway," I revised the poem several times before I decided on using dentist imagery to describe how the speaker felt about her father. On the one hand, the first line claims she feels nothing about the loss of him, yet the lines like "I cannot feel the way a daughter might...but more like a girl child in a dentist's chair, / nowhere to go, just enjoying the music / between the sounds of a hot drill" make it clear she does indeed feel a sense of pain and loss. I took special care not to repeat the words "any" and "way" and the phrase "I cannot feel" so often as to dull the senses, yet I felt the repetition served to emphasize the poem's meaning.

Peacock taught me that the use of sporadic repetition, rhyming and consonance can enhance the reading of a poem. Just as I can recall feeling cheated when reading Peacock's "The Gown," I can just as easily remember re-reading two particular stanzas in "Lullaby" to figure out why they sounded so wonderful:

under our own big comforter,
buried nude as bulbs. I slide south
To grow your hyacinth in my mouth.
Far above, the constellations blur //
on the comforter that real sky
is to real earth. Stars make a pattern
above; down here our pattern is fireflies
on flannel around us. Night turns (Original 35)

On the second reading I realized her use of consonance in repeating the "r"

sounds, under, buried, grow, blur, stars, here, around, helps hold the poem together, as does her use of rhyme. In the top stanza, she uses an exact rhyme coupled with a near rhyme, south and mouth with comforter and blur. In the bottom stanza, she uses an alternating near-rhyming pattern, sky and fireflies with pattern and turns. As seen in a stanza from "Anyway," I use technique to enhance the meaning of the poem, something I learned from Peacock:

His memory gets lost like the pieces of that train,
a stop sign here, a smile there, a caboose
like the pulling of a loose tooth, a cavity,
when I balanced on his belly, a Saturday
morning of cartoon Cracker Jacks.

I hope to achieve an overall effect by combining the use of consonance with near and exact rhyme. The "s" sounds in lost, pieces, stop sign, smile and balanced are meant to complement the rhyming of caboose and loose tooth, cavity and Saturday.

Even though Peacock had the most extensive effect on how I assemble my poems today, she was not the first poet who made me truly dissect a poem in an effort to discover its power. The first time I read Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" I was humbled by its enormity and inspired by its indivisibility. It seemed that each word and line was necessary to its understanding. Part of its cohesiveness comes from his extensive use of cataloguing: "The pure contralto sings in the organloft, / The carpenter dresses his plank... / The married and unmarried children ride home..." (39). In addition to cataloguing, his use of

repetition taught me its importance: "You shall possess the good of the earth... / You shall no longer take things at second or third hand... / You shall not look through my eyes either..." (28).

I learned not only from Whitman's poetic techniques but also from the philosophy of Whitman's poet-hero in "Song of Myself" who says, "I am the poet of the body, / I am the poet of the soul. // The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me..." (46). Through Whitman's poetry I became interested in the connectedness of the body and soul, how this idea could be carried into my own poetry. In poems like "I Thought As You Slipped between My Legs" and "I Leave You," Whitman's influence is evident where I repeat phrases ("Pushed for the time, connected / to a part of you for the last time") and catalogue ("Dorm, yours, bunk, mine, double"). His impact is also visible where I connect seemingly unrelated events in order to parallel the body and soul. For example, I compare the physical act to the emotional act of leaving.

Sharon Olds, like Whitman, showed me a way to speak about the body and connect it to the soul. In the *New York Times*, a reviewer commented upon their similarities: "Like Whitman, Ms. Olds sings the body in celebration of a power stronger than political oppression." Because she writes on subjects which I often address, I feel even more indebted to her than Whitman as a guide on my poetic journey. Whereas Whitman most often speaks of the Everyman's public life in America, Olds' poems reveal a more private side of her poet-hero. Her poems immerse themselves in the process of daily living, achieving simultaneously an intimacy which I admire. She, like me, makes connections

among events which are not necessarily related, as seen in an excerpt from "The Promise," a poem from her most recent collection of poems:

With the second drink, at the restaurant,
holding hands on the bare table,
we are at it again, renewing our promise....
....I tell you you do not
know me if you think I will not
kill you. Think how we have floated together
eye to eye, nipple to nipple,
sex to sex, the halves of a creature
drifting up to the lip of the matter.... (Blood, Tin, Straw 3)

In one smooth movement Olds explores love, hate, and death within the marriage partnership. As a young poet, I feel as though reading Olds has given me permission to tackle several big issues within one poem. She not only presents life's experiences but defines them according to her own vision.

Essentially, Plath, Giovanni, Peacock, Whitman and Olds helped me to uncover and shape various voices within my poems. As Plumly recognizes in his 1978 article "Chapter and Verse," the presence of a distinct voice in a poem is of utmost importance in contemporary literature. Throughout the landmark piece Plumly argues that, because free-verse poetry cannot rely solely upon the rhyme and meter of formal poetry, it must depend upon voice to sustain its musicality. He labels the typical free-verse poem the "prose lyric," depending on the rhetoric of the voice instead of the silent rhetoric of the image (Holden 259). Since the

publication of Plumly's essay, the prose lyric has evolved and divided into various offspring, including but not limited to the autobiographical lyric, the conversational poem and the lyric-narrative. Speaking in the introduction to *Poets Teaching Poets*, Gregory Orr and Bryant Voigt comment upon the state of the American lyric:

[Current American poetry] exhibits a remarkable range of hybrids—variations of the lyric moving either *outward*, following Whitman's lead, toward the dramatic, narrative, meditative, metaphysical, or political; or *inward*, following Dickinson's, toward the personal, confessional, psychological, existential, or ecstatic. Precisely in its post-Romantic escape from generic confines, the lyric refutes the charges of solipsism so long brought against it. (2)

Though I agree with most of what Orr and Voigt are proposing, I would argue that much of the poetry written today does not fit so neatly under the Dickinson and Whitman umbrellas; it moves *both* outward and inward simultaneously, creating a curious cross stemming from Whitman and Dickinson, not strictly one or the other. This mixing of the two poles of thought in American poetry, the narrative and the personal, gives contemporary poetry its edge. The "lyric-narrative," as poet-critic Tess Gallagher defines it in a 1984 essay, is a poetry which contains an emotional progression plus a narrative structure (Again 75). The lyric-narrative, then, balances both drama and personality in a way that revitalizes the contemporary lyric.

“...Lyric-narrative poetry has recently become the most popular form and at the same time a form somewhat despised for its easy accessibility, whose association with the word ‘linear’ would ask us to believe that the narrative poet needs no finesse, no savvy, and takes no innovative gambles. Not so.”—Tess Gallagher, “Again”

Consider for a moment characteristics usually associated with the lyric and the narrative:

<u>Lyric</u>	<u>Narrative</u>
Individual Personality	Character
Metaphor	Scene
Emotion	Events

A glance into most any recent poetry collection reveals that lyric poetry has become almost entirely dependent on anecdote, blurring the line between narrative and lyric more than ever. No longer are the distinctions between the lyric and the narrative apparent. Contemporary lyric poetry often depends upon character, image, scene and events as much as it relies upon the declaration. Of course, the lyric has never been completely detached from the narrative. As Joan Aleshire explains in her essay concerning the persistence of the lyric throughout history, the Greek lyric singer usually presented material drawn from the poet's life and shaped by his imagination: “Accuracy in the expression of one individual life allowed the songs to be personal yet not idiosyncratic....Poets sought to demonstrate the general and the basic by the example of themselves”

(34). What separates the previous from the current lyric, then, is the *presentation* of the narrative within the lyric frame. As Williamson notes, recent poetry is essentially narrative but “fractured by flashback and flash-forwards, by cinematic jump-cuts and ruminative asides....It emphasizes the speaker’s actions with a more expansive regard to play of consciousness over time” (Wojahn *Generations* 102).

In an effort to explain my relationship with the lyric-narrative, I would like to review the poem “Mama and I, Like Caramels:”

Often I wonder how I could have come out of her skin,
her long beaded skirts and bare feet that walk anywhere,
down New York streets, step on glassy, gummy concrete
beside the beaches of Virginia, coast-line cold, a night

I held her while she cried, Jenny I’m going crazy. Baby,
I’m going crazy, the living room bare but alive
with another midnight move away from a fairy tale
land of fuckyous and thrown wedding bands,
brothers spread out on pallets of white sheets
still warm from the spin of the dryer.

We like the caramel with turquoise wrappers, twisted
at the ends, shiny and perfect. Isn’t that enough,
to attempt perfection? To meld like caramels.

I went to sleep that night knowing I would never
go crazy, throw hangers out of closets, a hot flash
away from sterile rooms and leather barrettes.
I also knew I would never laugh quite as loud
as she did, never sob into someone's hair and tell them
I'm sorry until my mouth went dry.

Concerned with not only the memory but the meaning of memory, this poem is representative of the type of poetry found in the following collection. It attempts to balance the dramatic and the psychological, pitting the speaker's fear of repeating her mother's mistakes against one particular night in the speaker's childhood. It juxtaposes statement, image and scene to move backward and forward in time—the first and third stanzas are declarations in the present tense while the second and fourth are descriptions in the past tense. It adopts a cinematic coldness toward the events. Gallagher associates these characteristics with the lyric-narrative, and, as I employ most of them in my poetry, I choose to align myself with the lyric-narrative poets (Again 71-81).

Though a sub-genre with its own distinguishing features, the lyric-narrative adheres to many of the standards for the lyric set down by Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* during the Romantics' pursuit of the lyric's revitalization. The lyric-narrative utilizes incidents and situations from everyday life in a selection of language used by the common man while directly expressing the personality of the poet-hero. Because the lyric communicates

the nature of the poet-hero more than any other form, it easily accommodates the "I" in a poem. The "I" is the voice of authority as well as individual identity; it is the agent by which the reader can enter and share the experience with the speaker; and it establishes an automatic intimacy with the reader. While they're not restricted to its use, writers of the lyric-narrative, including myself, often choose the "I" as their personal pronoun. Although there are times when I feel that using the third person better serves the poem's purpose, as in "Wedding Night Revelation" or "Mother's Toilet," I almost always write an initial draft in first person.

Attention to detail is yet another characteristic of the early lyric which the lyric-narrative still recognizes. As Ellen Bryant Voigt expresses in her essay on the image, "Detail suggests empirical evidence; it makes the text plausible" (222). Within my own poetry, detail plays an important role in creating realistic situations. I often refer to specific numbers—.22, 3 am, two feet, forty-three, two inch, ten years; and places—in a car, in a glove box, beside a wall heater, in the mud, in a bathtub, at a table, in a bed, under stairwells—to lend plausibility to a poem. The details not only create authenticity but also help establish meaning in the poem, as in this stanza from "I Leave You:"

I leave you every time I stop at 177.
You are south, but I turn north
to exchange looks with a man
who will sell me gas. For a moment
I am the money exchanged,

and he holds me between his
thumb and fingers like you once did,

as if I were that valuable and necessary.

By citing such details as the highway number and the wife's nightgown, I hope to create a persona who is genuine. At least in the case of my poetry, the image is both representational and expressive. The man selling gas is not only a "character" in the poem but is also symbolic of the way the poet-hero feels about her situation. If the image, then, can, as Voigt says, "reproduce not only what the poet sees but at the same time *how* the poet sees, one need not choose one over the other, the mirror over the lamp" (230). By linking several images together to produce an overall effect, I hope to construct what Eliot calls the "inner unity" of a poem.

Metaphor, a technique lyric often depends upon, also helps establish the inner unity of a poem. In the case of the lyric-narrative, the metaphor occupies a peculiar position. Whereas the narrative depends upon momentum, the telling of what happened to whom when, the lyric counts on the metaphor to help slow the poem down, to give the reader time to ingest the images and meaning within the poem. Within my own poetry, I depend on metaphor as much as specific detail to tell the story. For example, in "Preparing for the Day My Grandmother Dies," the first stanza is composed of two juxtaposed metaphors: "She is as fragile and enduring / as the patterned china / she washes after Sunday dinner. / Like a sapphire stone separated / from its setting, a vein rises / out of a wrinkle

in her hand.” As a lyric-narrative poet, one has countless numbers of possibilities when considering how to present the poem’s subject. In this case and in many others, I choose to implement metaphor to create a “character” as well as the poet-hero.

“Certain qualities do characterize the poetry of contemporary women poets: a voice that is open, intimate, particular, involved, engaged, committed. It is a poetry whose poet speaks as a woman, so that the form of her poem is an extension of herself....A poetry that is real, because the voice that speaks is as real as the poet can be about herself....”

—Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women*

For a reason or reasons I do not completely understand, I find it necessary to address what it means to be a female poet at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Perhaps I feel the need because so much is being written right now on the power of women’s poetry. Or perhaps it is because so much of my poetry addresses femininity and the relationships between women. I do not ever consciously, while writing a poem, address an all female audience, yet I have found in workshops and in other realms where people have read my poetry that more women than men identify with and claim an interest in my poetry. I have noticed that the poems and short stories that men do take notice of most often deal with violence. I’m unsure whether this fact is related to the different ways in which women and men are raised or to their biological differences.

Either way, what Juhasz says about the form of a woman's poem being an extension of herself, interests me. Molly Peacock proposes a similar idea in a 1999 essay "From Gilded Cage to Rib Cage" when she states that women exhibit a significant preference for an "informal" use of form:

What women seem to appropriate for themselves in the realm of traditional prosody are general methods they can put to the organic purposes, or the psychological shape, of what is the attempt to convey or say or even, perhaps, be. They have not seemed to have aspired [as often as the males in the canon] toward the perfect sonnet, the perfect villanelle, the perfect quatrain. (74)

What Peacock espouses should not be misconstrued. She by no means suggests that women ignore form or are unsuccessful in writing formal poetry. She merely observes that female poets often break with perfectionist form and insist on a personal sensibility of sound. Conceivably, in modifying the formal elements in their poetry, women (myself included) are working against the male verse traditions where the idea of a "perfect" form exists in order to create new traditions where no one "right" way exists. Though I am by no means suggesting that men do not confront the same dilemmas in dealing with form and its revision, I am implying that women, because of their battle for freedom in society, may be more conscious of their fight for openness in form.

Surely Walt Whitman understood as well as any man or woman how liberation from the strictness of a poetic form can mirror the freedom or lack thereof within a society, how free verse may come naturally to those writing

within a democracy. In "Democratic Vistas," Whitman asks and answers,

Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections,
for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use
there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in
manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and
their beliefs—in religion, literature, colleges and
schools—democracy in all public and private life.... (980)

Practically alone in writing free verse in America until the early twentieth century, Whitman opened the doors for such diverse poets as Sandburg, Cummings, and Williams, who were revolutionary in their use of free verse. Truly, variety *is* the point of free verse. Individuals who use the open form differ as much as the ways in which they use it.

Perhaps form, then, is an extension of content (Levertov's idea) as well as the poet herself. Free verse allows the poem to be as distinct as its writer. But, as Eliot points out, no verse is free for the person who wants to do a good job. The free verse poet is bound by *different* qualifications than the formalist poet but constrained nonetheless. As Plumly recognizes, the free verse should scan too; "it might even, in its own off-handed way, rhyme internally, but it must not schematize the rhythm or the possible rhyme. The prosody of free verse is the prosody of assonance, consonance, and surprise.... And poetry—though it may not tick like a metronome..., must make music" (Chapter 23-24).

Whereas formal poetry makes its music by moving horizontally across the page, free verse patterns tend to move vertically down the page. Whatever the

length, the free verse poem's line breaks and enjambes, stops and starts its way down. Clearly, this is why Levertov, in her important piece "The Function of the Line," insists that there is "at our disposal no tool of the poetic craft more important; none that yields more subtle and precise effects, than the line-break if it is properly understood" (30). The line break can be a form of punctuation, recording the slightest hesitation between words. The pauses can, as Levertov explains, do many things:

For example, it allows the reader to share more intimately the experience that is being articulated; and by introducing an a-logical counter-rhythm into the logical rhythm of syntax it causes, as they interact, an effect closer to song than to statement.... Thus the emotional experience of empathy or identification plus the sonic complexity of the language structure synthesize in an intense aesthetic order that is different from that which is received from a poetry in which metric forms are combined with logical syntax alone. (31)

As Levertov continues, the line breaks determine not only the rhythm but also the pitch patterns, which in turn affects how the poem is read. Hence, an understanding of the various purposes of the line break empowers the poet to be more precise and reveal more of her personality.

Throughout the writing and revision of this collection, I have carefully deliberated upon where to break the lines in each poem because I feel as strongly about the importance of the line break as Levertov does. Often I use a

break to focus on a word I want to emphasize, to make the transition from one stanza to the next, and/or to allude to a double meaning. For example, in the poem "Mama and I, Like Caramels," I want to bring attention to the word "twisted" in the third stanza, so I not only set it off with a comma but place it at the end of the line; to make the transition from the first to the second stanza, from the present to the past, I place "a night" at the end of the line, where it doubles in usage: "beside the beaches of Virginia, coast-line cold, a night // I held her while she cried...;" because of the line break, the fourth line in the last stanza also adopts a second meaning: "I also knew I would never laugh quite as loud / as she did...." Just as the line break can signal many things to the reader, so can its absence. In the poem "Found on a Torn Napkin," for instance, I chose not to use line breaks and stanzas in an effort to give the poem a speed in which it would be read as one breathless line, one long, continuous thought.

As well as special attention to line breaks, the use of syntax, repetition and cataloguing reveals the poet's individual style—for instance, one only needs to hear a few lines from "Song of Myself" to identify the poem as Whitman's. The use of these poetic devices also helps generate the musicality which Plumly maintains is essential in free verse poetry. Because free verse contains no regular rhyming or metrical pattern, these other "threads" are required to hold the poem together, as seen in an excerpt from the poem "I Thought As You Slipped between My Legs:"

How, in December, I stopped counting

The number of times you thrust your

Knee into my thigh and ran from a bed,
Dorm, yours, bunk, mine double,
Chest red and slick, slightly firm still,
To get a scalding rag. A thousand....

How I would have told you then
We finally met inside each other,
The way we wanted to sleep,
Connected like a mother
Holding her child's hand,
Like we dreamed on a Thursday,
No sleep. I didn't know....

How capillaries burst on my cheeks
When I pushed nine ten, our child,
Rest, breathe, out, seven eight nine ten,.....

As I see it, the "threads" which are woven throughout this poem contribute to its uniqueness, identify its overall voice. The repetition of the word "How" connects each stanza to the next one, while the cataloguing techniques also serve to unify the poem. In composing phrases and incomplete thoughts instead of complete sentences, I hope to create a "motion" within the poem which mimics the alternating activity and inactivity that occurs in intercourse and labor, thus drawing a comparison between the two events.

In the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* Walt Whitman expresses his idea that the poet is the speaker for a multitude of people, in his case the people of America. In my poetry the group I most often speak of and for is the immediate and extended family unit, those people with whom one develops close relationships. In Section I of this collection, *Revelation*, all of the poems hinge on epiphanal moments in which a truth is revealed to the speaker. Section II, *Strength Derived from a Woman's Past*, contains poems in which the speaker grapples with issues, like the mother-daughter relationship and self-acceptance, which may not be particular to women but are nevertheless important to them. The last section, *Covers*, includes poems which struggle with memory and its persistence, the way a certain memory catapults itself into our lives without warning.

Throughout this Introduction, I have explored my influences, explained why I consider myself a lyric-narrative poet and analyzed my use of the free verse form. Whitman and Pound, both in their own times, called for American poets to "make it new." Although I have done nothing to invent a new criticism or poetry, I have, through creation and revision, made it mine.

As I come to the end of my graduate studies, I am still grappling with the question, Why am I a poet? I have come to several "small" conclusions but not one overriding answer. I write poetry because I can, which may sound like an obvious answer but really isn't because there are some people who cannot or at least feel they cannot. I write poetry because my father hid his poems only to be discovered after his death, afraid, I'm sure, that he would reveal his vulnerability;

because my grandmother also kept her poems in drawers—in her eyes making chicken fried steak with white, peppered gravy was more important than writing; because my mother writes poems but will only show them to a select few. I write poetry because I can't paint like Monet or sing like Billie Holiday. To my own chagrin, writing is my one creative outlet. In my poems I can be a composer of words, not notes. I can be three again inventing stories about a little green mouse. I can invent a lie yet simultaneously reveal a truth.

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I

Revelation

Wedding Night Revelation

It is not until she removes the veil,
not until she listens to the music box
he bought on her first birthday,
not until she sits cross-legged with
the antique lace spilling on the floor,
not until she imagines the corner
of his lip showing his tooth hole,
not until she looks at her dimpled hand
with the gold band shining like gun metal,
not until she reaches under the bed
to find a cracked picture frame, his face.
It is not until then that she remembers
he was not in the long aisle,
not walking beside her through
the cut-out doll faces of people,
not calling her baby girl, not calling
her husband a lucky sonofabitch.
It is not until then that she knows
how a woman can look like a man,
how she can take off her makeup then
pull her ears and her breasts back,
how she can hold a glass of champagne
the way he held a bottle of Cuervo,
how she can draw her eyebrows up
and cock her face to the side like a .22,
how at 3 am she can look like her father,
the way he did at 6 am in the moment
that exists before a man shoots himself.

Trading in Step-Dads

Mom claims Ferdinand was the best friend she ever had – a long, burgundy Ford LTD with leather interior, a back seat wide enough for four children to sit while traveling to Lake Eufala or Frontier City, he put her kids to sleep at night when they were restless, took her to work faithfully every morning, and all she had to do, if it was a wintery day and he didn't feel like starting, was hit his dashboard and say, "Come on baby, just one more day."

The only time I sat in the front seat was when mom picked me up from school. As soon as I climbed in, I would open Ferdinand's glove box. A treasure chest full of trinkets, each time I opened it, I found a surprise, a balloon, a dum dum, or shiny gold ring lost in the crevices of his seat after our last trip to the Piggly Wiggly.

When mom remarried, my step-dad bought her a new car and drove Ferdinand himself. No matter how much he cursed the car though, it wouldn't start on cold mornings. I put my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

The day my step-dad traded Ferdinand in, I ran to the glove box for one more surprise, but all I found were a box of Sucrets and a package of stale Danish wedding cookies.

Found on a Torn Napkin

Two feet below purple flowers, the place where, together, we dug our fingers in the mud and I told you the story about being four years old and reaching down for and finding Mephistopheles' hand mangled, my first sin, my second going home with you, is gone, where we left burned, cold from the sun that had turned black, ran across the hill we rolled down the day before graduation, knowing we would not be lovers when winter ended, when we no longer needed each other for heat because we could pay the electric bill, to lean back our heads, touching, on the red booth, to share whiskey sours, drinking them in one sip and making us shaky enough to hold each other one more night, when you said you knew I would leave you before you left me because that's the way it is when you screw so many girls you can't remember except for the one who said she wanted you and you said she could never have you and now you have each other at three o'clock in the morning, when it's not Christmas Eve but you're giving each other kisses and presents and sleeping under quilts naked beside the wall heater, and she doesn't want you but she wants to marry someone, but she does want you when she sees black specks in the white of an eye or when she plants wild flowers, feels wet dirt underneath her fingernails and realizes, her thirteenth epiphany since rising, that place is gone.

Mama and I, Like Caramels

Often I wonder how I could have come out of her skin,
her long, beaded skirts and bare feet that walk anywhere,
down New York streets, step on glassy, gummy concrete
beside the beaches of Virginia, coast-line cold, a night

I held her while she cried, Jenny I'm going crazy. Baby,
I'm going crazy, the living room bare but alive
with another midnight move away from a fairy tale
land of fuckyous and thrown wedding bands,
brothers spread out on pallets of white sheets
still warm from the spin of the dryer.

We like the caramels with turquoise wrappers, twisted
at the ends, shiny and perfect. Isn't that enough,
to attempt perfection? To meld like caramels.

I went to sleep that night knowing I would never
go crazy, throw hangers out of closets, a hot flash
away from sterile rooms and leather barrettes.
I also knew I would never laugh quite as loud as she did,
never sob into someone's hair and tell them
I'm sorry until my mouth went dry.

On Never Seeing the Ocean

I will place my right foot
in the water. It will be warm
and nothing more.
It will not move me
any closer to my destiny
or propel me into ecstasy.

The left foot will never feel
the sand dig under its nail.
There will be no need
to risk the sputtering of salty
water when I know already
that there is nothing more
or less than drowning five
toes in liquid not hot or cold.

I will back away and bury myself
in a sand pile that was a castle
or find another ocean.
Perhaps I will stay a while
with my knees bent at the edge
of the sea and stare into the abyss
that is endlessness.

Autumn

The only time I think of God is in the fall,
when the purple plums shrivel on a tree
in the field behind my house, the sun hidden
then found between copper leaves.

I believe I may have felt God in the pocket
of my flannel shirt once at the end
of a Shakespearean production
in the park, a cold September.

I can't imagine people talk to God when
they are dropping tiny seeds in the wet
dirt or when their skin is tan and taut.

Faith

I cannot see the bird outside my window.

The night is cold and black.

But I can hear it chanting.

I wonder how a voice can sound so sweet

In a darkness which encourages sleep.

After Discovering I Have Two Months to Live

My husband will take me to White Fish to see the flight
of the egrets as they migrate in preparation for winter nights.
I will catch salmon in streams, eat venison cooked over a fire,
watch raccoons and deer hide behind trees, sure I will leave soon.
On the car ride back to the City, we will talk about how we grew up
together, how we were each other's first sex, how I fear nothing,
how I will miss touching toes under the covers before sleeping,
how I never saw the Giverny garden, except in postcards.
I will die on a Tuesday in October under the desolate lights
of a hospital room. My husband will move my face toward
sunlight, brush my hair with his fingers because he knows
I like the feel of his hands on my scalp. The funeral will be
on a Sunday, amid the black and white cows, the fog
above brown grass settling above my ashes
spread among the pecans, wild lilacs, grasshoppers
like the morning dust on a moth's wings, able to fly.

II

Strength Derived from a Woman's Past

Pills Like White Elephants

I take a birth control pill
each night, same time—11 o'clock.
Funny how one little tablet
can taste like spoiled milk,
like I'm swallowing
an elephant whole,
trunk first, dumbo ears,
stamp feet.

Tonight I throw it down
with a swig of red wine,
the way I throw back his logic—
not enough money time
aren't you tired
Ph. D. blahblahblah
I like it just being me and you crap
Look, we have time to read
he says grinning the way he does
when he knows I'm pissed off
but doesn't know why.

I'll be one day older tomorrow,
the precise age I pictured myself
with a family. He pats my flat stomach
and asks *Honey, have you taken your pill?*

Early Morning

On my way to a hospital I feel so heavy.
I pass a woman running along a stretch of highway
wearing, it seems, nothing but leather shoes,
a woman who has only a sliver of a headlight
and the echo of her own footsteps as company,
a woman who chases shadows of stop signs,
seemingly happy in her singularity.

As I prepare to give birth to a daughter,
The runner is my focal point.
I hear her short breath in my ear.
There is no crowd or cheers as she rounds
the last corner which will take her to a house
where no one jumps from a bed to greet her.
In my pain I cannot remember
if I am the runner or the mother.

Power

Like Samson my hair made me powerful.
Once, a long curl hung down
in the face of my lover and convinced him
of his desire to have only me.
I tied it around my neck and hid myself
the way a sunflower envelops a bee.
My daughter born of that spell,
I had no need for hair.
I cut off every piece, save one
long strand where she could lose
her finger. Too much power
in my butcher block thighs.
I delivered Samson.
Power in my lilted breast.
I sustained life.

Preparing for the Day My Grandmother Dies

She is as fragile and enduring
as the patterned china
she washes after Sunday dinner.
Like a sapphire stone separated
from its setting, a vein rises
out of a wrinkle in her hand.

Seated in my designated chair
not at the head of the table,
I wonder why I can't talk
with her as a friend. Honestly,
I don't know, but maybe
part of the answer lies in
the back of a bureau drawer,
where the teal-blue silk slippers
I gave her ten years ago sit
suffocated in the cellophane.

Yet, even with the words missing
and the spaces between us created
from generations and movements,
something connects us that is more
forceful than last names, a strength
derived from a woman's past, a crack
like the one in her yellow string of pearls.

Mother's Toilet Is a Flower Pot

On the pot she sits
and her children beat
on the door outside
the bathroom. She stays
and cites a book on
chicken soup, the feet
changed blue from resting.
She smiles, blows
a ring of smoke, knocks
off a two inch ash. They
knock and yell. She
smokes and laughs
then leaps into a bath.
Five rings six rings now it's
seven until the room is filled
with smoke like poison
ivy grown from two
inch ashes. Still.

Postpartum

I have been bleeding for forty-three nights.
My underwear, like a polka-dot dress
from the fifties, lie on the tile floor,
the two leg holes positioned as if I could
slip back into them, a security blanket.

Through slats of the bathroom shade
steam ascends like clouds in an Impressionist
painting and I stand, feel my way;
a towel reaches for my hand and pulls me
to the side of the tub where I see my mother.

Our love wedged between us like a pained breath,
I see her sitting naked in the window sill, spine bowed,
feet splatting in blood, hair dripping with blood,
breasts hidden between her knees, hands locked,
as if she has been birthed by glass shards.

I try to speak, to tell her I'm sorry I couldn't see her
as a person until I had my own child, but what I never
can say is not said again, that my fear of her dying
alone between a toilet and claw-foot bathtub, overflowing,
will be a dream once more tonight.

reply to a mirror

freckles and moles
this is my body
poochy and pouches
this is me
vanity alienation
one is the other
clippies and clapping
yeh for me for me
long legs little boobs
stretch marks silvery
gold on my fingers
in my ears on my neck
diamonds so shiny
show I am new
I am worth it
if I tell myself
I am worth it
hair do color cut braid
weave in and out of caring
not-caring if you see me
don't see me love me
don't love my stomach
not quite flat my butt
not quite round like
my cheeks veiny
eyelids veiny
everything thin
you can see right through
see how hard I try
to ignore what you think

When I Never Told You of Sleeping on the Floor

Why don't you just say it, Grandmother,
Grandest of All Mothers?

Why do you not say, *Jennifer*,
not *Honey, Sweetie, Angel Baby*,
you are a Bitch, unappreciative,
a woman unthankful for being
born in 1973, full of opportunity,
a woman who could be top
of her class, receive scholarships,
graduate with honors,
honored by motherhood,
be on top of her husband,
a man who would love your
meat and carrots, no dessert,
would not strike your pregnant belly,
would wash a dish if asked to,
would not touch you
unless you said touch me,
would change a diaper if asked to,
would not touch you at all
if you asked him to.

Why do you not say this,
Grandest of All Mothers,
to your unappreciative bitch
of a granddaughter,
instead of *He is just*
a man. When I am just
a woman.

Impression of Camille Monet

He never painted another lover
after he saw her posed among
wild flowers in that satin
Japanese kimono, a corset
pushing her breasts toward her chin.

Her green dress pulling tighter
made him smile with thoughts
of children running wild through
grassy patches along the Seine.

Even in their bedroom with death
and afterbirth between her legs
he had to sketch her mouth half open
once more, a black dress.

Burning his eyes with sunlight,
eating cobalt blue and loaves of bread,
painting poplars, water lilies,
things without words, these his
actions—penance for her death.

Thanksgiving Dinner with My Parents

At first I ignore the words thrown down on the table
like a deck of cards slammed by a losing hand.
The warmth of the heat coming from a stove
hiding turkey legs and scalloped potatoes
is almost enough to halt the curses in midair.

I pray to get caught in the middle of a death wish
as it flies from one head of the table to the other.
The lily centerpiece glows like an adored sibling.
I would like to be that noticed,

to be taken in and out of a vase, arranged just so
until I feel nothing but fingers against my stalks
and cool water rushing in and out and around.

I almost say pass me a sliver of that china
which slid down the wall and slumped
in a corner. I stay silent until every cranberry
in the ambrosia salad tastes like a slice
of a cereal box served from a rusted pipe.

III
Covers

I Thought As You Slipped between My Legs

How, in December, I stopped counting
The number of times you thrust your
Knee into my thigh and ran from a bed,
Dorm, yours, bunk, mine, double,
Chest red and slick, slightly firm still,
To get a scalding rag. A thousand.

How, after ten years, I lost track
Because you invariably told me
I looked like one of God's
Devils when I came, your jagged
Name somewhere in my tongue.

How I would have told you then
We finally met inside each other,
The way we wanted to sleep,
Connected like a mother
Holding her child's hand,
Like we dreamed on a Thursday,
No sleep. I didn't know.
I thought I would know
When you and I became one
Tiny cell multiplied by a million,

How capillaries burst on my cheeks
When I pushed nine ten, our child,
Rest, breathe, out, seven eight nine ten,
Pushed for the last time, connected
to a part of you for the last time.
I kissed the vernix above her lips
with my eyes closed, unsure
if the mouth belonged to you or her.
I held her in the crook of my belly,
the silver cord dangling from the bed rail.

Any Way

I don't feel any way about my father
who killed himself when I was eight.
I cannot feel a way about someone
I hardly remember, who exists in fragments
of a green toy train set he gave me.
I don't remember what year.

His memory gets lost like the pieces of that train,
a stop sign here, a smile there, a caboose
like the pulling of a loose tooth, a cavity,
when I balanced on his belly, a Saturday
morning of cartoon Cracker Jacks.

I cannot feel the way a daughter might feel
without a father, angry, sad, not any certain way
but more like a girl child in a dentist's chair,
nowhere to go, just enjoying the music
between the sounds of a hot drill.

I cannot feel for someone who only lives
now under stairwells where he stashed
his old carpet and booze, who exists still
in cedar lined closets where he kept
his gun collection and boy scout uniform,
still pressed and folded on the top shelf.
Such a biting old burnt smell in that closet.

You and I, in Portraits

That picture lives in our bed.
I hold onto your neck.
My teeth polish the camera.
Your eyes have been strangled.

I need to find the black and white.
You grab me around the waist.
It's not in the bottom drawer.
Only a medicine dropper remains.

One night I knew you.
I fixed a heating pad under your chest.
A fever told me you loved me loved me.
A snowstorm kept us warm in delirium.
We were so close to the window.
You slept and sweated as I rocked you.

Still—
That picture lives in our bed

Covers

This fall morning carries a frigid breeze,
makes a still fan half-circle above you.
I see round thighs stuck out of a onesie
the way they dangle out of swing holes.

Legs, mouth open in sleep you don't look
cold, but I pull the thick comforter
up to your neck. My job is to cover you,
to help you tie bootlaces on snowy mornings
of bus rides and cinnamon rolls and boys,
to tap your knee, let you know you are sitting
with your legs spread too far apart for a
lady, to put my hand over your mouth
when you sneeze and teach you the same,
to pull your cotton tee over your shoulder
so you don't show a bra strap to a boyfriend,
to tell you equality exists only in numbers.

There you are, though, sleeping,
nose and lip twitching in silent
laughter, and this morning, for now,
I pull back the comforter, uncover you

I Leave You

Hard. I leave you hard,
with your cotton boxers
standing like the tent
I bought for our wedding,
a chapel we slept in six
months after the reception.

I leave you hard and roll over
to my three inches of the bed,
where our daughter breathes in
and in, the only sound between us,
where my stomach, still looking
five months pregnant, droops
toward the exit door.

I leave you hard because
you want me to touch you,
make you soft again, but I'm tired
of making you anything.
I made you buy an engagement
ring three years after we married.
Hell, I made you marry me.
You couldn't really be happy alone.

I leave you hard because I can
feel a man's hand lodged inside
my uterus, a doctor's hand yes,
but a man nonetheless;
because the thought of another
pair of lips suckling my breast
makes me want to be a man,
one whose nipples serve no one.

I leave you hard because you
haven't touched me since
this morning, when you scooted
me over to shave under your chin
in the mirror. I watched you,
you didn't watch me back, just walked
out the door with a thrown I love you.

I leave you every time I stop at 177.
You are south, but I turn north
to exchange looks with a man

who will sell me gas. For a moment
I am the money exchanged,
and he holds me between his
thumb and fingers like you once did,
as if I were that valuable and necessary.

Autism

What bothers me is something
that doesn't have one ounce of pretty.
You know how death can be as beautiful
as a Southern girl under a magnolia?
Well, this isn't at all like death. I hate

to even bring it up on a pretty page,
but take my brother—
he was born with something worse
than ugliness. With no music playing
he dances in circles. Let's say

one of those arms hits my mother
while he's swinging faster than a married
man on a Saturday night.
She's bruised and scratched
like an eagle mistook her arm

for a fish. He's sixteen, a good age
to be driven to an institution.
Talk about a place lacking pretty.
It's not just the doctor shooting
up in the stall or the nurse, a wall

with vials between its fingers.
All the white makes it is so damned ugly.
What a difference a floral
comforter could make. Or how about
if the patients could act out plays.

My brother can't drive like he's dreamed
of since he could say the word car,
but he could be Macbeth or someone else.
Wearing a costume, standing stage center,
he'd look so pretty.

To Have It All

Such a long time has passed,
I'm unsure how many days,
since you have been beside me
on our couch, in the corner of my eye.
Your head did rest heavily in my lap.

Without the glances, I have time to read that book now.

Your side of the bed remains untouched,
so perfect in its protest. A cradled hair
lies where the curve of your back should be.
Even in my sleep, I know you are gone.

Without the touching, I have time for naps between meals.

The sound of your razor scraping
against your chin has been replaced
with an unwelcome silence, a lifting
of a shade. Music from the clock radio
poses as conversation.

Without the words, I have time to meet new people.

So this is what it feels like to have it all,
to miss you, afternoon, night, morning.

VITA ²⁰

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Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: WEDDING NIGHT REVELATION: A COLLECTION OF POEMS WITH A
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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