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This is How I Sing to You

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This is How I Sing to You

Sarah Gray

**M.A., English, University of Missouri—St. Louis, 2005
B.S., Secondary Education, English emphasis,
University of Missouri—St. Louis, 2003**

**A thesis submitted to the Graduate School at the
University of Missouri—St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Poetry**

April 2013

Advisory Committee

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Abstract

***This is How I Sing to You* is a collection of narrative poetry which sheds the notion that such subject matter is easily dismissed. These poems resonate, follow a life and respect the press of time: placing you somewhere near the beginning and allowing you to find your way to what, for now, is the end. In a life, and in these poems, there is losing and finding; gift-giving and truth-telling; staying put and leaving; looking back and moving forward. There is sky and some rain. There are dogs. There is a spider. There is lots of singing.**

THIS IS HOW I SING TO YOU

Sarah Gray

*For my mother, looking back;
for my daughter, moving forward.*

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My ordinary ear

fields bent in breeze
hid me till I was nothing

but heartbeat

sneakers
flattening grass

I heard birds speak in verse

harmonies
my ordinary ear couldn't translate

sun flooded the sky

it fell

I turned for home
claiming no sister but a clutch of trees

acres and rocks
half-buried

ONE

Your long-held sigh

When I was nine

the table swallowed me to my chin
kept us centered.

Mom rubbed her thighs like stones,
eyes heavy
blued by rain.

She offered my father pastries.
Slid the white box across the table.
Said *please*.

I knew my place

We sweated through Texas rain in a Ryder van,
engine heat melting my new school shoes.
I swabbed the windshield with KFC napkins,
tried hard not to breathe.

Antiques wrapped in newsprint—Roseville,
cigar tins, electric-line insulators—
waited for the snap of blue tablecloths,
wrinkles releasing like your long-held sigh.

In the ash-dawn, we'd stake our spot, unload the van.
You'd muscle out a Hoosier cabinet inch by inch
from deep to edge and ease it to ground
like oak was gold. I revealed Coke trays,

Depression glass, a case of buttons that claimed,
“I like Ike!” and arranged them twice
and once again. I saved boxes for packing up:
some things always came back.

You'd tell me to man the space
so you could grab a beer, a pork steak,
trusting folks wouldn't talk me down.
I knew my place, wanted to please you.

Returning, you slipped me damp bills
so I would slip away from you
and the woman who was not my mother.
I wandered far, lost myself in crowds

and dust and parking lots until I knew
I'd find you alone, van packed half as full.
Rolling those two-lane highways, we found
the Sleepy Hollow and its empty pool,

ate vending machine dinners
by the television's buzz and glow.
Polyester beds promised rest, another day
driving somewhere, maybe home.

This is theirs

She lights a wooden match then turns a knob
so gas meets flame:
light gasps beneath the pan.

The stove is old and brown. The faucet drips
in this place she lives with her child
incidentally brought to life.

Together they own a couch, a TV,
a dog with a yellow tail.
An acre of green and weeds, a septic tank.
A red car rests outdoors, mottled
with sap from trees that tell her
nothing ever stays beautiful.

She hums Carole King
while she smokes by the door.
This is theirs, she thinks,
it is hers: blue flame
snap of fat table set and waiting.

Consider your gifts

She marked days between men,
flattened pages, turned blank leaves
one by one, uncertain
why she opened it now, missing
what she did not put down,
could not remember.

Only one page was filled:
the first, penned the day of giving—

it was a gift from a friend.
Lavender linen like skin,
pages white as eggs.

Clearing a drawer,
she found it: cover gray,
paper stiff,
an accusation.

Some lines from Dad

Hey kid

I messed up again

still don't know how or why
but I'll tell you this

when I get out of here

when

I get out of here

when I

get out of here

I will own

the last ten years

broken glass

the blood

every single December

but if you

want to continue this standoff

that's your right I suppose

I myself cannot function

on bitterness and resentments

What it says when you leave

I used to strip green-forked tongues
for switches—a bitterness
my bare legs would swallow.

My mother watched from the window.

Today, the thickets are gone.
The sky is clear of all
but two clouds so loose that blue
spills onto this:

mailbox and prairie grass.
Three concrete steps
that rise to nothing.

In every tree grows a metaphor
—for Grandma Ruby

Her chest is a map
surveyed shoulder to breastbone.
It's paperwhite.
Her scalp is pink beneath a smoke of hair
that strokes my chin as I say goodbye.

I knew her beauty shop, the astronaut
helmets that dried her curls, the roast beef
and *au jus* we shared after, her strictures:
do not ever slurp your straw. Sit up.
Never say *bull honkey*. Blow your nose
and do not sniffle. Close your legs.

In her half-wild garden, she let me
plant an Arbor Day scrub pine. I marked
years by that tree, saw it surpass me, sought
its quiet metered branches,
heard my dad cut it down.

TWO

Cataloging ruins

That could have been the death of me

Shortly after you lifted me
over the threshold they became
my bones: those planks
lined in a straight shot

pointing from entryway to exit
to the alley and across the alley
to a cemetery
flat and endless.

The dust, my enemy:
evidence of us and our
ever sloughing skin,
of the dog discarding hair

to free her undercoat.
I cornered our remains
and swept them daily,
let them slide like sand

into the garbage can. I filled
the pail with Murphy's
and water, scalded
floors till they gleamed

like pennies
in a dead man's eyes.

The acts of marriage

I

A diner at night.
A boy with a weak chin pours coffee,
lights my cigarettes and lets me tease out
a few words about Jesus.
This excites me, a girl
who has tasted neither milk nor meat of God.

II

He carries me over the threshold
and lets me down
upon our brand-new mattress.

We make friends and hold Bible studies.
We page through truth.
We trace the letters.

III

Here, the unmarried cannot hold hands
or kiss in view of others. Blessed
with freedom to do both, we do neither.
We study angels and demons
and the light of righteousness is clear
when I do not let him hold me.

IV

Back home, we are strangers
watching movies in the dark, skipping church.

We find dogs to worship us.
Their smiles distract us so we laugh.

V

One summer morning, the girl-dog dies;
her body comes home in a garbage bag.

Days stretch long and the other dog
finds loss deep inside his skin.
He bears it in the bones
he takes from room to room.

We cannot meet his gaze.

What we sow but do not keep

You loved the desert prophets,
seeking God in heat and hunger.

I was an altar boy, ready
to snuff your locusts and your honey.

Each summer, you grew tomatoes.
You would not eat them raw but loved

to watch juice drip down my chin.
Most moldered.

A spider, dead for months
hung by her dusty thread.

My hand pulled back in fear
each time I passed her by.

Patrimony

I got your brown eyes,
your love of all things abandoned.
I'm drawn to bones and wavy glass,
what speaks of time
and imperfection.
I love dogs like you do.

I used to trace your scars:
those crooked roads
that spanned from breast-bone
to belly-button.
I just knew I came from you,
displaced your organs,
broke your ribs,
emerged
bloody and mad.

I've yet to embrace my hairy arms
or our Czech name.
It glues my throat.
It is a stubborn sap.

How to go out

My step-father went out in a pool of blood
staining sheets. A green quilt, their mattress.

She bleached linens in five-gallon buckets
lining the kitchen. With each soak
water grew pink and cold.

He went out with a case of beer,
a pack of Marlboro Reds.
Bic tucked in his suit pocket
like a boutonniere.

In their room she found his gifts:
stained Indians cap, a pocket knife.
Grade-school pictures of his kids,
some *Playboys*. A jar of coins.

When Maggie died

I came home to silence
and knew she was gone—even more
knew she wouldn't come home—
that it was you who'd lost her.

Orange and white squirm.
Muscle and tail. A place we could meet
and know what it meant to love.
What it was to forget each day.

Your dad brought her home,
removed her collar. Her tags
jingled in his hands.
I went inside.

I never thought to miss finding here
and there what she chose to chew:
chapters of the Bible, your winter socks,
straight tulle edges of my wedding veil.

In defense of collecting memories

Most of it is easy:
I take the couch, he

takes the loveseat,
the weathered farm-bench

and its scaling paint.
The pantry we divide

evenly, using gallon bags
to measure sugar, cornmeal,

flour's cloud and dust.
With spices, we take turns

like we're forming teams
for gym class, selecting

the strong, the versatile.
CDs take deliberation.

Each song a memory to sustain
or to forget. With some,

I am generous and sacrifice.
Dylan, Marley I hoard in spite.

Then only the photo albums
remain. I go first, knowing

that thumbing through
what was left would break me.

It takes a paring knife to slice
London from the page, the lone

red phone booth in Scottish fields,
all my bridesmaids, smiling.

I take our dog, now dead,
our friends at Christmas.

I leave the captions
like placards cataloging ruins.

What you find in a thrift store

Shoes you discarded, straps
tight around ankles swollen
from St. Louis summers:
that noose rubbed raw.

The jacket placed once
around your shoulders
for a wedding in November,
wind breathing down your neck

like a lover you should have left
but didn't. Then dinner with friends,
drinks beyond memory.
No dancing.

Pants you refused because you wanted
to look just-so and didn't.
Blouse you shed and gave the floor
that night you chose,
succumbing

to lips near your ears,
your chin. Mouth
open as a newling sparrow,
eager for what is given,
then discarded.

THREE

Just enough root to survive

In the beginning

Seven days of waking
eating breathing
between kisses

I make coffee half sleeping
pleased to hear water
whistling and hot

You blush as I wake you
the way I do to say
hello it is morning

This is what we wished for

With each rain
our home takes water.

Drops, like birds in rows,
line up to wait and fall

from sash to swollen sill.
Wet sand and horsehair:

the whole wall is heavy.
Plaster blisters

from jamb to floor.
Our house is thirsty

and all my dreams
are water full.

It drips from chimneys,
breaches thresholds,

missiles in
through mortar chinks

and always rises.
Shallows deepen to waves,

soon suck our thighs
and waists.

Its weight takes
some getting used to.

Most mornings

We take it spoon by spoon
and pretend we are family.
We use white napkins,

break plates, unwind hours
like a backwards clock.
The calendar resets to April.

We wish it were last April.

At night, we sleep deeply,
sleep like we're dead,
and when we wake

it takes twice as long
to shake the hours.
They are not hours.

They are days.
They are months.
The mirror confirms this.

April is the ghost in my dreams.

She whispers rain and brings fire.
She lies. Most mornings
she sews my eyes shut.

Reasons for not moving

You have more than halved your age in moves.
You remember most of them.

You cannot lift what you once could
and cannot pay the movers.

You know your neighbors.
They like you.

Something always breaks.

You want people at work to think
you are a stable, reliable person.

You are a stable, reliable person.

You gave your daughter
all the bubble wrap.

It is July.

Cardboard gives you paper cuts.
The taste of your blood is bitter.

You are not your mother.
You are not your mother.

Every surface a map

You stained trim in the hallway,
rag detailing spindles
the way a shiner shines shoes.
You worked on your knees;
you loved me.

The woodwork gleamed.
It held the solvent's bitter tang.

We painted and moved in our ways;
mechanical arms trained your roller up and down
like a metronome.
My brush steady only when it found its surface.
Always along the edges.

We kept it up
listed improvements minutely.
We did not speak of love
as something we used to have,
like baby teeth.

After you left, I wandered,
tracing plaster cracks,
the circuitry of wood.
Every surface
a map of me and you.

This is now the air we breathe:
dust from the cracks we widened,
the holes we filled.

Pastoral

Solitude under sun.
Wind and the news it brings—
places north, their scent
the same but colder.

Their ears flick to swaying grass,
to traffic. To move,
to feel the end of stillness.
To scatter flies.

Do they feel the pressing sky,
the senseless clouds adrift?
They are four stomachs,
a swishing tail.

They eat their world: the grass
they tear and walk upon,
leaving behind just enough
root to survive.

The second stage of love

Matching socks
from still-warm laundry

slick with static,
tossing bags of spinach

filled with something more
than good intentions,

pulling crabgrass in the yard.
The calloused sweep

along my cheek
marking me as yours.

Damp toothbrushes
leaning in a white cup.

Sighing springs.
The quilted den of sleep.

How to wait

On Saturday we curl our bodies
inward from the bed's far edges,
unfold our arms to find each other.
Your hand rubs my belly, round
with this life we hardly know
how to wait for. I am swollen
with sunlight and dreams:

the winter light is blue and I
wait. I smooth my crib's wooden rail,
watch shadows hide in curtains still
against the window, impatient
for the slippered count of feet,
for the door to swing wide,
for my mother to claim me.

Something to teach my daughter

I am driving, hands strangling
the wheel, fixed and ready

for a sudden stop— the blur
of a ball and its boy sailing after;

taillights bleating red
just before impact.

In the backseat mirror
I see her— feet up near her mouth,

hands grasping daylight—
and despite myself, begin to sing,

releasing partial notes until
her sapling-voice finds mine

and this is what we know:
roll down the windows, accept

the heat, let the whole sky in,
name everything beautiful.

The boy on the sidewalk.
The earth in its rotation.

Streetlights at dusk to remind us
it's time to go home.

The contract

Eliza goes to the park today,
gets a hat that looks like a strawberry,
eats gelato and makes faces
in the rear-view mirror,
chocolate ring around her mouth.
She grows teeth like a scientist

and wants to know if the fish at the zoo
are the same as the fish in her mouth.
They are both orange. It is strange
to parse the world with her, to choose
what to explain and what
to simplify. Today, it rains,
tomorrow, it may keep gray.

At home, she sleeps as she does,
tucked up tight, back to the world.
When she wakes, she arranges her fox,
her baby and her puppet-bear
and speaks to them, says that,

on the other side of that door
is such a world to see.
She'll show them all she knows
and calls us to come,
to meet her perfect need.

What I would not say

If my father died
I would be relieved.

Sometimes I like to drink
and let my daughter sleep,
flip the monitor and hear her breath,
a stopwatch ticking down.

I dream of being touched,
and not by my husband beside me.

There are mornings I wake
but pretend not to.

Let us note the irony in life

Last week, I sat in church to remember
my husband's father, a man more substantial
in mind and body than my dad ever was.
Even his ashes had more weight.
I watched my husband taste his tears
through Willie Nelson hymns,
the salute and shotgun echoes.
The acrid tang of absence.

Today it is Spring in Winter.
The weather does not know
that we are mourning.
House wrens and robins do not
acknowledge death, but I can't help
but suck it in and tongue it
as one would a horehound drop.
Or rend it like sassafras between the teeth:
green veins, stem, all.

FOUR

We shared the solitude

The good wife

Three weeks before my first wedding
I asked you to be a bridesmaid.
You loved the new me, church me.

I loved your soprano, loved how,
near you, I could sing and mean it.
You gave me books on martyrs, lent
a head covering, taught me to pray.

Nine months into your marriage
you had a boy and a hard time.
He ripped you and brought you mother's
silence: child like a bowling ball
you took everywhere.

In our square-stamp homes,
edged just past the county line,
we shared the solitude of housework,
the lie that well-made beds
were gifts to God and husbands.

Each year left us fatter, more careful.
I saw you as God's own, my friend
who made babies, sewed curtains, prayed
through Psalms. You held your tongue while mine
spoke every word that frightened.

I've seen your children smack each other
with swords made of sticks, watched them pout
and cry, kick soccer balls. Next year,
I will teach your oldest in high school.

At my second ceremony,
you sat in back, wore a long black sundress
and let your brown hair hang loose.
You stayed for dancing, had some wine.

The years, they keep on coming

I map my face. Fingertips
touch jawbone, temple, the mole

on my cheek, wrinkles framing
my lips. I am bothered

by friction, rough
passage of skin on skin.

I pour wine in distraction
as you offer me your glass.

"I'm near sixty," you say,
hair swept up like a wave,

red tube-top cupped
where breasts rest and fall,

overalls draped as silk
at your hips. I follow

your cigarette's ember,
I love your cadence,

voice the orange and purple
light of sunset. A kiss of wine

surrounds your mouth;
fans, folded, crowd your eyes.

What we do on Wednesdays

In the basement it's past ten

I feel every second
of my thirty-four years

watch the metronome
mark each beat

Rachel's poured her bottle
 bowed half her song
 a half-note off

I hear its tremolo

 swirl my glass

watch waves rise and fall

violin strings

taut
near breaking

wrench their notes
a measure too soon

Being friends with girls

In lunch line, note her wary shoulder:
recall her Cookie Monster mask,
your nurse hat, two plastic pumpkins;
contests at swings to see who
could go higher, shake the chains,
jump farthest and still stand.

See her hair, black and straight
like silence: boys careful not to stray
too close; girls taking note
of high-waist pants, her Keds,
laces frayed and dragging.

Inhabit still that fluorescent cafeteria,
replay her voice, scraping chairs.
Being friends with girls
tells you what it means
to know yourself,
to meet her unfed eye.
To say nothing.

What we learn

Here, if you walk halls too slowly,
bump a girl with your backpack

humped out a foot or so behind,
if you must wear an eye-patch,

you are marked. Here, the mark
weighs more heavily than books.

It is darker than the mole
on your face. Here,

you recite fifty-two prepositions,
label four chambers of the heart.

You strike a three-quarter beat, yet
nothing adds up: you will always

belt your pants too tight, solve
for x too quickly, raise your hand.

You recreate shades of mold so well
your teacher says she smells it.

Here, these detract from your sum,
diminish your value so you amount to

zero. Know this: you will forget
the order of operations, you

will forget on which side
the *vena cava* flows,

you will lose the rhythm
you were slow to follow.

We are all artists, losing
—for Elizabeth

Memories to sleep or age,
the last ten minutes of a dream
I would not choose to wake from,
the words I meant to say,
the location of my keys.

Ten minutes driving, somehow
not drifting from my lane, never
missing a gear-shift, a signal.
My muscles' recite the give and take
of gas and brake, a steady speed.

Every joke I've ever heard,
his trust, her favorite sweater.

A dog with a sideways wag,
another dog, a cat. Still more.
I like to think they came back home
to someone who was not me.

Rings to an ocean, a husband
or two, lines of poetry:
no small things, each enough
to sting and ache, lives
I lost suddenly or gradually
or perhaps abandoned.

To the sister I never had

I could have blamed so much on you.

But mostly I needed you
when mom's hairbrush went missing for days
and no one existed but me and her,
and like she said, "Why would I
hide my own damn brush, Sarah?"
Past her glare, I could only just see you,
see my hand raise, pointing,
my eyes narrow with victory.

You could've held me
the day dad threw drawers out windows
as smoke crept down the hall.
He was certain that flames
were hidden in the attic, smoldering
in anger, ready to loose the joists
of our house, its very framework.
I spent that night at a neighbor's,
I wet the bed. I needed you.

Or last Saturday, at the hospital with mom.
I watched a nurse attach electrodes,
lift her fat almost reverently.
I folded her socks, her stretched-out bra,
waited for CAT-scan results.
Waited for you.

So I have called you here, my sister,
to share with you this weight beyond pounds.
I have boxes in my basement full of rocks,
photos, all she said was precious.
Her application for Long-term
Disability or this other for Food Stamps.
She has radiation tomorrow.
You could take her to lunch .
Though I must tell you
her appetite's not what it used to be:
buy a roast beef for yourself, split the fries.

FIVE

We did not know we hungered

This is how I sing to you

I wake at six to hear you breathe
gulp the air, draw it in like rope
like you're at sea
and pulling anchor.

Each morning, in the basement
where we lived, you sang to me.
I woke to light in my windowless room.
I was your sunshine.

Now, I find your bed,
dawn reaching through night
the way children do at bedtime.
I check your pulse, sort
your meds, let you sleep.
I wake at six to hear you breathe.

Something you can recognize

In the middle of making Heart-Healthy Coffee Cake
I hear Mom call from the top of the stairs,
“Baby, I need a bowl to puke in.”
I take the largest, a stainless vessel. I watch
light slant through her last fine hair.

After I add the applesauce
I notice mold spotting the jar, brown
pupils lined with rust and kohl.
I acknowledge nothing, keep stirring,
watch the dry mix disappear.

Somehow we laugh, get the baby
to try Mom's wigs, watch her back away,
wanting nothing to do with Nana's trick hair.
I serve cake warm. We watch our crumbs and swallow,
practice what we term our “new normal,”
the life we didn't want but now is ours.

Thanksgiving

Here is breast, gristle,
white muscled threads,
skin and grease.
Potatoes and cousins.
Cranberries in a can.

We pile our forks
and jaw through the meat
of this, your last November.
Each mouthful means
we cannot speak
nor want to.

Here are the ads
thumbed with spittled fingers.
Twelve a.m. lines,
the promise of doorbusters.

Come Friday, everything
will fill our arms.
All we did not know
we hungered for.

Addendum to my mother's anatomical gift application

Accept her body,
the flesh and folds,
her two long breasts,

her blue eyes and aching knees.
Take the freckled ears that endured
my cries, my teenage curses;

the lungs and tongue
that shaped her morning song.
Acknowledge feet that paced

in nurse's shoes along patient beds,
hands checking pulse, taking note.
Welcome her absent uterus,

her slick dense liver
shelled with metastatic cells.
Please close her once-pink lips:

they sought my daughter's cheek.
Rest her on your table.
Take what she's worth.

Keep the ashes.

This is not a eulogy

I would have said she bored me.
Tired me out with her tears or the way
she'd go missing for weeks, refusing
to return my calls then phoning at ten—

need so strong it crossed rivers
to settle deep in my chest.

I would have said
she said no to lonely
and yes to him, the one
who breathed her in
as deeply as the meth
that fell through his fingers,
fingers that forced her face to gravel
and named her fat bitch
as she crawled to her car.

I would have said her need
mirrored mine.
There are no rivers.
It will not settle.

The second time I decide I will no longer speak to my father

Before he slides into the passenger seat
I study his beard, face, remaining hair,
all the color of cement. I watch
his dry lips move, shift my gaze.
This is the last trip we will be making.

I take a left, map our route
from the birds-eye like he taught me,
north then west, slow gas
beneath redbrick shadows.
February dusk splays like a bruise
spreading east toward the river.

He keeps talking, pats his knees
and eyes me sideways as if I
should be eyeing him back.
I watch the flicker of brake lights.
Faded lines. The blur of asphalt.

Where you are now, maybe

Your borrowed house: abandoned
by a man who captured his wife
in photographs, who left
after she walked across the street,
invisible to the car that swept
across her hips then drove away.

You read their books by flashlight
and piss in the backyard grass
fallen flat against the ground. You
see your face in their mirror.
It reminds you of nothing.

What is not here: copper pipes,
the fridge, matching plates or bowls.
The glossy Queen Anne table
visible in snapshots lining walls.
What's left was personal

but now is yours. Half-smoked
cigarettes you've already burnt through,
the man's athletic socks
you layer on those rare cold nights.
QT cups you rinse with rain.

You are grateful for this mild December,
love having windows you could open
but chose not to. You wear his sweaters,
warm his couch. Every day
you open their door.
You close it firmly.

There will be no place

They'll know you by the teeth remaining
in your slack and open mouth.

I may not know for months
though I read the Obits.

You will never be among
the listed dead.

I will not know to call and tell
the bookends of your life,

name survivors. What
to send in lieu of flowers.

There will be no flowers.
There will be no place

to honor who you were or
who you might have been.

Some dim creature
—*for my mother*

You asked if I dreamt of my child,
her eyes or his sex, because you
dreamt of me. But I did not see
her face, only felt her twist like an eel,
wrestle water in the deepest trench,
the sweetest stretch of night.

I dream of you. You before
your cancer, your own slick fish
that swam your channels,
spawned from throat to groin.
In my room, you question me:
Will she remember?
You are unhappy you are dead.

Tell me your dream of me, your girl
cradled tight in your belly,
not some dim creature to fear
slipping silent through your depths.

Thoughts on saving your last voice mail message

You are my voice-over,
my divine mouth. I cannot sleep.

When I change phones, lose one
in a barroom toilet, what then?

How long till I forget
the fabric of your speech?

As a child, when did I know that you
were you? How many lullabies?

You are eighty-five seconds: a remnant.
I press nine again and again.

I will save your morning song:
the last words you always say.