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Agueproof

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Laurie A. Williams

B.F.A. Arkansas Tech University, 1987

May 2009

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for Tony Fitzpatrick, my biggest fan

Table of Contents

Preface.....	v
Resume.....	1
The Way to Dover	
A Visit with my Father	4
Hand-Me-Downs.....	5
Daily News.....	7
Forgotten Miracles	8
Death of a Horse Trader.....	10
Heredity.....	11
Brand.....	13
Birthday Card.....	15
At the Woolworth’s Counter.....	16
Blunt Trauma	18
Fever Sleeping	
As They Carry Me Away from his House by Ambulance.....	20
A Dangerous Conversation	21
Russellville, AR—What I Remember.....	22
What Is an Aging Beauty Queen to Do?.....	23
Regret.....	25
Pageless Nights	26
Exceptions	
Icarus Before the Fall.....	28
Squatter’s Rights.....	30
Grave Robber	31
I Was a Conscientious Objector.....	32
Sitting Around the Kitchen Table with Some Atheists.....	34
Exception	36
The Pruning.....	38
Vita.....	40

Preface

*There was only one huge word with no back to it
A word like the sun
One day it broke into tiny pieces
They were the words of the language we now speak
Pieces that will never come together
Broken mirrors where the world sees itself shattered*
—Octavia Paz trans. Eliot Weinberger

I was born into an incongruous, bleak Beckett landscape. As a child, I did not realize the absurd nature of my home life. I thought it was normal, that everyone lived and thought as I did. To illustrate this landscape most clearly to you, I need to relate my first conscious image of Jesus and Heaven. I was raised Baptist and went to church with my mother every Wednesday evening and twice on Sundays. Hymns and the fire-and-brimstone sermons Brother Ed shouted and whispered from the pulpit were the first rhythms that conveyed the musicality of language to me. Before I could read, I heard the same hymns so often that I thought I knew what reading was since I knew what words were on the page.

There were no icons of any kind in my Baptist church, and the stained glass windows were just squares and rectangles of colored glass. Everything at the front of the church was either wood-stained dark oak or cloth of dull red velvet. Sunday school, my mother, and my grandparents taught me that Jesus lived in my heart and that when I died, I would go and live with Him. I confused Heaven with my heart where Jesus lived and often wondered why everyone seemed so interested in going to Heaven in my heart. In my mind, the Jesus living in my heart looked like all the images of Jesus I had ever seen—sad and tired—that in later years I would learn to call, *ennui*. All of the images of Jesus, the ones in the Bible of him at Gethsemane or him turning the money lenders out of the temple, the ones in living rooms of his

face painted on velvet or on glass in shimmering paint with his eyes centered to look as if he were watching you no matter where you stood, even the one in the Cecil B. DeMille movie all looked to me as though they suffered from *ennui*. I felt sorry for Jesus when I was a child. But when I came to understand that I would have to go and live forever with him after I died, I felt sorry for myself as well. It seemed a bum deal to be sad and tired for eternity. No streets paved of gold could make up for that although, in my image of Heaven, the streets were not paved in gold.

My father was a big smoker, and in the early sixties and seventies, the American Heart Association ran television ads about the ills of smoking. Their logo is the traditional symbol for a heart with a torch going through the middle. At one point, that heart, heaven, and the Jesus living inside my heart became entwined in my mind's eye. Jesus lived in my heart, which, to me, looked suspiciously like the American Heart Association heart, except the torch was more of a truncated column on top of which sat Jesus, staring pitifully out over the dead. The dead themselves looked as though they were being punished with nap-time. I imagined that when I died, I would go into my heart where Jesus would hand me a brown woven mat to lie on. I would have to lie next to my family, usually my Great-Aunt Elizabeth, who was the meanest woman I ever knew, but who I was repeatedly assured was going to Heaven. Jesus would not speak to me; he would just provide me that mat and would look sorrowful.

My family would not speak to me, nor would I speak to them. I would simply lay down my mat into the one open rectangle, next to Aunt Elizabeth (I must have always died last in my imagination, and since I was the youngest, I always got the worst spots around the table or in the car, so I figured I'd have the worst spot in Heaven too), and there I would lie quietly looking up at the dark cave-like ceiling for all eternity with Jesus staring out over the neatly placed mats and

people. When I was a child, I thought he was sad; now I think the Jesus I envisioned from my childhood was bored and very much a Beckett character trapped in absurd circumstances where neither life nor death had any meaning.

My Heaven had many of the trappings of the underworld of Greek mythology, but none of the power. The shades of the underworld could walk and talk, could still impart some wisdom. They could understand their circumstances. Hades is still a bit boring, but it is not the still death of my childhood Heaven. These early mixed-up ideas of religion are probably why I inhaled mythology when I finally found it. It made so much more sense to me than the stories of my own religion. None of those stories seemed incongruous or bleak. Each character had a purpose and some control over his or her life. The extreme Protestantism on which I was raised left me with the idea that I had no choice or purpose except the one that was ordained for me the moment my conception.

Despite her acute religious beliefs at the time, I am fortunate that my mother has always loved language and was, when I was a child, a big reader. My mother always read aloud to me, and I loved the sound of her voice, the cadences of her speech patterns. How she would linger over some words and pause here and there to add effect. I owe my love of language to her and many of the rhythms I use in my writing today are memories of her voice as she read aloud to me. My earliest memories are of going with her to the public library every Saturday morning. We did not own many books as we could not afford them, and my father thought they were a waste of money. The library became my church. Books, not Sunday School, gave me my moral compass and taught me right from wrong and that life did have purpose and meaning, and that not everything was preordained. At the library I could step away from the bleakness of my religious education. In books I found a different landscape, a different Jesus.

Other than nursery rhymes, most of poetry I heard came from scripture and hymns in church. The pastor at the Baptist church had a powerful speaking voice. As with many mid-western preachers, he had a certain rhythmic quality to his sermons. He also often paused, for effect, in unusual places. Those idiosyncratic rhythms still float through my head, as do the rhythms of my father's swear words. He would elide his curses, much like the elisions of Shakespeare's times in phrases such as, '*zounds* and *God gi'good e'en*. For his favorite curse word, *son-of-a-bitch*, he would often say *son-bitch*. My sisters and I learned to understand that whenever he swore, the length of the elongation of the *o* and *i* vowels indicated his level of frustration. The more clearly we could distinguish the prepositional phrase, the less angry he was. As a man of few words, he would truncate sentences to their essence or less. I could never be sure, until it was too late, when he would actually finish a thought, as he would often end his phrases at an illogical grammatical point. Understanding his meanings was much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. But one thing was clear: He had not inherited this trait from his father, a man who, to the contrary, always spoke in succinct easily understood commands.

Two of the most powerful men in my childhood, my father and the preacher at my church punctuated their narratives as if they were constantly searching for the one word, the right word that always eluded them. I believe that each, whether conscious or unconscious, thought that if he paused long enough or broke the syntax in the right place, he would find the exact word that would make all of the difference. For one it was the word that would save, for the other the word that would damn. Many of my poems vacillate between these two fates and speak stories of the in-between where the sacred encounters the profane. Once I began to read poetry seriously, in my freshman or sophomore year of college, Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" allowed me to understand the landscape of my childhood with the lines, "wandering

between two worlds one dead,/ the other powerless to be born.” In these lines the religion of my childhood and the images those early teachings created in my mind led me to absurdist writers, and I found Beckett and recognized immediately the landscape in which his characters are forever trapped. The other male figure, my grandfather, who looms in many of my poems, thought he already knew that all-powerful word and spoke with authority on all matters. His voice is the one I try most to ignore but which permeates all. He is my Godot of promises and appointments not kept and the underlying fear that he does this because I have somehow failed him. I recognize this, but I have not yet come to terms with his powerful presence in my work.

Another major influence on my writing, my undergraduate professor, Baxter Clarence Hall, taught me years ago to write what I know. This is what I know. It’s not what I believe. It’s not what I mean; just what I know. In fact, most of the poems in this collection were conceived in the Beckettian landscape of my childhood, only later unveiled for me. Among writers, I identify most closely with Beckett, but I also have found fragments of my childhood and adulthood in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: the Fool, Cordelia, and Lear are blood relatives somewhere in my lineage. Robert Hayden’s father figure in “Those Winter Sundays,” is how I want to remember my father and even my grandfather, and that austere love creeps into my imagery. From Diane Thiel I learned that it is okay to remember the harder parts of family, and that poems can contain the love and the hate in the same line, the same image. The reason for joining these apparent opposites is to look for the basis behind the actions of others.

Yeats’ poems reinforce sense of place, longing for the land where my forefathers lived. The land where I grew up is often barren and rugged in many of these poems, yet it is still my most important landscape. And Octavia Paz shows me how to linger over language and love the sound and the unruly rhythms of language. He has also shown me how to love form, even

though his poems are not formal. The way he breaks his structure and creates tension and turns, I could only discover first by writing in the fixed forms of the sestina, the sonnet, and the villanelle. And finally, Robert Browning's dramatic monologues allow me to explore complex characters and step inside the skin of the people I remember or have created. He has also shown me the power of rhyme and how it can be used to great effect.

I begin this collection with what I call my memory poems. Not that it is actual memory, but these do come from the same time and place where I first imagined Jesus sitting silent and sorrowful in my heart. The second section and third sections are built on the foundations of that memory. The second part moves away from childhood memory to more recent events, and the third drops back into childhood at intervals. This seemed the most logical order and these poems are what I have to share with you in the greater realm of the world that does not involve politeness and coffee cups. This is my heart out of my rib cage alone and vulnerable and not quite complete. This is my wood chipper, my Diogenes, grinding, sifting, searching. Desolate in the need. These are the people I remember, even if they never actually lived. Their lives shredded down for one drop of truth within the lie. These are the situations of life that I know. Moments that define what it is to be a human being in this god-forsaken world. These are the broken mirrors I've put in to what order I can.

Resume

I can't be punished anymore.

--Samuel Beckett

Ruptured ovarian cyst 1980. They thought my appendix had ruptured. Didn't know it was the cyst until they opened me up.

Vaporizer spilled on my legs 1969. It was an accident. I was in the backseat and my grandmother accelerated in reverse too quickly. 2nd degree burns, especially my left leg.

Gall bladder removed 1998. Supposed to be an "easy" surgery. I swear the surgeon stood on my chest to get better leverage. My blood pressure dropped to zero and they screamed for lidocaine just like on t.v.

Bumped off the teeter-totter by Carter Kerns 1971. My 1st concussion. Goose egg the size of my mother's palm on my forehead. Both my eyes blacked.

Bleeding ulcer 1981. I told them something was wrong. No one believed me; they thought I was just being dramatic until I passed out in the bathroom after throwing up blood.

1st degree burns 1970. Playing spaceship dryer. It was a fun game until my sister turned on the dryer and then couldn't stop it. You don't spin well, but it does get hot.

Heat stroke 1992. In Miami with my ex-in-laws. I wanted to go inside to the air conditioning. They laughed and called me a fragile Southern Belle. I stayed outside and showed them frailty.

Motorcycle wreck 1983. Hit a pick-up making an illegal left hand turn. No helmet. Shattered bones. Asphalt in my skin gently removed with a lovely wire brush. 5th concussion.

Hairline fracture of my right wrist 1973. Jumped off the roof at my sister's prompting using a sheet as a parachute. Landed on my sister. 3rd concussion.

Another ruptured ovarian cyst 1993. They thought it was an ectopic pregnancy. Took me to Charity Hospital. The pre-doctors got to practice on me with needles and other shiny objects. They weren't very good.

Slight electrocution 1975. Unplugging a box fan. Was too lazy to go to the wall plug. Just pulled the cord from the other room. It wouldn't come, so I used my teeth to help pull. Haven't done that again. Mouth still leaks when I try to hold water.

Reaction to antibiotic 2004. Had bronchitis. Wouldn't go away. Needed to work. Went to the doctor; he gave me a time-release pill. Covered in hives for 2 ½ weeks. Had to spend 3 months on steroids. Olympic hopes dashed. Still cough.

Beaten up 1985. Mistaken for some guy's girlfriend at a party. He pounded my head into a concrete floor. Good thing it was next to the keg. Someone came out to get beer and stopped him with a few swift kicks. 6th concussion.

Ectopic pregnancy 1991. Took a month to discover I was bleeding internally. No insurance, but would die without surgery. Live-in boyfriend refused to help. Beginning of my bad credit.

Another bleeding ulcer 1984. This time I was in college, went to the doctor sooner since I only had to convince myself. Still lost fifteen pounds. People always called me anorexic.

Anaphylactic shock 1976. Reaction to an allergy shot. Dreamed I was climbing a golden staircase to heaven until they restarted my heart. Woke up disappointed.

Passed a kidney stone 1982. Woke up crying from the pain. Couldn't get out of bed or down the stairs for help. Kept passing out. Finally crawled to my sister's room. She wouldn't wake up until I screamed, "Fire!"

Bucked off my horse 1978. Landed on a good-sized rock. Knocked out, again. 4th concussion.

Dehydration and exhaustion 1988. They said I work too much and would have to slow down. I drink more water now.

Another ectopic pregnancy 1997. They said I should have a kid as soon as possible if I was ever going to have any. That didn't work out so well.

Knocked out 1972. By Hud Yerby in a dodge ball game. He had a crush on me, hit me as hard as he could to show how much he liked me. Head slammed into the gym wall. My 2nd concussion.

Bleeding ovarian cyst 2000. Slow bleed. Took eight weeks to find the source of the pain. Had been bleeding almost three months and would have died within the day if the ultrasound technician hadn't suggested looking lower. The doctors were astounded at what they saw. They wrote articles for medical journals; I am referred to as Patient X.

References available upon request

The Way to Dover

*Know'st thou the way to Dover?
There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully in the confined deep:
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
from that place I shall no leading need.*

Gloucester King Lear

A Visit with my Father

I drink his coffee
near the blue-white flames
framed by a brown metal box.
The grey hearth-rug catches the ice
shed from my shoes.

I drink his coffee (black)
as the morning's sharp light
from the kitchen window
creeps across his silhouette
wreathing the edges of his coarse
blue jeans and jacket. In a shadow
defined by light,

I drink his coffee (black
with bitter grounds)
while he tilts back his head
and vacuum-like he siphons
the thimbleful of alcohol
that remains unfrozen
from each can in the six-pack.

Hand-Me-Downs

My eyes weren't always this hue of blue.
The dust storms of Texas made them dark
and red, burning color into them.
Black ashes rimmed lines around their skin
I couldn't wash away when styles changed.
See, they are very like the ones that
you paint fresh each day. Be careful, child,
this earth blinds you, consumes your body
to feed the children you've left behind.
Cattle and men made these potatoes
as did the walnuts and apples ripening
to puddles of decay on this soil.
Remember what made them when you eat.
And only eat to live, not to please.
The fat ripen to a quicker death.
We bury seeds and harvest their youth
taking from them old age; be cautious
of the too green fruits and the too ripe.
They both will make you sick, like seeing
this family's blood drained too soon or late
by wars and threshing machines— or fire.

You, little one, who want to be burned
instead of buried inside this land,
what will your ashes feed? Your children
and nephews will be hungry for you.
Being a woman you should know that.
Mothers eat the afterbirth, children
the afterdeath.

Look here in my eyes,
those beans in mason jars I put up
yesterday, you will break their seals and
even after I am dead, eat them.
You, who was born here, who ran away
from the blood and sweat this life demands
will come back heavy and overripe
to lie down in these fields and smell the earth
knowing for the last time you're to home,
that fancy dresses and clever words
mean nothing to this dirt or these crops.
The wind, sun, and rain will follow you,
just like the smell of cattle and wheat

all tugging at your womb full of cramps,
bleeding heavy, stretching cords you think
you've cut.

I see them around your neck.
It doesn't matter the coat hangers
you scrape yourself out with, no matter
how much blood you flush down toilets
or soak up in pads— that tug will stay,
squeezing breath until you have no choice
but to do right by who you are, by who
you were born to be.

You came here for the closets; I know.
Take my dresses and my cashmere coats,
the silk seamed stockings your grandfather
brought from Normandy I never wore,
and this gold band— it will grow to fit
just like those gloves and hats you'd drag out,
not more than ten years ago, to play with,
when the wind would knock the t.v. out.
Wear them again in their faded style.
It's your time to dazzle and ripen,
but pass them on when your stench begins.
Your own decay, like the one I have now
that perfume and powder can no longer hide.
You will know it when your own children
can no longer eat when you are present.

And all your dreams will be of harvest,
of these potatoes moist in the ground.
Your womb will bleed again one last time.
That will be your sign to come to home
and lie down in this earth beside me.

Daily News

He sits in the lobby staring at a television without sound, a green or red rubber band across his knuckles still from the morning newspaper—his removable tattoo, my grandmother called it, hating the indentation it left across his left hand like a wedding band.

He was born right before the modern age that passed across south Texas like a dust storm maddening the believers and embittering the farmers with their hand sown fields of wheat and soy. As a boy he'd plowed the fields one row at a time following a mule he'd learned to beat with a two-by-four.

In his dreams he remembers the feel of moist, warm soil in, the taste of fresh, sweet corn so tender you could eat it off the stalk, and even the dung he'd hauled that burned his eyes. But that was before, before he bought the tracts of land and the self-propelled combines, before he asked for my grandmother's hand in marriage, before all his food was store bought, grown out of a field he'd never seen and harvested by people he'd never know.

He could read them, though, in the newspapers, see photographs of their droughts and floods. He'd walk the quarter mile down the dirt drive every morning and stand, his elbow crooked, resting against the top of the aluminum mail-box as he

searched for the debris-cloud the delivery driver kicked up as his truck tires barreled down the gravel road.

The driver would place the papers in his hand--*The Times, The Sun, The Daily*. As he walked back up the drive, he'd slowly strip one of its rubber band and caress the headlines. My grandmother timed the percolator to have just finished as he reached the porch, giving her enough time to pour his cup of coffee and sit down at the other end of the table before he came through the door. The dining room filled with silence as his eyes ate the words on the pages between them.

When the cataracts took his reading eyes, he moved his morning routine from the dining room table to the easy chair in front of the t.v. My grandmother sat his coffee cup on a tray beside him and returned to the kitchen, so she did not have to watch as he ran his fingers across the paper while listening to the newscaster tell him what words he might be touching. She was gone two days before he missed his coffee enough to look in her room, and he waited another two days to call the coroner.

At night, after lights out, he lies on his back and watches the second hand move and strokes the rubber band as he tries to remember if it's time to plant or to harvest.

Forgotten Miracles

She hated wrinkles and aging,
always ironed and starched
even her plainest cottons
until polyester—the finest
invention for ironing women,
hard to sew but easy to keep
looking ready-made.
Colors wouldn't fade much
nor age. Instead, as the fabric
wore, it would pill up in little balls

she could easily scrape away
with opened shears
or a dull knife.

“To be put away in,”
said the note we found wrapped
with the pink polyester gown
she bought at eighty, receipt
tucked inside its collar still
in case she changed her mind
about the color, style, or size.
No matter how long her journey
to Heaven took,

she wanted to be fresh.

That must have been the reason
for the fifty-two jars lining the shelves
and cabinets in her bathroom. Every brand
of miracle cream t.v. ever offered. Her time

machines to keep her fresh,
so God would remember

she was young once
and pretty.

A few she could have wrapped
in polyester to be buried with her
like Dead Sea scrolls to reapply
the moment before she reached
Heaven's gate. Beauty,

her only ticket in.

Although she'd planned well,
she wasn't quite ready for that
trip. As her chest tightened

she grabbed what creams
she could. The coroner pried
the open jars –three of them!—
from her hands, breaking two
of the fingers on her left
hand and three on the right, fingers
the mortician found a way to hide
for the viewing by way
of a small live rose bouquet.

How she must have hated
those flowers once they withered.

Death of a Horse Trader

He closed his eyes . . .
No longer bargaining with God
to stay around until the little ones
got through college, got married, got
children, got old. His final trade
was a Chevy for a Dodge;
that would have to be good enough.
A comfortable seat with a motor
to take him to places to eat
food he could no longer fix
for himself or even taste.

Bacon grease rotted on the stove
from his final attempt at cooking.
It permeated every room until he began
to believe it was his person he smelled.
He was afraid to clean it up

because then he would know for sure.
He stopped washing his clothes
perfuming the air with something other
than decay, but the over-ripeness
assaulted his thoughts.

Day and night no longer mattered,
only the smell and the sound—the tick,
tick, tick of his heart slowly slowing
until he could not remember
what the smell was nor
what was the sound, that tick.

Heredity

I've got a drunkard's
genes. Whiskey is the
major factor in the DNA
structure that formed
every cell in my
body, the major
building block on which,
literally, I
continually stumble.

One night, . . . well,
all nights, my old man
got drunk but
this one night he fell
out of his pick-up
on a gravel road
on his face:
Twenty-eight stitches
across his forehead
and down his cheek.

In fact, I did the same thing,
another night, except in
the rain, not on gravel,
but in dirt near
our driveway, and from
my Cutlass, lower to the ground.

My foot was still tangled
in the pedals and the dirt was
fairly comfortable. Good thing
the thunder woke Mom up,
or they might not have found me
until the next day. Probably dead,

drowned like Ira Hayes in a gutter.
Adults whenever they thought
I couldn't hear them, whispered
to one another that I was destined
from the start to be a drunkard,
considering my genes and all.

When I was younger,

I wondered why my mom kept
buying me drunkard's
blue jeans and what exactly
a drunkard was. By eighth grade,
unfortunately, a bottle of Evan Williams
taught me the definition.

Brand

Every woman adores a fascist
—Sylvia Plath

In my eye's frame he stands
and shadows all I see.
I blink and rub,
 rub and blink,
squirt Visene and even belladonna
at him. To bully him out,
I clench my eyes, or drown him
in tears: He blurs
 and falters. Still,

his voice prevails, coffee
stained and catarrh thick.
His words decades old gravel
against my eardrums. I shake my
head, poke fingers and cotton
swabs down my ear canals. Still, I hear
 and smell his voice,

 see his shadow
 in the margins
 of my sight.

Directions, now obsolete, on how
to gap a spark plug bounce
from brain to cochlea to temporal
bone, they hang about my outer ear. I
 tighten my jaw against the sound,
 bracing for the invisible blow,

bridging the gap until my childhood
and adulthood are one. My hands
I rub to smooth away tire-iron
grease no longer there. No
matter the soap or lotion, the oily-grit
remains on fingers a century
of manicures can't fix. Silk will
 always be their enemy.

 He bought me, at seven,
 my first jeans jacket—Levi-

Strauss, his brand. Before
the store's mirror he stood, shoulders
hunched a bit, cupped as if
lighting a cigarette in the
wind, and most important the last
two buttons—not just the last—
of his own jacket buttoned. He then
showed me, exactly. His brand. Still I can't
help but button on any
jacket the bottom two.

At nine I stole a pack of his
Camels, filterless and wedding-dress white.
I tucked, not rolled, them in my shirt
sleeve. The man I (briefly)
married had the same move—
drop your left shoulder,
slow like a shrug, and slide
the pack gently from
neck to sleeve.

I practiced the quick-wrist-flick required
to pop a single cigarette half-way up
from the soft pack, practiced tapping
the ink-end on the dash
of a motorless Mustang, stacked
as if for a wake on blocks. Finally,

the smoke curled in O's around
my head as I hunched my shoulders
against the constant non-existent wind—his
but for gender and age
his doppelganger
almost. I keep

trying to exhale him—only
nothing but smoke comes out.

The Birthday Card

*Go to; they are not men of their words. They
told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie—
I am not agueproof.
--King Lear*

Handwriting, scrawled across an envelope,
fractured and broken ink strokes, hieroglyphs
to be deciphered by further digging:
No return address—postage mark too faint
to read. Inside the envelope a check
for twenty-four dollars and zero cents
made out, I think, to my older sister;
her first name, though misspelled, yields several clues.
The printed bank's name and Arabic numbers
aren't hard to read, but all the letters scripted
above the lines for "payee," "amount," "payer"
require patience to reveal their truth.
You'd think the signature would be familiar,
but overripe hands fumbled with the pen.

His swagger mesmerized me as a child.
His hands he'd clap to pray to God, that boom
an echo God himself could not ignore
till rain might pour across the fields, such power
I used was for God—or almost God
because his hand, upraised, rivaled the one
God showed Isaiah when the world was smaller.
The skies would darken at Granddaddy's fist.
But so would my grandmother and sisters.
From his mouth words fell like baker's chocolate,
pelting me as did the raindrops that shook
the ground they hit slowly enough to count.
but still I adored him, stood next to him
as he divined the heavens—looking up
with him, eyes fixed on his hands raised, not seeing
the man at all. Not seeing him at all.
Only his power, his wonder-working power,
his hands.

But none of that stays with me now,
nothing but these broken lines, faded symbols.

At the Woolworth's Counter

“Just three Coca Colas,”
she said to the boy behind
the counter. One for me and
one for each of my sisters. We
had been shopping for school
clothes, one nice dress, two
tops, and one pair
of pants or jeans each.
My mother counted out
change for the drinks, slowly
pushing each coin away
from her purse. We

watched, eyes wide as
the boy pulled the red
and white spigot to fill the
tall soda glasses. The wooshing
sound and smell of dark
bubbles caused my feet to dance
and tingled my fingers. My eyes,
nose, and ears told my mouth what
to expect. I almost swooned
when, winking at my oldest sister, he
pumped a splash of vanilla
in each glass

at no extra charge.
My sisters greedily
slurped down their sodas
as I spun on my stool, stopping
only at every third pass
to take a sip, savoring
the sweet darkness
of the bubbles. My mother

never ordered a soda
out, and we girls didn't
often get them either.
although we always walked
slowly past
the counter and begged, begged
her for one with our

eyes. She walked
slowly too, running
her finger along
the edge of the cool
counter top. That day

I watched her as I spun
and stopped to sip
my soda. As she smiled
down at me, in one

sudden gulp her
emptiness engulfed me,
and I knew as I know her now.
She is thirsty, so very
thirsty. She has
always been
thirsty.

Blunt Trauma

I keep hitting my head on things
on purpose usually, but
sometimes it's a welcome

accident. The doctors tell me
I should stop before something
regrettable happens. My sixth

grade science teacher,
Mr. Bland, told grisly stories
of boxer's cauliflower

ears and detached retinas,
gave us detailed accounts
of head-injury autopsies.

Actually, enough concussions can
create a stalactite inside the skull that
over time builds up like a giant nail

slowly piercing the brain
until it kills a person. All
I want, really, is to wake up

in a hospital, find my family
standing around my bed statue-
like and ask them, honestly,

“Who are you people, anyway?”

Fever Sleeping

*Asleep you are bigger than the night
but your dream fits inside this room.*

—Octavia Paz

As They Carry Me Away from his House by Ambulance

I. What He has Heard

Let not my love be called idolatry
just because I own a few photographs,
purchased locks of your hair, a few quality
life-sized mannequins, and have tattooed my calves
with the dates of our first kiss, our wedding,
the honeymoon, each month's unborn child (sadness)
I lie in your room each night, change your bedding
while you are away and hope the blackness
won't descend when no baby burrows out).
This problem I've encountered with conception
is what has driven you away; no doubt
you are grief-stricken, too, and need protection
from all these minor problems we've endured.
I can't believe you think I can't be cured.

II. What I Meant to Say to Him

I can't believe you think I can't be cured
of all these problems we've so long endured.
You are grief-stricken, too, and need protection.
And what has driven you away; no doubt
is this problem I have with conception
left over when no baby burrows out,
while you are away hope turns to blackness
I lie in your room each night, change the bedding
from our honeymoon, unborn children, sadness.
The dates with our first kiss, and our wedding,
tattooed on pint-sized mannequin—their calves.
Locks of purchased hair, some are quality.
But just because I own some photographs,
let not my love be called idolatry.

A Dangerous Conversation

Somewhere between Paz and Bunuel,
sleeping and waking became one.
Your eyes touched my skin and I fell

naked into Morpheus's arms, still
speaking, but only to you. Undone
somewhere between Paz and Bunuel

when your words changed from sound to smell
not from smoke but from fire, when
your eyes touched my skin, I fell

against your words and burned until
my eyes blurred making you my only one
somewhere between Paz and Bunuel.

Your breath, as we talked, grew tactile
fingers, and the words from your tongue
(like your eyes) touched my skin and I fell.

The lies I didn't know I could, I *would* tell
my husband and myself lie near me, stunned
in the darkness between Paz and Bunuel,
where your eyes still touch my skin as I fall.

Russellville, AR—What I Remember

I don't remember the last time I saw you
because not until years later, maybe
not until now, did it occur to me
I would not see you again. I do remember
those mid-nights when we sat smoking, drinking
coffee, watching reruns of *The New Avengers*, talking
and talking while outside the world came and went.
You on one end of that long, ugly, gold couch
that doubled as your bed, me on the other end
laughing and laughing until I couldn't breathe
and begged for quiet.
I can remember how the door squeaked
as you'd sneak out early mornings and go down
to that tiny, tiny corner store to bring me a cold Diet Coke
and sit on the edge of my bed coaxing me awake
by holding the can just outside
my reach,
how on cold mornings we'd huddle
in the bathroom by the gas heater and eat
Chocolate Malt O Meal.
I still remember how you explained cadmium red to me
and threw out all my pthalo blues
and greens and how you rubbed your fingers across my lips
the first time before you kissed me.
I can even remember the sound
of your car's engine as you pulled up the drive. I still
hear it when I'm
almost asleep.
I can't forget how once I waited for you
at an airport
practicing my casual wave and nonchalant
smile as if I saw you
every day. I kept
practicing. In every art museum and gallery
I expected to turn
and see you. Every bus stop and train
station, but there was only that one
airport, when I almost
saw you again, that one plane
you never got on.

What is an Aging Beauty Queen to Do?

One day, suddenly, I woke up,
and tried to dress myself.
It didn't work. I said to myself,
"I don't know whose ass this is
or whose tits. Maybe someone
while I was sleeping, stole mine."

Yesterday,
I could dress myself
in my own clothes because I had
my own ass and my own tits. Who
do you think would take someone else's ass?
Tits, I understand, but an ass?

So here I sit, stand, and lie
as I button and zip
some fat lady's butt, painfully,
into my favorite pencil skirt
stretching the seams beyond repair.
And on top of that lovely bottom
figure, I have to keep stuffing
some old lady's saggy boobs
back into my undersized bra
to keep them from
 plunging
 down
 to my
 navel
 each time
 I move. I can't
sit. I can't walk. I can't even
breathe. I don't know what

to do. Placard the neighborhood
with posters of my stolen
body parts with "please return"
jotted underneath together with
my name, address, phone number?
Should I hold a press
conference? Look directly
into the camera and cry,
"Oh, the humanity"?
I mean,

for the love of God,
what is this world coming to
that a woman can't fall asleep
for fear of waking up with some
other body stretched and stapled all
over her real one.

I knew I should have had the good parts
tattooed when I was twenty.

Regret

And if you ask how I regret that parting
that last kiss and the almost kiss after?

And if you ask how I regret
lying in my marriage bed?

And if you ask how
I whisper your name
in quiet spaces?

And if you ask,
I would say yes.

And if?

Pageless Nights

for Paul Lake

When in the chronicle of wasted time
my name gets billed as main contributor,
will I regret not having more poems rhyme,
or more in iambs, more pentameter,
more in elaborate forms like villanelles,
instead of all this confessional crap
vomited across the page as kiss and tell—
malformed, misshapen, as if I just slapped,
down on paper, hodge-podge, the words without
for hours on end, working over each pause,
every image, as though I'd never doubt
my genius? How this question gnaws
at me, this legacy not quite fulfilled,
these pages empty whether blank or filled.

Icarus Before the Fall

Standing in line, ticket in hand,
staring at the criss-cross bracing
wondering when it was last checked
and if the checker rides the rails.
People behind me shove ahead;
I stand still looking up

until the ticket taker shouts, "Next up!"
and I move forward to unhand
my ticket, as pointing ahead
he indicates the front car. Bracing
myself, I sit, resolved, but unsure of the rails.
Should I trust whoever checked,

or was supposed to have checked,
the braces? The chain pulls us up
clack, click, clack, click, clack, click—the rails
shimmying slightly. I clench my hands,
knuckles white, nails piercing flesh, braced,
clenched, prepared for the drop ahead

down—down the dark tunnel ahead.
My bile rising, my panic is unchecked—
I swirl the blood in my mouth and brace
for another drop coming up,
dropping me out into nothing. My hands
grip the bar. I pray to the rails'

god (if there is a god of rails)
and prepare for the drop ahead.
If I could, I would lift one hand,
then the other, as the car sweeps past the checkered
landscape of faces peering up
at us, and lift myself, stop bracing,

almost, and fly away from the fear. I'd brace
myself for the thrill of the rails,
the tidal release from all that's pent up
inside of me, elated not to think ahead
to the turns and drops that can't be checked
nor known nor feared beforehand . . .

I will not escape my head; my hands
will never let go of the bracing
bar that nails me to these clattering rails.

Squatter's Rights

Today a round man in a yellow jacket
put a freshly printed sign in my front yard:
bright green "FOR SALE." Now any curious
passerby, on a whim, might, just like that,
stop and take a peek inside at places
strangers aren't supposed to see: my blue bedroom,
rust living-room rugs, ugly gold wallpaper
my mother loves—

I don't know that I want
the closing chapters of my childhood told
and told again through guided vivisection
of our private lives: *Here she cried over
her first boyfriend. There her parents fought.
Under this loose board, she hid cigarettes,
and here, she smoked them.*

It amazes me
how names etched in paper with black ink
can sever my mooring lines, can make null
and void any squatter's rights I once owned.

Grave Robber

*for Sheila Scott, a poet who graduated
from college the same year I did*

At the kitchen sink she stood and drank, one
after the other, cups of water from the tap, waiting
for him to return with food bungied to the back

of his cheap scooter. Not thirsty, but hungry she waited
silent as the mountain she's stranded on. Maybe
today and certainly tomorrow he'd come,

crotch full of cash—shotgun across his knees.
Once, he brought a chicken still bloody
from the collision of semi and car, trailing feathers

Hansel and Gretel style from wreck to skillet
where she pan fried its pieces soaked in lard
as a sort of sacrifice for a Muse, maybe Calliope—
I could have stolen that image

but didn't till now.

I think she always thought she wouldn't lose
control, her hands white on the wheel,
when she hit the trees like napalm
and rolled, end to end, without words, fire

blackened the poems in her head to ashes.
They blow across me now like locusts,
not where they eat, but where they are eaten.

I Was a Conscientious Objector

in the first grade
when, one rainy afternoon,
Coach Rankin told me
to stand against the wall
at one end of the gym,
then handed Hud Yerby
(who stood at the front
of the line) a kick ball.

I was supposed
to dodge but refused.
I knelt down, shut
my eyes and, as though
the tornado sirens had gone off,
covered my head with
both arms. Saigon
had not fallen yet, and wouldn't
for another four years.

Still, I listened as Nixon,
our President, interrupted Bugs
Bunny shooting at Daffy Duck
to tell me about the war (a war
I later learned in junior high
was only a conflict).
I had heard my daddy
and granddaddy late
at night talk bad about the draft
dodgers, who had fled our country,
their conversation punctuated
by the clinking of each tin can
against the linoleum as it rolled
off the kitchen table.

More and more Sundays
Mothers would weep in church.
I did not understand why
whenever the choir sang "Onward
Christian Soldiers" they looked
as I felt each time Hud Yerby
beaned that kick ball
directly toward someone's head.

I only knew that I hated
P.E. on rainy days, not only
because I got minuses
instead of pluses on my
report card, but also
because I didn't think it
right for a teacher
to make one student
hit another
on purpose.

Sitting Around the Kitchen Table With Some Atheists

*Just as I am and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot
To thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God I come, I come*

Hymn

I remember stained glass windows
made of plastic, the red carpet up
the aisles, the new hymn books with “Holy,
Holy, Holy” on the first page, pews
with straight backs instead of curved, Mother’s
eye open down at me while she prayed,

my head straight up looking, while I prayed,
as morning or evening light through the windows
rose, then fell with the organ. Mother’s
voice, an alto like God’s, gathered up
the low refrain. As I hung from the pews
and stared, the empty mouths sang “hoo-lee.”

I was six that time I thought I felt holy.
I walked, while they bowed their heads and prayed,
through their soft murmurs along the pews
pulled toward the preacher by the flood light
behind his head that shone straight up
the length of the bare cross. Mother’s

hand reached to hold me back sensing, as mother’s
do, that I was not yet ready for the Holy
Spirit to enter me and fill me up.
But Brother Ed had already bowed my head. He prayed—
and they say the light pouring through the windows
flickered; turning, I walked by the pews

hands clasped in front, greeting each in each pew
as an equal before Go—until I got to Mother’s
row. There I knelt, still unworthy, across from the window
with Judas at Gethsemane and Jesus’ holy
face drenched in tears. Thunder clapped while they prayed.
I lifted my head and tried to look up

but could not find His face. Then they stood up

and shadowed me with their prayers. God's pews,
stiff and hard, pushed them up when they prayed,
even as they sat, but not me. Mother's
gestures I mimicked, stared at the word "holy."

Looking up I saw it fall from Mother's
mouth and vibrate the pews. My *holy*
I spoke, not prayed—no light through the windows.

Exception

Wrapped in swaddling clothes (they didn't have children's sized robes), I stood next to the cold tile wall waiting to walk down the concrete steps into the frigid, clear water. Just past my seventh birthday, out of the devil's number and ready to be good. Brother Ed called my name out to the congregation. Slowly I stepped

into the water, which was not as clear once I was in it as it was when I stood above it or looked up at it from the pews in the church. My robe sucked up the water and weighed me down. Each step became harder to navigate due to the weight of the water and the size of my robe. At the last step, I was finally pulled under by the heaviness of the water-filled fabric. I flailed my arms hoping for salvation. Brother Ed grabbed my neck with both hands at first and held my head up above the water line. When it seemed I could tread the water, he clenched the back of my robe with his left hand and raised his right hand in the air, signaling God and the congregation—then shouted

his prayer into the microphone hovering above his head like a tiny, black halo. My long hair was entwined in his fingers as he yanked my neck back with his left hand while shoving my chest down into the cloudy water with his right. Sour liquid filled my throat and trickled into my lungs. My concrete robes trussed my arms and legs, dragging me toward the drain. I thought

to meet my maker as the water forced past my esophageal flap and poured into my lungs, but Brother Ed hauled me up by my hair and shoved me over to the exit steps. The congregation

gasped as the baptismal water turned a pale red. The steps had gashed my leg open from ankle to knee. Brother Ed looked down at his once white robes now an odd pink. He looked across to where I sat coughing up God's water, his face a mixture of fear and awe.

Finished—finished—it must be nearly finished
—Samuel Beckett

The Pruning

You're on earth; there's no cure for that.

—Samuel Beckett

Puncture here.
Then cut alongside this scar
to end this incision near the navel.

Cross right
under the rib-cage,
slicing between
 these gall-bladder scars.

Scarred tissue
below muscle will blunt
your blade. Pause. Remove.
 Sharpen on stone (as needed).

Continue
the cut so you can lift
skin and muscle back
 like a tent-flap.

Gently tug as though
on a zipper that's stuck.
Tug. Pull. Fold back the flap.
 Wait. See

those scars there?
The damage coagulated
around the womb?

Those puddles of spoilage
from previous evictions
blight what properties
 remain intact.

But nothing
original comes out
today. Just scoop (as needed)

any blood-like pudding
from the pools. Find the roots
of fibrous bands pressing

against her organs
and snip, bottom
then top, unwinding the tissue

as you remove.
Whatever organs are left
should expand, breathe out,

so to speak. Next,
bring a light to shine
inside thirty-five minutes or so

until the color brightens
before slowly
 very slowly
 reclosing

 the flap
 shutting in
 what remains

 unreachable
 by knife
 by spoon

Vita

Laurie A. Williams was born in Dumas, Texas in 1964. She moved to Bentonville, Arkansas in 1973 and remained there until graduation from high school. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Arkansas Tech University in 1987. Currently she teaches English at Isidore Newman School.