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The stuff that affects you: Fiction, poetry, and doggerel

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THE STUFF THAT AFFECTS YOU:
FICTION, POETRY, AND DOGGEREL

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Lisa Doreen Brodersen
University of Northern Iowa
December 2009

ABSTRACT

Inevitably writers write about the stuff that affects them. Maybe the stuff that affects them is life-altering, or in some way profound or sublime, like untimely death, divorce, or being in love. Or maybe it's the mundane stuff, like marbles, cats, crows, weeds, wind, rain, or riding a bike. This thesis includes fiction, poetry, and light verse (which I prefer to call doggerel) triggered by all of that stuff, but I've twisted and embellished it beyond the literal or whole truth, until what remains is nothing but the truth.

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Entitled: The Stuff that Affects You: Fiction, Poetry, and Doggerel

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
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Date

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DEDICATION

To err is human, to forgive divine. Alexander Pope (1688-1744), An Essay on Criticism-1711.

To my parents: I forgive you for the stuff that wasn't divine, and I thank you and love you for the rest. I wouldn't want any other parents. To my brothers: I'm glad you're my brothers. Keep doing good stuff. To my sister: I still think about you often and wonder what things would be like if we'd grown up and old together. To my kids: I hope you'll forgive me for whatever haunts you and that you grow up appreciating the stuff that was worthwhile. To my best husband: Thanks for the right stuff. You might be a saint.

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To Dr. Gotera and Dr. Tracey: I've been following the Vince and Grant Show for ten years and I'm still a big fan. Thanks for all of the terrific workshops. To Dr. Myles: Thanks for your kindness, candor, and above all, your expertise. To Dr. Gladden: Thanks for waiving the recency requirement (twice!) and always having Kleenex tissues available (even though I never needed them). To Kris Knebel: Thanks for knowing everything, for always being patient and kind, and for always having candy. To all: Thanks for never crushing my spirit. It's been a pleasure—truly. Thanks for reading. Oh, and here's to Marcia and Darrell who enlightened me to “the stuff that affects you”—and God love them for that.

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INTRODUCTION

The Stuff That Affects You

I once went on a ski trip with the Iowa Ski Club—yes, there really is an Iowa Ski Club—by Amtrak from Osceola, Iowa, to Winter Park, Colorado. Anyway, because I was a new member and it was my first outing with the group, I wasn't part of any social nodes that had developed within the club over the years. Besides, I looked forward—as I always do when I travel—to looking out the window, reading, and dozing.

Although I did not partake in any of the conversations going on around me, I did not resist listening. The other members were well-acquainted, and I noticed immediately most were in varied stages of failure where romantic relationships were concerned. Two of the most memorable were Marcia and Darrell. They were clearly chums, drawn together by their mutual love of skiing, and because both were firmly established divorcees who were currently single and looking for their soul mates, but not very successfully. Marcia was somewhere between cautious optimist and skeptic; Darrell was a bitter cynic. Recently divorced and having sworn never to get married again, I found myself relating to much of what they said.

Marcia and Darrell talked incessantly during the trip. Although their voices rose above the otherwise unintelligible murmur of the other four or five members of their node, because their contribution to each conversation was frequent as well as loud, it was possible for me to get the gist of it even from several seats away. At one point Marcia, despite frequent interruptions by Darrell, was trying to talk about a mutual friend of theirs who recently, subsequent to divorce, had suffered a mental breakdown coupled with

alcohol or substance abuse of some sort. Apparently the friend had endured a miserable childhood, wrought with untimely deaths, divorces, and assorted family dysfunctions that contributed to the demise of his marriage. Darrell refused to excuse the friend's current failure to overcome his past:

“So,” Darrell said, “I had a lousy childhood, too.”

“So?” Marcia said.

“So what's the big deal?” Darrell said.

“So that kind of stuff *affects* you, Darrell!” Marcia said, exasperated.

Yeah. Yeah it does, Marcia, I was thinking when, as the train snaked through the mountains just after sunrise, the conductor announced that we would soon be entering the Moffat Tunnel, his purpose being both to prepare passengers for the darkness that would ensue as the train entered the Tunnel, and to let them know that wedding nuptials would be exchanged in another car during that six-mile excursion. (Apparently the groom had proposed to his bride in the Tunnel during a previous trip to Winter Park.) The notion of this symbolic and romantic gesture elicited guffaws from Marcia and Darrell's crowd, but it was Darrell who most candidly captured the essence of the moment by predicting, “Well, that pretty much epitomizes the rest of their lives: long and dark.”

There were a few chuckles—one of them from me—in response to Darrell's cynical forecast for the soon-to-be newlyweds in the other car. Marriage, apparently had affected us adversely at some point in our lives. No doubt what had made us cynical about marriage was affected by all of the *stuff* that had affected us up to the point at which we were no longer married. I began to wonder what had happened to Darrell—and

to Marcia—and was tempted to join them to compare notes, but then the train emerged from the tunnel and my attention was diverted by the lavender shades of sunrise in the Rocky Mountains, some 9,000 feet above sea level. When you're used to the rolling hills of Iowa, that kind of stuff affects you.

Inevitably, but not profoundly, writers write about the stuff that affects them. Maybe the stuff they write about is only the stuff that affects them so profoundly that it sticks with them unshakably and influences the courses of their lives. Or maybe it's the ordinary, everyday stuff, like cats, crows, wind, weeds, rain, or riding a bike.

Until I took that train ride to Winter Park with the Iowa Ski Club, the most recent thing I'd written was a thesis for an MA in nursing, some three years before. And I had only recently started reading something other than professional journals—current best sellers, mostly novels. As mundane as it might seem, that train ride—what Darrell had said about his lousy childhood, and what Marcia had said about stuff that affects you—was a turning point for me. I was reminded of one of the few books I'd read recently: *Angela's Ashes*, by Frank McCourt, whose life depicted in his memoir was surely the epitome of a lousy childhood. On the first page, McCourt wrote, “When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood; the happy childhood is hardly worth your while” (11).

If McCourt had not experienced a miserable childhood, that is, had there not been stuff that affected him profoundly, there would have been no *Angela's Ashes*. It seems like many of my favorite writers have experienced profound stuff that sprinkles or pours into their stories and poetry. Flannery O'Connor grew up in the racist South, lost her

father to lupus, and later died of it herself. Sylvia Plath's father died when she was a child, and she later suffered from mental illness during a time when there were no serotonin reuptake inhibitors; it is also well known that Plath's marriage was unstable. At age fifteen, Carson McCullers, another Southern writer, developed rheumatic fever—which was misdiagnosed as tuberculosis—resulting in months of estrangement from her family while she recuperated in a sanitarium. Kurt Vonnegut, of course was just barely twenty years old when his battalion was taken prisoner by the Germans during World War II; several months prior to being shipped overseas he lost his mother to suicide. That's profound stuff. And just look what they did with it.

Although Vonnegut lived much longer than Plath, O'Connor, and McCullers, the book that made him a rock star was *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which drew substantially on the stuff that affected him up to and beyond his stint as a POW and the fire-bombing of Dresden. Vonnegut managed to prevail over his child- and young adulthood and the trauma of Dresden, to make a career of writing about social and environmental injustice in a manner that was (and is) highly accessible to the common man. And God love him for that.

Still some writers whom I admire appear to have led lives that have been relatively unscathed by untimely death, addictions, illnesses, and other varieties of stuff, which perhaps frees them to write about other stuff from which they may not have suffered personally, but is nevertheless the stuff that affects them, no matter how mundane or profound. John Steinbeck seemed to have experienced a comfortable middle class life, but was sufficiently moved by the crisis of Dust Bowl—displaced farm

families—Okies—who migrated to California during the Great Depression that he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck approached the writing of *Grapes* with humility, confessing, “I am assailed with my own ignorance and inability” (qtd. in DeMott x). He is said to have “refused intentionally to write a popular book or to court commercial success” (DeMott xi), but was bent on writing *Grapes* “the way lives are being lived not the way books are written” (qtd. in DeMott xviii). And God love him for that.

I know little or nothing about many of my favorite writers who are still living and writing, so I can’t speculate about the stuff that sprinkles or pours into their work. Ted Kooser, for example, is a Midwesterner, and a former poet laureate, English professor, and insurance executive whose poetry depicts familiar Midwestern images that achieve verisimilitude with fellow Midwesterners. In “Applesauce,” Kooser writes about what I imagine to be his mother’s or his grandmother’s kitchen in the early fall where a bumper crop of Iowa apples is boiling on the stove, creating the “warm wet breath of apples”—a juxtaposition of some very mundane stuff (breath and apples) that had never occurred to me, yet makes profoundly perfect sense. And God love him for that.

I compare the stuff that affects us to what Richard Hugo describes as triggers, which are events, objects, or things (i.e., stuff!) that inspire poetry. He suggests that it is what poets are most familiar with that frequently triggers ideas for poems, but advises writers to avoid the literal truth in order to imagine a different truth. In other words, start with the facts, but don’t stick to them; lose the subject that may have triggered the idea for a poem, and instead create what happens in the poem, such that the literal truth or trigger may not be apparent in the poem at all, yet verisimilitude is achieved all the same.

I like to apply Hugo's notions about triggers to fiction and other creative genres.

Triggers are really just a type of stuff that affects you.

On the miserable childhood scale, Frank McCourt's beats mine soundly. I was never poorly nourished or clothed, and have never known a time without antibiotics. But my parents and their significant others; my ex-stepmother; my brothers and their ex-wives; my kids, their dad, their ex-stepdad, and their stepdad—my (yikes!) third husband would all agree that our family history qualifies as dysfunctional. My sister would agree, too—if she were alive.

The point is that a dysfunctional family provides stuff for poetry and fiction. I used to write about the same stuff over and over, probably because it affected me profoundly enough that I made life-altering decisions as a direct result, some of which I later regretted. Besides my dysfunctional family, I am a nurse (something I became for the wrong reasons, but have never regretted) who worked in a critical care unit for sixteen years and lived all of the stuff that television and movies inaccurately dramatize. (A mental health counselor once told me that real life is way more interesting than any fiction you'll ever read.) The real thing definitely affects you, which makes it a perfect bucket of stuff for dumping into your writing.

Not all of the stuff that I dump into my writing is dysfunctional—unless you consider my fondness for crows dysfunctional. I am certain there's nothing dysfunctional about wind and rain, riding a bike, or watching birds on a lake.

Surely there's nothing dysfunctional about marbles. I'm writing this by the light of a glass lamp filled with all varieties of marbles: marble marbles, glass marbles, mini

marbles, and massive marbles (OK, I embellished, but all of them are magnificent to me). To express my appreciations of marbles, I wrote a poem about them, but admit I failed to capture their stuff, that is, what it is about rolling them in your palm, holding them by the handfuls, or just looking at them that is so extraordinary. Perhaps my fondness for marbles is a little dysfunctional, or at least a little strange.

Likewise, I am certain that there's nothing dysfunctional about true love. It's the kind of stuff that ten years ago I never expected to write about. I consider myself profoundly fortunate to know what it is. God love my best husband for that.

I used to think that poems had to rhyme straight—at the end of each line. Free verse was hardly worth my while. At any rate, I have adapted somewhat to a world where good poets avoid straight end-rhyme. I'm not averse to free verse, but I very much appreciate the challenge of forms. The most challenging form I've ever tried is chant royal. How I came to choose that form—and the stuff that I included in it—is a long story: I had recently read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present* and I know someone who has the same last name as one of Columbus's crewmembers—Triana. There's more to the story, but suffice it to say that the stuff that affected me was the horrendous injustices done the indigenous peoples of the lands that were discovered and conquered.

So, I'm a devoted straight end-rhymer and repetitious alliterator who has derived considerable enjoyment from reading rhymed verse (e.g., Ogden Nash, Shel Silverstein, etc.). Perhaps the reason for my rhyming penchant is that the first book I ever read was *Hop on Pop*. I credit Theodor Geisel (alias Dr. Seuss), not Dick and Jane, and not my

kindergarten teacher, for teaching me to read. If Seuss is to blame for my penchant for music-laden poetry, then God love him for that. Surely an addiction toward writing heavily rhymed and alliterated poems is mere scree at the bottom of the dysfunctional mountain. After all, it's neither illegal nor grounds for discipline in a drug-free workplace. It's just harmless *light verse*—or perhaps it's downright *doggerel*.

You know that poem about marbles? I wrote it before I fully appreciated the distinctions between light verse, doggerel, and serious poetry. The poem is abundantly alliterated on “m” sounds. When I finished reading it in a workshop, a redheaded, fullback-shaped young man said, “Weeeee!” I smiled. That was exactly the reaction I'd hoped for, and he provided just the right word to describe it.

Although you won't find *weeeee*
in a dictionary,
I contend it should be.

Now that was doggerel. However, my purpose is not to present a proposal on why *weeeee* should be in *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged* (or the number of e's it should contain—probably the same number as *scree*), nor is it my purpose to write a thesis on the differences between doggerel and light verse. There are I think more similarities than differences. In other words, the line that separates doggerel from light verse isn't a fine one; it's quite crooked and fuzzy.

Standard dictionary definitions of light verse and doggerel are similar in that they suggest qualities of humor and entertainment, but dissimilar in connotation, the former somewhat favorable, the latter derogatory. (Personally I prefer the term *doggerel* for all

of its sound that *light verse* lacks.) So what is it exactly that I've included in this thesis? Doggerel or light verse?

In his recent article, "Reduced to Rhyme: On Contemporary Doggerel," David Caplan asserts that doggerel resonates with its etymology (170), thereby suggesting its own mangy worthlessness. In other words doggerel is so-called because it is a type of low verse, in perhaps the same, albeit debatable sense that dogs are a lower form of mammalian life than are humans. Meanwhile I can't help but think that *doggerel* resonates nicely with *mongrel*. I've never written a poem about dogs, but one of my best doggerel poems is about cats. It's in the thesis, along with the marble poem. You'll know them when you see them.

So, is doggerel the mutt of purebred poetry, or some other species altogether? If I were actually writing a thesis on the differences between doggerel and light verse, I might succeed in answering that question, but I might have trouble doing so because doggerel, as "a kind of verse to be shunned . . . has enjoyed little critical attention" (Caplan 170). It's darn difficult to find scholarly literature on doggerel. Furthermore, doggerel and light verse have been penned for centuries, probably for as many centuries as serious poetry, so it is likely that their meanings have evolved over time, making it difficult to classify poems exclusively as one or the other.

Robert Frost asserted that doggerel is "verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic words" (60). William Harmon, editor of *The Oxford Book of American Light Verse* (OBALV) includes several varieties of poetry in his definition of light verse, all of which are linked by one common thread,

“the spirit of comedy” (xv), and include “parodies, burlesques, travesties, satires, nonsense, *vers de société*, occasional poems, and verse that used to be called ‘familiar’” (xx). At least one of those types of poems, burlesque, is included in *Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged* definition of doggerel. Long before Harmon edited the OBALV, Anthony Deane, editor of *The Little Book of Light Verse*, placed light verse “somewhere between . . . lyric poetry and satire” (ix), but eschewed the notion that “so long as its theme was humorous, it might be written anyhow” (xiv). In other words “an extra syllable or two in a line . . . [and] a clumsy inversion or a false rhyme” (xv) rendered a poem something less than light verse, in Deane’s view. Perhaps without using the word, Deane was actually defining doggerel.

Ironically, in one of the rare recent critical articles on doggerel, the term is never explicitly defined except to note that it is “the rhyming form that suffers from the lowest standing” and that “often the term doubles as a pejorative, referring to bad or inept poetry” (Caplan 169). Other contemporary conceptions of doggerel have been expressed by journalists and even nurses. Self-proclaimed poet and poetry critique Peter Barraclough, a community health nurse in the U.K., defines doggerel as verse with “clanging rhymes, lame metre and an absence of simile, metaphor, clever use of syntax or emotional tone” (31). A kinder assessment is offered by Mary Schmich, Chicago Tribune columnist and cartoonist, who defines doggerel as “silly verse written with a wink” (435).

Whether or not a poem qualifies as light verse or not a poem at all (i.e., doggerel), most certainly depends on the writer or the anthologist. Consider the poems in *Rank*

Doggerel (Hewson), *A Little Book of Light Verse* (Deane), and *The Oxford Book of American Light Verse* (Harmon): *A little Book* and *The Oxford Book* are anthologies that include work by well-known poets (e.g., Robert Browning, E. E. Cummings, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Elliot, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Frost, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Amy Lowell, John Milton, Ezra Pound, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Theodore Roethke, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman, William Wordsworth, etc.) and versifiers (e.g., Julia Moore, Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash). *Rank Doggerel* is Hewson's original work, and although it is difficult to appreciate any differences in his doggerel when compared to the light verse in the two anthologies, Hewson seems to have proudly embraced the label doggerel, implying in the book's epigraph that he was "but a doggerel bard." Furthermore, Harmon's collection includes pieces written by authors he refers to as *prismatics* (e.g., Julia Moore). A prismatic is a writer "so . . . superlatively bad that he or she belongs in a special genre in which normal rules and habits of judgment are magically suspended" (xx). In other words, the poetry of prismatics is lighter than light; still, Harmon doesn't call it doggerel.

If doggerel is light verse's lazy, crooked cousin, written easily and haphazardly, and written in irregular or defective meter with little regard for rhyme quality, then light verse must be doggerel's more industrious, law-abiding cousin. Therefore, what distinguishes light verse from doggerel must be that it requires more effort to write light verse, and aside from being humorous and entertaining, it conforms to the conventions of serious, acceptable poetry. Either genre, like pornography, may defy definitions that are "at once succinct and satisfactory" (Deane ix), but like pornography, and like doggerel,

you'll know it when you see it. But even when you see it, whether you classify it as doggerel or light verse is likely to depend on what you, the beholder see. In other words:

If an artist drew a cat
sitting on a mat,
but it looked like a rat,
would you call it that?

~Relativist Cat-Rat Doggerel, L. D. Brodersen, 2004

I contend that there is considerable overlap in what qualifies as light verse or doggerel. The lack of critical attention given to doggerel (Caplan 170) has much to do with the lack of bending and the blurring of the line between doggerel and light verse. For now, one critic's doggerel will be another critic's light verse. And for now, as long as the beholder is affected in some favorable way, does it matter what it is?

Schmich wrote an article for *Poetry* magazine about how she uses poetry—both her own and that of “serious poets”—in her columns to make serious points. She admits, “I’ve always felt slightly sheepish about the pleasure I get from my occasional forays into doggerel. The enjoyment some columnists get from their political fulminations, I get from rhyming ‘spinach’ and ‘Kucinich’” (435). Whether you call it doggerel or light verse, “enjoyable” is according to Harmon, “the operative word” (xvii) and “amusement,” according to Deane, “is the primary objective” (x).

By current standards, some of the poems I’ve included in this thesis are closer to light verse than they are doggerel because despite their thorough, shameless end-rhyming and abundant alliteration, they were not easily or haphazardly assembled, and their meter, although perhaps imperfect is not defective, which is why I think they can be quite enjoyable to read. Nevertheless, like Hewson, I choose to embrace the term *doggerel*

because I like the way it sounds. Moreover, I like what doggerel does to counterbalance the poems in this thesis that are about serious stuff.

In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, W. H. Auden asserted that the best work of the Romantic poets is “personal, intense, often difficult, and generally rather gloomy” (xvi), which he suggests is because “they turned away from the life of their time to the contemplation of their own emotions and the creation of imaginary worlds” (xv). Auden warned that private experience is “exhaustible” and implied that the poet eventually needs to write about stuff to which society can relate (xvii). I’m not suggesting that any of my work is at all comparable to even the worst work of the Romantic poets, but I am suggesting that you can tap your personal life too much and that eventually the dysfunction bucket runs dry.

I like to think that including light verse in this thesis, and insisting on calling it doggerel, puts some fun in dysfunction. Although Dorothy Parker would have appreciated this gesture, she’d have preferred that I just omit any stuff that reflects personal or familial dysfunction. In “For a Lady Who Must Write Verse” Parker gives this advice:

Show your quick, alarming skill in
Tidy mockeries of art.
Never, never dip your quill in
Ink that rushes from the heart. (9-12)

In other words, Dorothy Parker advises women against baring their souls in writing that will be shared with an audience. Too late.

Whether it’s doggerel or light verse, I must be a lady who *must* write it.

According to Douglas Parker (no relation to Dorothy as far as I know), Ogden Nash is

supposed to have “said that when he found he could not write successfully in the manner of the classic poets, he decided to become ‘a good bad poet, rather than a bad good poet’”

(4). Although I applaud Ogden and Dorothy for their devotion to craft, I think it is possible to do it all. And that’s what this thesis represents: my attempt to be a good bad poet and a good *good* poet, and a good fiction writer. Of course whether I actually achieve those aims depends on whether readers see a cat or rat, or even a dog on the mat.

So here it is—what I did with the stuff that affects me: fiction, poetry, and yes, doggerel. The stuff that triggered this stuff ranges from tragic to silly, and has been sufficiently transformed so that none of it is the literal truth, or the whole truth, but it is I think nothing but the truth. And God love me for that.

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Marble Motif

Imagine many marbles spilling on the floor
Multitudes of marbles rolling toward the door

Multicolored mayhem rotating down the hall
Marvelous mottled marbles moving toward the fall

Mobile marble masses lining up in pairs
Mediated maelstrom marching down the stairs

Imagine many marbles mingling in the streets
Motley mobs of marbles meeting on concrete

Momentary mishmash mixing in the road
Marathon marble melee in emerging marble mode

Imagine many marbles too numerous to mention
Mighty marble myths mesmerizing your attention

My Trouble With Funerals

Foreword

Death: Sure it's inevitable, but I don't have to like it. One of the aspects of death that I dislike the most is funerals. I became averse to funerals at a very early age. Of course some of my aversion was due to the tragic circumstances of untimely death, but in addition to the grief and emotional discomfort that go along with death, it seemed that each funeral experience was accompanied by some kind of trouble for me. For example, when I was in third grade, my grandfather died suddenly of a heart attack. After the funeral as everyone left the church, I got separated from my parents and became lost in a forest of bawling, hugging strangers. When I was 17, two months after the death of my 15-year-old sister, a classmate's mother was killed in a car accident. Probably because of my sister, I felt more than ample of sympathy for my classmate. Even 30 years later, I am still nowhere near being ready to lose my mother, and back then, I was nowhere near ready to attend another funeral; however, I was told by the school principal that because I was class president I must. Subsequently, although I was the worst driver among my friends, I was the only who could get a car, so I ended up driving to the funeral, and while parking on a muddy, slushy gravel road near the church, I put the car in a ditch.

My trouble with funerals actually started long before that, in first grade, when I'd returned to school following my great-grandfather's funeral. I don't think any of my classmates had actually asked me to do it, but apparently I had decided that I would imitate what my great-grandpa looked like in his casket. I must have flinched, because one of my classmates told the teacher that I had "said" my dead grandpa moved in his

casket. Consequently, the teacher told my parents, and I got in trouble for “lying.” That incident provided the *stuff* that triggered this story. Of course the story has been substantially embellished with fictional details and characters, so the result is only fiction.

The first funeral I ever attended was my Great-Grandpa B’s. Except for his physical appearance, my most vivid memories about him are of his funeral. He was a stooped, white-haired, scrunched-looking man who used a cane and shuffled stiffly when he walked. He had a large bumpy, purplish nose etched with tiny blue veins. His voice was rough sounding, as if he were talking under water. I think I was always a little afraid of him.

The funeral was in the morning on a cool day in the middle of October, 1967. My parents ushered my big brother Bart, my little sister Deena, and me past an easel on which was propped a wreath of lavender flowers and greenery. In the center of the wreath there was a white Styrofoam cross to which a huge shiny purple sash had been stapled. Printed on the sash was a word I recognized: Grandfather. My mother held my little brother Davie, who had fallen asleep in one arm, while with her other arm she gently pushed Deena and me forward past foil-covered pots of yellow, purple, and white chrysanthemums, and occasional vases of roses or carnations. Bart walked forward confidently; when he reached the head of the casket, he turned toward it, pausing for a few seconds before turning away and moving on past more flowers and away from the viewing area. My parents had taken him to the funeral of another great-grandparent several years before. My sister and I might have taken our cues from Bart, but we were

probably too distracted by the whole scenario, and perhaps the fact that we were going to see our first dead person.

My mother nudged Deena and me forward toward the foot of the casket. It was made of a dark gray metal, and we could see our faces reflected in its shiny exterior. On top there was a spray of daisies and white roses and a white sash embossed with another word I knew: Father. When we reached the head of the casket, I could see Grandpa B's knotty white hands arranged one on top of the other across his belly. His horn-rimmed glasses were perched on his bulbous nose, which was no longer purplish or veiny. When Deena rose up on her tip-toes, I suppose to get a better look, my mother gave each of us another nudge and we moved on to join Bart.

After the service we stopped at Maid-Rite for lunch. Waiting for our order provided some time for Bart, Deena, and me to ask some questions about the funeral.

"Why do caskets have white, shiny sheets? Won't they show dirt?" asked Bart.

"Why didn't I get to be a flower girl?" asked Deena, who had been a flower girl in a wedding the previous summer.

I wondered *why Great-Grandpa B was wearing his glasses if his eyes were closed. Mom always took her glasses off before she took a nap or went to bed at night.* I also wondered *why grandpa had so much hair in his nose and ears,* but I was afraid Bart would call me stupid, so all I said was "Davie missed the whole thing."

By that time Davie was awake and sitting on my mother's lap concentrating on the spoonfuls of loose reddish-brown meat that she was feeding him. Dad was reading a newspaper and puffing on a cigarette.

I don't remember what either of our parents said in response to our questions, but I do recall that when Bart attempted to answer Deena's flower girl question starting with "you dummy," he stopped abruptly when Dad glared and gestured with the back of his hand. I got the same response when I continued to suck through the straw of my glass of soda, even though there was nothing left but ice. The noise reminded me of Great-Grandpa B's voice.

The funeral was on a school day, so Bart and I were absent in the morning. We were both disappointed that we missed noon recess. Dad remained in the car with Davie while Mom walked us into the school. Deena's afternoon kindergarten was just beginning. We walked through the empty hallways past row after row of coats that got progressively smaller the closer we got to Bart's classroom. When we arrived outside Bart's classroom, he hung his coat on a hook labeled with his name, accepted a hug from Mom, then quietly opened the door and entered 3-West. Mom, Deena, and I proceeded in silence down the hall to classrooms 1-East and K.

When I entered 1-East, I found the desks had been rearranged. Instead of columns and rows of desks, there were four-desk blocks. I forgot about the door and let it shut by itself, which made a distinct click. Everyone looked up from their desks, including, Miss Murphy, who peered severely at me through her black rhinestone studded

cat-eye glasses. She raised an index finger to her lips, touching the tip of a long red fingernail to the end of her nose. Then she walked briskly to the most remote corner of the classroom, her black pumps clapping distinctly across the drab tile floor. The clapping stopped abruptly behind an empty desk, on which Miss Murphy tapped the same red fingernail. I walked directly to the desk. The chair's legs grated against the gritty tile floor as I dragged it away from the desk. I took my seat with my three new block mates whose attention I had distracted from their Dick and Jane readers.

Miss Murphy took advantage of my disruptive entrance to announce that she would be leaving for a few minutes for a meeting with the "*principal*." She emphasized "principal" I suspect for the positive effect she expected it to have on our behavior during her absence. Before leaving the room, she added, "The intercom will be on and we'll be *listening*." The door clicked decisively behind her. Until the clapping sounds of Miss Murphy's pumps diminished and ceased, the classroom was unnaturally quiet, as if our first-grade minds were momentarily contemplating our options. I took advantage of the opportunity to survey Miss Murphy's desk reorganization scheme, which appeared to involve placing two girls with two boys at each block, except for my block, which had three girls because there were 13 girls and 11 boys in the class.

The boy in my block was Darwin Elam. Darwin was quiet, serious, and at least four units ahead of everyone else in programmed reading and math. As soon as Miss Murphy left the classroom, he put his Dick and Jane reader aside, reached into his desk and pulled out a book that I'd seen my mother reading recently. Meanwhile, one of the boys in another block was brave enough to get up from his desk and go to the water

fountain. A boy in the block next to mine put his hand in his armpit and began flapping his arm wildly, but he was unsuccessful in creating any farting noises. Another boy at the same table actually farted, and the two girls in his block burst into stifled giggles. A din of furious whispering rose in the room. Still nervous about the intercom, I opened *Fun with Dick and Jane*, but before I could read “See spot run,” Brenda Brown, one of the girls in my block turned to me and whispered so loudly that had I been out in the hallway I’d have heard her: “Where were you? We had meetza pie for lunch.”

Brenda was a chubby girl with nearly black hair, dark round eyes, and skin that looked like she spent every day, year round at the local swimming pool. I hated meetza pie, so whenever we had it, I traded for Brenda’s lime and pear Jell-O. As if to counteract Brenda’s brownness, Miss Murphy had also assigned Jessica VanderWyk to our block. Jessica was translucently pale-skinned, had sandy-blonde hair, and blue almond-shaped eyes. Every day she brought her lunch to school in a pink Barbie lunch box. She even had a matching thermos printed with the dancing figures of Barbie, Ken, and Midge surrounded by light blue music notes. Bart, Deena, and I didn’t have lunch boxes. We had to eat the school’s hot lunch.

Jessica was a new student. On her first day the week before, when Miss Murphy had introduced her to the class, Jessica was wearing a light blue headband, a matching light blue dress, and white go-go boots. She stood in the front of the classroom beside Miss Murphy, with her toes turned slightly inward, smiling with the tip of her tongue inserted in the gap left by a missing upper front tooth. Miss Murphy had announced, “Class, please welcome Jessica. Jessica’s father is a new supervisor at Holland Dairy,”

Then Jessica had passed out little plastic cups of ice cream. By the time I got my cup of ice cream, the only flavor left was vanilla.

“Yeah, where were you? You missed our spelling test. I got 100%,” said Jessica, pursing her lips into the shape of a nearly perfect heart.

Jessica and Brenda looked at me intently. In an apparent fleeting moment of interest, Darwin glanced over the top of his book.

“I had to go to a funeral,” I said.

“Ohhh. A funeral,” Brenda had whispered, nodding her head and looking morose.

“Did your cat die? We had a funeral for our cat after the vet put her—”

“We don’t have a cat,” I had said, shaking my head vehemently.

“Oh,” Brenda said, “then was it your dog? Or your hamster? When my hamster died we buried it—”

“Then who died?” Jessica demanded.

I paused for a moment, while Brenda and Jessica stared at me expectantly.

“It was my Great-Grandpa B,” I said.

“What was wrong with him?” Jessica asked.

“My cat had a sickness, so the vet put her to sleep,” said Brenda.

“I think he was old,” I said.

“Was your grandpa put to sleep? After my cat was put to sleep she looked like this.” Brenda’s stuck her tongue out one side of her mouth and wrinkled her nose. Her arms were bent at the elbows and tucked close to her chest; her hands hung limply from

her wrists. Her squinting brown eyes darted back and forth from Jessica to me. No one said anything for a few seconds. Once more, Darwin glanced over the top of his book.

Then Jessica peered at me and asked, as if she were daring me, “What did your grandpa look like?”

“Like a grandpa. Kind of crumpled, with a big nose,” I said.

Jessica rolled her eyes, sighed heavily through her nose and hissed, “I *mean* today! What did he look like at his funeral?”

“He was in a casket. And his eyes were closed. You couldn’t see his legs,” I explained.

“Show us,” dared Jessica. “Show us what he looked like in his casket.”

Brenda looked worried; her eyes had grown especially large and round. Darwin put his book inside his desk.

My chair screeched as I pushed it back and stood up, but the noise was muffled by the chatter and giggling of students who, myself included, had forgotten Miss Murphy’s warning about the intercom. I walked around to the side of the block where Jessica and Brenda were sitting. I lay down on the floor behind them and crossed my hands, one over the other on my belly. Both of them turned in their chairs, got up on their knees and leered down at me. Darwin got down on the floor and looked at me from under the desks. The tile felt gritty and cold on the backs of my legs. I closed my eyes and held my breath, and tried to mimic the serious, almost angry expression I had seen on Great-Grandpa B’s face, but I could not suppress a smile at the thought of what I’d seen just

before I closed my eyes. Jessica was not wearing any underwear. I announced my discovery to the rest of the class, tucked myself into a ball, and burst into a fit of giggles.

All of a sudden the room got quiet. Brenda and Jessica whirled back toward their desks, and Darwin was no longer on the floor looking at me. Then I heard it: That familiar clopping noise. From the floor, I could see in the doorway across the room a pair of legs and black pumps.

“WHAT’S SO FUNNY?” growled Miss Murphy, advancing slowly into the room. Clop. Clop. Clop. Clop.

Needless to say (well, actually I do need to say it), Miss Murphy was not the only person from 1-East to visit with the principal that day. Not only, pleaded Jessica, was it *not true* that she was *not wearing underwear*, but I had said my dead great-grandpa had smiled. So, there was no defense for my behavior, which included disruptiveness and, worse yet, “lying.” I was “in trouble.” My punishment involved several forms of humiliation. At home I got a spanking and was sent to bed early. At school I sat at my desk during several recesses until I had filled an entire penmanship tablet with the promise, “I will not lie.”

Getting “in trouble” at school was always traumatic, but after several days, the drama waned and first grade became first grade as usual again. Then one day our class got another new student. Her name was Connie. She was assigned to Darwin’s desk. (The teachers had decided to promote Darwin to second grade early.) On the day Miss

Murphy introduced Connie, she was wearing paisley bell bottom pants and a pink T-shirt printed with the word “Love” in red sequins. She had long, straight white-blond hair. But the most interesting thing about Connie was her pink plastic cat-eye glasses, which Miss Murphy suggested made Connie look “very intelligent.” Like Jessica’s father, Connie’s father also worked as a supervisor for Holland Dairy, but Connie ate school lunch. On her first day, Connie passed out cartons of ice cold chocolate milk.

On Connie’s second day, there were two people with glasses sitting in our block of desks. Jessica was wearing a pair of large light blue cat-eye glasses with rhinestones embedded in the frames.

“Well, it looks like we’ve got *two* very intelligent young ladies in our classroom now,” said Miss Murphy. Then she announced that we should take out *Fun with Dick and Jane* and read quietly while she attended a short meeting with the *principal*. And *this time*, she was *very sure* she said, looking directly at me, that *everyone* would stay in their chairs.

Shortly after Miss Murphy clopped out of the classroom, Brenda whispered to Jessica and Connie, “You’re so lucky. I wish I could get glasses.”

“My big sister has contacts,” said Connie.

“If I got glasses they would be purple. Don’t you wish you could get glasses?”

Brenda said to me.

I shrugged and said, “Maybe if they were like Connie’s.”

“Do you want to try them on?” Connie offered, taking her glasses off and handing them to me.

I placed Connie's glasses cautiously on my face. Brenda and Jessica became instantly blurry, and I thought I might barf, so I took the glasses off and gave them back to Connie.

"Glasses with diamonds on them cost a lot of money," said Jessica for no apparent reason.

"My sister had to save up her babysitting money to get her contacts," said Connie.

"Brenda, do you want to try my glasses on?" Jessica offered.

Brenda looked elated as she timidly took Jessica's glasses and put them on, but they kept sliding down her nose, nearly falling off twice before she finally held them firmly in place and whispered proudly, "I can see perfect!"

"I think those glasses are too big for you," said Connie, "Here, try mine."

Brenda and Connie cautiously exchanged glasses and put them on.

"These don't help me at all," said Connie.

"You guys look scary," said Brenda. She took off Connie's glasses and handed them back to her.

"Let me try Jessica's," I said, taking them from Connie. I held Jessica's glasses up to the light like I had seen my mother do before she cleaned hers, but I could see that Jessica's glasses didn't need cleaning. I put them on and said, "these aren't real glasses."

"Liar! They are so real!" replied Jessica, raising her voice above the cautious buzz of the room, and pursing her lips into a pucker.

"I will not lie," I said, poking my fingers through the frames and touching my eyelids. Brenda's eyes widened and her hands flew to her mouth.

“Give them back,” Jessica hissed, reaching across our desks and grabbing the glasses off my face. Splotches of red had begun to color her fair cheeks. Everyone else in the room had turned to stare toward our block, but the expectant silence that had fallen on the classroom was suddenly filled with a familiar, dreaded clapping.

Kids on Tracks

They looked both ways and crossed the street,
leaped over sidewalk cracks.
Red flip-flops flapped on dusty feet—
skipped to the railroad tracks.

They tapped the tracks with rusty nails
and hopped from tie-to-tie,
walked heel-to-toe up on the rails,
chins tipped up toward the sky.

They stumbled in between tie-rows
and cinder-pocked their knees,
stubbed and skinned their tarry toes,
filled their fingernails with grease.

They put their palms on sun-soaked steel,
felt faintly, far-flung humming.
Red flip-flops flapped on dusty heels—
skipped home—the train was coming.

The Pleasures of Weeding

Once we thought of dandelions
as presents for our mother,
so we would race to pick them,
too young to know that we
were only weeding.

Once I thought of you
as petals scattered in the aisle
and I, the dandelion
pushing through
the sidewalk cracks,
defying herbicide.

And then one night
I saw you in a crowd
of silhouettes, twisting
in the heat of thrown
heads and hair,
bottles tipped and
tossed into a blaze
of wood and weeds.

And I watched you
from the car, my cheek
pressed against a mum,
its scent and dewy
coolness not so different
than a dandelion, was it?

Later, I thought of weeding—
punishment
I did not deserve,
but I seized each dandelion
low around the stem.

And I pulled
until the ground gave up
every narrow root and tip,
dirty trophies I admired,
pitched on a withered,
bitter pile.

In the end, there was
the scent of mums
I could not see
beneath the dandelions
wilting on the sidewalk.

And that is when I knew
you had finished weeding.

Now I am reminded
by every foil-covered pot,
every sagging sash or bow.
Now, I remember

and I wonder,
had you stayed inside the car,
would the dewy softness
and that scent
seem as punitive,
or tragic,
as the pleasures found
in weeding?

Tumble Weed

I slowed the car and swerved
to miss the brittle mesh
of frost-killed foliage, slain
and jaded by a season.

Ripped loose and liberated
from a dormant ditch, oddly
buoyant, it rolled and bounced
across four lanes.

I caught glimpses in the rearview
mirror—a dauntless carcass,
tumbling, resurrected—
as I drove on against the wind.

Rain Haiku

A wicked wind mutes
the slap of my running feet
against wet pavement.

My frigid hands strain
to get the key in the lock.
It's like I'm trying

to thread a needle
in the dark as shards of rain
pelt my eyes. At last

frantic wipers stroke
refracted light, scattering
rain. Then I recall

on the floor under
the seat by the ice scraper
is my umbrella.

How to Pick a Casket

Suppose someone in your immediate family dies. The death is sudden, unexpected, premature, and so forth. Maybe the person who dies is your sister or brother, or perhaps your mother or father. It doesn't matter who. It is an "untimely death," and as such, qualifies as tragic. No one would argue that notion.

You can't sleep and when you do, you forget that something tragic has happened, which makes it all the more disappointing when you wake up and have to remember. A tragic death takes you out, disorients you. It stops your clock. It stops the world, or at least you think it should. Then someone rings the doorbell. It's one of the neighbors bringing food. The newspaper is there on the WELCOME mat and the garbage truck hisses and squeals, making its way to your street. Someone has to put the garbage out.

Suppose the one who died is your brother, Jake. He's fifteen, one year younger than you. After supper one night he says he's going to a friend's house. The friend is celebrating his sixteenth birthday. After cake and ice cream, the friend gets the keys to his first car and takes two of his best buddies for a ride. His mother takes a picture of them standing by the car. She tells them to be careful, but an hour later her son is in serious condition, one friend is critical, and the other is dead.

You've heard this story before. *No seat belt. Thrown from the vehicle. Massive trauma. Dead at the scene. Didn't suffer. It's a wonder any of them survived.* And so on.

The next morning an unscheduled family reunion is taking shape at your house. Your parents ask you to go along with them to the funeral home to make "arrangements."

—

You don't really want to go, but you don't want to stay home either. You don't know where you want to be. It seemed like you and Jake never got along. Three days ago you declared your perpetual hate for him when he accidentally used your toothbrush.

You climb into the backseat of your parents' car. Your mother, normally a well-groomed and vivacious woman, is slumped against the door in the front passenger seat. She wears a pair of large, white plastic-rimmed sunglasses, usually reserved only for rounds of golf. She has not combed her hair and is wearing sweatpants. Your father, also uncombed, and unshaven, turns the key in the ignition. Heavy metal FM blasts from the radio—Jake's selection during the lift you gave him to his friend's house last night. Your mother's shoulders start to shrug convulsively. Your father switches the radio off and puts the car in gear.

Your father grips the steering wheel with both hands. He concentrates on something in the distance down the road. You lean close to the window, shielding your eyes from the rude brilliance of the late February sun. You have lived in this town since you were born, but today you watch it pass by with what strikes you as unfamiliar clarity. The golf course is spattered with glaring patches of snow, like shrinking islands in a sea of dormant grass. The water tower blocks the sun for a moment as the car passes by. It stands out crisp and white against the sky, astonishingly blue, and for now blotted only sparsely with clouds.

You pass the farm implement dealership where red and green combines and tractors stand ready and precisely aligned, like soldiers waiting to march into the fields. You pass the Casey's convenience store where you work part-time on weekends,

stocking shelves; selling gas, bread, milk, junk food, and cigarettes; and hoping someday you'll have a job you won't hate. You pass your father's plumbing and heating business, where your mother keeps the books. The word CLOSED beams bright orange on a sign in the window.

You pass the high school where you—studious, shy and musically inclined—and Jake—popular, athletic, a decent enough student—are absent that day. Absent instead of merely tardy, which was usually the case—much to your chagrin—owing to Jake's disdain for punctuality, in spite of your desire for it. Every morning it was the same scene: You'd give the five minute warning and Jake would assure you that he was ready—just had to brush his teeth (or get his jeans out of the dryer or find his phone). Somehow you always believed on *that* day, he really meant it, but somehow you were still sitting in the car by yourself five minutes later. Somehow Jake could incite a rage in you that no one at school would have believed possible, and you'd unleash it on him as he tumbled into the car, ten minutes after you'd started honking the horn, barely a minute before the first hour bell. Yet somehow he could always squelch your fury by doing something silly, like sliding over to snuggle up against you, giving you a sloppy smooch on the cheek. Or he'd tune into new age radio and sway dreamily back and forth as you drove down the street. And somehow your attendance record remained unscathed, owing to Jake's rapport with the office staff, and probably his connection with the student assistant, a sophomore cheerleader.

Finally your dad drives past the city square, where a dozen Robins peck at the ground, and you feel an utter sense of inconsequence. In the center of the square sits the

fountain, turned off for the winter. The last time you took notice of it was after Jake and some of his friends had dumped a box of Tide into it, creating a mountain of white suds that lasted for two days before the fountain was drained and refilled with fresh water. You would be content to just keep riding around the square, like you—and sometimes Jake—did last summer after a baseball game, or sometimes after getting ice cream, but the Dairy Sweet is closed for the season, the town is small, and the trip is brief.

When you arrive at the funeral home, you are greeted by a grave but compassionate-looking middle-aged man dressed in a dark blue suit. He escorts you inside and invites you to “make yourselves at home” in a spacious sitting area with tidy colonial-style furniture and a fire place with a flaming fake gas log. Arranged on a coffee table are a leather-covered binder embossed in gold letters with “Crumpacker and Crumpacker” and a 200-count box of Kleenex tissues. Melancholy organ music seeps through the room. A grandfather clock chimes ten times.

The man in the blue suit is the funeral director, Wilber Crumpacker, Jr., who inherited the funeral home from Wilber Crumpacker, Sr., now deceased. You vaguely recall that last fall your father had the plumbing contract for the funeral home’s massive new addition, the Crumpacker Memorial Chapel.

Mr. Crumpacker offers beverages, but no one accepts. He sits down and gestures for you and your parents to do the same. Then he clears his throat and says, “A meaningful funeral is the first step in the journey through grief.” Next he opens the leather-covered binder to the first page, which says, “A meaningful funeral is the first step in the journey through grief.” Mr. Crumpacker proceeds to turn the pages of the

leather-bound binder, guiding you and your parents through the process of creating a meaningful funeral even though you are already well on your way on the journey through grief.

According to Mr. Crumpacker, a meaningful funeral entails the use of the new Crumpacker Memorial Chapel, an organist, a soloist, three or four hymns, a pair of candelabra, a DVD video collage, a video projector, a hearse, a limousine, and so on. Your parents make decisions by nodding as Mr. Crumpacker makes check marks on a list that he has removed from the front pocket of the binder. For every check mark Mr. Crumpacker makes, your mother puts a wad of tissue on the coffee table. Your mind wanders.

You know Jake considered it a personal triumph to annoy you, even when he didn't intend to. Later, Jake and your parents would tease you and make you laugh about the stunts he pulled. And you are sure it never meant anything to Jake when you screamed at him, "I HATE YOU," which was often. But you still wish you hadn't said it.

Mr. Crumpacker has checked every box on the list, except the last one, when he closes the leather-bound binder, smiles empathetically and says, "I know it may seem impossible to understand at this moment, but over time, you will feel good knowing you gave James the kind of funeral everyone deserves." Then he stands and gestures for you and your parents to do the same.

You look at your parents, confused and annoyed, but they don't notice. You sniff loudly and say, "Jake," but Mr. Crumpacker apparently does not hear you because he has already turned his back and motioned for you to follow him. You and your parents

accompany Mr. Crumpacker, but instead of ushering you to the front door, he leads you toward the Crumpacker Memorial Chapel. You are thinking that this is no time to admire your father's plumbing, but Mr. Crumpacker leads you past the restrooms and pauses in front of an unmarked door just outside the cathedral entrance. He opens the door and flips the light switch to illuminate a descending stairway. Your parents shuffle along behind Mr. Crumpacker like two zombies. You don't know what else to do so you follow them down the stairs.

It has never occurred to you that there are showrooms for caskets, but later it makes sense; there are show rooms for cars and furniture, so why not caskets? Your father buys toilets and shower fixtures from a plumbing showroom. But none of those showrooms are dimly illuminated with soft blue lighting like the one you are in now, nor do they play harp music.

You and your parents huddle together for a few minutes, adjusting to the idea of caskets and the lighting. Mr. Crumpacker stands a few feet away in a posture of respectful patience: head tilted slightly to one side, feet shoulder-width apart, hands together, fingers interlocked. Once the three of you are somewhat composed, Mr. Crumpacker explains, "Casket selection is a very personal decision." He says, "Some things to consider are the type of wood or metal, and the complexity of the design," then he adds, "Take your time."

When you shop for caskets, you walk around the show room, just like you would if you were buying a car or a couch. Of course the atmosphere in a casket showroom is necessarily different. The carpet, a sculpted plush mixture of heather and white hues,

very cloud-like, is quite thick and cushy, presumably to provide some degree of protection in case you or one of your parents suddenly falls in a heap. None of you does.

The caskets are arranged in order by quality and price. Your choices include bronze, copper, cherry, oak, native poplar, pine, walnut, rust-resistant stainless steel, light weight carbon steel, and so on. Your parents stumble together around the room. Your mother keeps saying, "I can't. I can't."

None of you can, but you do (stainless steel). Once the casket is selected, you experience a momentary sense of relief. You expect Mr. Crumpacker to make one final check mark on his list, but he says something that includes the words "burial vault" and leads you to another room in the basement that contains cross sections of burial vaults and poster illustrations of what might happen "if the beautiful casket you have selected for your loved one is not buried inside a *lined* burial vault." Mr. Crumpacker assures you that there is considerable "peace of mind in knowing that your loved one's burial vault will not take on moisture." The poster contains drawings of caskets inside burial vaults with and without linings. You notice that the casket in the unlined vault is apparently floating, listing sideways, and bumping against the sides of the vault, no doubt scuffing up the fine wood finish or dinging the shiny carbon steel.

A decision is made (lined) and Mr. Crumpacker applies the last check mark to his list. You and your parents follow him out of the burial vault showroom, back through the casket showroom and up the stairs. Mr. Crumpacker waits for you at the top, then flicks off the light and shuts the door. On the way back to the sitting room, you hear the grandfather clock chime twelve times.

Your stomach rumbles and reminds you that you've eaten nothing since supper the night before, yet you don't feel like eating anything right now. Your parents go with Mr. Crumpacker back to the sitting area, but you slip into the women's restroom. After using the toilet you stare at your swollen eyelids and puffy nose in the mirror for a few minutes and splash some cold water on your face.

You find your parents and Mr. Crumpacker back in the sitting area signing papers. When your father sees the total bill he puts the checkbook back in your mother's purse and pulls out a credit card. According to the bill, a meaningful funeral, the kind that everyone deserves, runs about eight grand. And that doesn't include flowers. The grandfather clock chimes once as your mother signs the charge slip.

Mr. Crumpacker sees you out. He shakes your father's hand and reminds your parents that "tomorrow we will be ready for James' clothing at 1 P.M. Family visitation is at three. Public visitation at six." Your father acknowledges these instructions with a nod. Your mother sobs. This time you say it louder: "Jake," but the door is already closing and Mr. Crumpacker is smiling compassionately through the window.

Your father follows your mother around the car and opens the front passenger door for her, something she normally shuns. After climbing into the back seat, you turn your head to the left, expecting Jake to be there, a reflex that will reoccur in the days to come—every time you hear the back door slam, or water running in the bathroom sink, or footsteps outside your bedroom door—until through lack of reinforcement it's finally extinguished.

As your dad drives toward home, you notice the sky has become overcast and the first fragments of a winter storm have begun to tick at the windows. Oddly, you feel relieved.

Silent City

I walk a solitary ashen road
to a reticent town surrounded
by a stoic iron fence,
where the bodies of the dead
deliquesce beneath the dirt.

Outside, indifferent finches
flit from fence to ditch,
perching on stalks of cattail
or bursting milkweed pods,
searching for thistle seed.

My footsteps scuff
and grind the gravel,
stirring dust and rousing
red-winged blackbirds
from eggs nestled in the brush
and gauzy clusters of asparagus.
They rise and hover,
chant staccato warnings,
swoop and nudge me
toward the gaping brick posts,
through the gates of Silent City.

Inside, wind-worn cedars,
and rangy pines creak and sway,
pondering the scene they shade:

Foil-covered pots of mums
shrouding mounds of soil,
and faded plastic wreaths
with sun-bleached bows
littering the sod now settled flat.

Moss-blotted marble stones
and sculpted granite markers
lean toward any sound,
but hear only the wind
whistle hollow elegies
through stoic city trees.

Cats We Don't Know

For Calico, the stray who filled in for my sister.

It seems that everywhere we go
we see these cats that we don't know.

"Kitties," sometimes sobriquetted
often moonlight silhouetted

perched on fence or witch's broom
spine stiffly arched, straight tail a-plume

sometimes pampered and caressed
perhaps deprived or dispossessed.

Whether neutered, tom, or tabby
fulsome-furred or mangy-shabby

tame, refined, domesticated
wild, reviled, uncultivated

feral, foul, or furious
tranquil, composed, incurious

vicious, fierce, upsettable
skittish, shy, unpettable

indoor-outdoor acclimated
six-toed, tail-tip amputated

leaping, pouncing, slinking, prowling
purring, hissing, snarling, howling

black, or orange or calico
blonde, brunette or albino

coarse or gritty, luster-lacking
slick or waxy, hair-ball hacking

strippéd, dotted, splotched or mottled
solid, spotted, specked or spottled,

we shoot each cat without remorse—
oh, in DIGITAL of course----

and mount each photo row-by-row
in catalogs of cats that we don't know.

Hair

For one in eight women.

She thought
hair
was all she needed
before she had
her breasts.

She looked
below
a child's chest,
where severed
strands settled
in brown clumps
upon the sidewalk.

She imagined
hair across one eye,
brushing her lips,
blowing it
a side.

She bent
her neck back,
stretching out the skin
from her chest
up to her chin,
until her head
had touched a bone
at the top of her spine.

She realized
it would be a long time
before she could feel hair
between her shoulder blades
so she waited.

She looks, now,
at the reflection
of the person
who once had breasts
and hair below
her shoulders.

She traces the scar,
barely raised, smooth,
like an albino worm
beneath thin skin.

She fits her fingers
between each rib,
inside the pulsing grooves,
and remembers
her reflection,
symmetrical and full.

She looks down
into white porcelain
where gray-streaked
clumps of hair
circle and in the drain.

That Mother

I keep thinking of that mother
holding that dead child,
her face a beacon of betrayal.
But she didn't want to blame me.

Holding her dead child,
she asked, "Is he already gone?"
because she didn't want to blame me.
She smiled, kissed him on the forehead.

She said, "He's already gone."
I nodded, tried to swallow.
She smiled and kissed his forehead
and tears ran down her cheeks.

I nodded, tried to speak.
The chair creaked as she rocked.
Her tears ran down his cheeks
and disappeared into the blanket.

The chair creaked as she rocked.
Her face flared with betrayal
and disappeared into the blanket.
I keep thinking of that mother.

The Conservationist

For Sylvan T. Runkel

When Sy comes into the clinic, he brings his thick,
soft heart that barely beats inside his chest,
so I can hardly hear the rhythm or
the gush and flow of blood behind his skin
and brittle bone. It reminds me of a frantic bird,
worn out, fatigued, inside a crumbling cage.

I ask about the book he's writing now
(he says it's almost finished; I'm relieved)
and the rustic cane he leans on when
he shambles through the hall, dragging his stiff
leg, knee joint fused bone to bone, but sturdy as
a tree.

Sy says a conservationist needs a hiking stick
to walk among the wild flowers, prairie grasses, native trees.

When Sy was not so sick he told me the story
of his knee: World War II, in France,
lying in a field of grass and wild flowers,
while German soldiers sauntered by.

I think he must have prayed
they'd see his shrapnel-shattered leg,
but would not hear the pounding of his heart.
He must have smelled the weeds
and flowers crushed beneath their boots,
the thrashed-up scent of dirt, blood,
and broken grass.

I ask him how his breathing's been, if he gets much sleep.
He says he will be back again next week, then winks
and shambles home to write a book.

Crow Control

Two years ago ten thousand crows claimed roosts in Lincoln Park. A faithful flock, each day at dusk, assailed the park in droves, perching wing to wing on every branch in every tree. There lurked, this avian choir cawing cacophonous hymns that only crows would know, but by dark became a quiet, corvine congregation, casting murmurs and moon-shadows from their feathered canopy.

When common citizens looked up and saw the tar-flocked canopy shedding shit and feathers on the sidewalks, in the streets, and on park benches, they called in their complaints about the cackling congregation. For the mayor and council members, carping phone calls came in droves so the mayor convened the council to convince them of the need for crow control. Meanwhile, one block from city hall, a Presbyterian pastor looked

across the street at Lincoln Park where slick black birds lurked in thick masses, blotting out the stars above their oily canopy. On his windshield he saw not frost, but thick purple-tinted crow crap. To him it was quite clear: There was no sanctuary where he'd parked. He resigned to scrape the desecrated windows, then got in and drove to city hall where he succeeded in confirming an anti-crow congregation.

Now I ask you, should these humans commit anti-crow conjugation? And what if the Lincoln Park flock infiltration involved a flock of larks? Would their decision be any different if they had to deal with doves? Would the city council and a Presbyterian pastor eat a tray of canapés (served with drinks) garnished with domestic fowl, or perhaps pork? And finally, will they end up regretting their actions and eat crow?

Maybe. The council critically contemplated ways to curtail the crows, but concluded that convenient remedies to control the chaotic congregation were substantially unsuited for the crow-conundrum in Lincoln Park. Rhetorical suggestions too ridiculous to mention, kept the council looking for serious, yet reasonable regulations to de-flock the fowl canopy (propane cannons? fire crackers? grape flavored foam?). Still driven

council members picked police to blast the birds with birdshot, driving them to frantic flight, dispersing a shocked and cawing flock. Crow bodies hit the ground; One hundred defiled fowl dropped from the canopy. Feathers showered around fallen members of the fleeing congregation. Dead bird carcasses were nailed to boards on branches, black eyes looking skyward for nine thousand nine hundred crows, leaving Lincoln Park.

Shhhh. Across from Lincoln Park, I see one crow standing in the driveway at the church, while lurking in the steeple, there is a second crow—
Sentinels sent from a foiled congregation to mourn a fouled canopy.

Conquest of Columbus

(Chant Royal)

My point is not to grieve for the victims and denounce the executioners. Those tears, that anger, cast into the past, deplete our moral energy for the present.” ~Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States—1492-Present, 2003 (10).

For Juan Rodrigo Bermejo Triana, the Tainos, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Born in Genoa, a wool-weaver’s son,
 he favored sea-sailing to spinning and so
 by Christo’ Colombo no wool would be spun,
 yet yarns of adventurous missions gung-ho—
 of searching for riches, silks, spices and gold—
 would for history be woven and faithfully told,
 curtailing all tales of inhuman transgress
 under the guise of just Christian progress.
 When royals and rulers sought empire spread,
 they sanctioned a certain uncivil regress
 knowing conquests for gold required bloodshed.

Aiming for Asia, he followed the sun—
 knew knots by flotsam, by compass, the flow—
 for he was no master of star navigation.
 He tracked hourglass time, tacked with the blow,
 from topside and crow’s nest, Columbus patrolled
 for *Indian* shores—Khan’s far-eastern world.
 He dead reckoned a course by clip, sand, and guess
 believing the size of the world was much less,
 la Pinta, la Niña, y la Santa Maria he led
 on a journey of fortune that crown and cross blessed,
 in conquest of gold for which blood could be shed.

After thirty-six days seeking land, seeing none,
 at last lay a mass—someone shouted land-ho!
Tierra! Tierra! Terrestrial horizon!
 cried a sailor who perched in the nest of the crow.
 The first to sight land the crew had been told
 reaped one thousand *maravedes* tenfold,
 but Juan Triana the sailor, no prize would possess
 for his Admiral, Columbus did nonetheless
 claim credit for sighting the Indies instead
 of Triana, who'd ponder, but seize no redress
 in conquest of gold for which blood would be shed.

And so the first stretch of his journey was done
 at the island Guanahani, home to the Taíno,
 natives the Admiral misnamed "Indian,"
 their island *Lucayo*, called *San Salvador*,
 for the crown's Holy Savior—behold
 paradise declared and enscrolled
 the province of Spain, dominion-noblesse.
 The Admiral commenced with subtle finesse
 the trading of beads and caps colored red,
 hawks' bells and glass trinkets—largess—
 all in conquest of gold for which blood would be shed.

The Spaniards had muskets, the Taínos had none
 and so were perceived as a fleecable foe
 where after their trust the invaders had won
 the seeds of inequity Colombo would sow
 for in the New World they would find little gold
 and so seized its people as slaves to be sold.
 Of freedom and will they were dispossessed,
 against swords and guns, rendered helpless.
 By ruthless gold-greed they were heavily bled,
 were slaughtered, enslaved and sorely oppressed
 all in conquest of gold for which much blood was shed.

Envoi

History knows humans are prone to excess,
 beyond our own lines, we're known to transgress
 against color and class, though all blood is red,
 we seem to repeat what we cannot suppress
 knowing conquests for gold require bloodshed.

The Ninth Step

“Pick you up same time next week,” Sam said to Ed.

The gravel in the driveway crunched and popped as Sam slowed the car and braked. Ed gazed through the windshield to something, or perhaps nothing, in the distance.

“Hey, thanks for the ride, man,” said Ed. The passenger door creaked open and he climbed out. Sam backed up toward the road. The car’s headlights cast Ed’s shadow against the house, where it rose, distorted, and disappeared as Sam turned drove into the night.

Ed flung some residual coffee from a 16-ounce plastic travel mug into the dark and walked purposefully toward the mailbox at the end of the drive. The gritty crunching of his feet as he scuffed through the gravel was the only sound in the clear, rural night. The moon, nearly full, illuminated the vapor of his breath. He reached the mailbox and pulled on the door, which emitted a hollow screech. He reached inside, but felt nothing. Darla had remembered the mail.

He closed the door and turned toward the house. Tucking the travel mug under his arm he searched the pockets of his jeans for his keys but came up with a lighter; his coat pockets contained only cigarettes. He reached the front door, stepped onto the slab and pressed his face against the window, cupping his hands parenthetically about his eyes. A lamp was on, revealing an unusually tidy living room. The afghan was folded and draped symmetrically over the back of the couch. The baby swing had been moved out of the middle of the room and placed between the television and toy box. A few

books and some magazines were neatly stacked on one corner of the coffee table. It appeared that Darla and the kids were in bed.

Ed dug into his pockets and pulled out the cigarettes and lighter. He stood on the front step smoking, thinking about his keys. He had drunk two cups of coffee at the meeting and another on the way home. It was 24 degrees Fahrenheit and he couldn't get in the house; naturally he had to pee. Stepping to the edge of the stoop, he pursed his lips around the cigarette. The sound of his descending zipper was unexpectedly loud and he felt oddly embarrassed. The urination was even louder. In the summer there were crickets and locusts to obscure the sound of urine splashing onto the sidewalk; not so on a Thursday night in February when there was little more than the distant drone of traffic on Highway 6, one mile to the east. He seemed to go forever; it sounded like rainwater pouring from the eaves. Urine splattered and steamed on the concrete, forming a foaming amber river that ran to a dependent corner of a slanting segment of sidewalk where, at last, it pooled and glimmered in the moonlight. Relieved, he carefully re-zipped. The cigarette had produced a precarious appendage of ash that dropped onto his coat. He secured the cigarette between his thumb and index finger and, with his other hand, halfheartedly brushed at the ash. Ed turned back to the window. To the left of the living room he could see into the kitchen, where a red dot glowed on the dishwasher; the microwave clock sharply illuminated 10:15 P.M. Underneath the telephone, on the wall above the counter, next to the back door, he could see a stack of mail—and a pile of keys.

Ed's fingers curled around his cell phone in the pocket of his coat. He considered calling Darla, but decided against waking her. Ed was frustrated. "Shit," he hissed,

kicking the old metal milk box that adorned the front slab. It rattled off the side, tumbling into some shrubbery, which, to his relief, stifled further racket. He listened for signs that he had awakened anyone. Ed drew heavily on his cigarette and secured it between his lips, then plunged both arms into the bushes to retrieve the milk box, suppressing additional expletives as barberry thorns assaulted his hands. As he repositioned the box he heard the muffled clinking of something inside it—possibly metal. Hopeful, he pried the lid open and reached in and found two empty beer cans and a Hot Wheels car. Probing along the bottom of the box he located what he was looking for—a spare house key.

Ed took a final drag from the cigarette and flicked it onto the sidewalk. It bounced into the puddle of urine and sizzled. He unlocked the door and opened it cautiously. As he stepped inside, Ed immediately smelled pine cleaner and furniture polish. He removed his shoes and placed them parallel to three other pairs that had been arranged in descending order by size along the wall just inside the front door. He removed his coat and tossed it on the couch. Glancing around at the tidy room, he reconsidered, grabbed the coat and hung it in the closet next to the front door. He proceeded down the hall moving quietly past the bedrooms. Out of habit he entered the bathroom, but quickly remembered that he did not need to go. He turned toward the sink and looked into the mirror. His brow furrowed slightly and he assumed a mildly puzzled expression. *I look different*, he thought. Perhaps it was just that he was unaccustomed to looking at himself in the mirror, or perhaps there really was something different in his

reflection. He had muddled this notion over for nearly a month now. *Maybe, I need a haircut*, he wondered.

“Hi, I’m Ed. I’m an alcoholic,” Ed spoke to the mirror. Realizing that he had said this out loud, Ed quickly closed the bathroom door and turned on the exhaust fan. He placed his palms on the sides of the sink and leaned close to the mirror. He said it again, this time adding a little nod after his name and lifting his chin higher as he enunciated, “*Al-Ca-Hall-ick*.” As he spoke, only his chin and lower lip moved, revealing glimpses of his bottom teeth. He smirked, shook his head, and looked down into the sink. It was unusually free of hair and smears of toothpaste. Looking back into the mirror it occurred to him that it was his eyes. They weren’t blood shot. Still, he needed a haircut.

Ed shut off the fan and stepped into the hall. He snuck past the master bedroom. Darla was snoring harshly behind the closed door. He figured she had been in bed since nine, about a half an hour after she put the kids down. Darla required a lot of sleep particularly when pregnant. The baby had not yet been sleeping through the night when Darla announced that she was pregnant again. He had been thinking about having a vasectomy when she had told him. Once he had gotten the news it didn’t seem like there was any need to hurry. Now here he was trying to get used to the notion that in another month there would be hungry baby interrupting their sleep. And he would be a father for the fifth time.

He approached the second bedroom shared by Joshua, his three-year-old son, and Caitlin, his ten-month-old daughter. He turned the knob cautiously and opened the door. A nightlight illuminated one corner of the room. He walked over to the crib where his

daughter lay sleeping on her back. Her arms formed a halo about her head and one knee was bent such that the heel of her chubby foot rested against the knee of her opposite leg, like a ballerina performing a pirouette. Her full lips formed an O shape through which she blew sweet, rhythmic puffs of air. Her hair was just beginning to grow and formed wispy blonde ringlets across the nape of her neck. If she were awake she would smile, bat her blue eyes, and say “Da.” He stroked her cheek with his index finger and repositioned her blanket. Joshua was sleeping on his side, curled into the shape of an egg. He needed a haircut, too. His straight brown bangs nearly covered his eyelids and thick dark lashes. Ed pulled the sheets and blankets up around him, brushed the hair back from his forehead, where he placed a stealthy kiss. He went back into the hall, pulling the door shut inaudibly behind him. He stared at the master bedroom door, unsure of what to do, but knew he was not ready to sleep. A muffled but prolonged sonorous blast occurred behind the door. It was followed by an abrupt pause, then a series of rhythmic snorts.

Ed decided that most likely he was wired from the coffee he’d downed at AA because he realized he had felt like this every Thursday night for the last month. He went back down the hall to the living room and turned on the television. Letterman was delivering his monologue.

Ed sat down on the couch and absentmindedly reached toward the breast pocket of his shirt. He glanced down at his chest and remembered leaving his cigarettes in his coat. Then he noticed the shiny, clean, and carefully arranged ashtrays on the end table and considered not going to the closet. Letterman broke for a commercial, promising

Stupid Human Tricks when he returned. Ed noticed a new eight-by-ten photograph of Joshua and Caitlin on top of the television. He got up and walked over to the TV. A second photograph, a five-by-seven, was hidden behind it. It was Sydney and Graham, his daughter and son from his first marriage. He picked it up. In the picture Sydney was five and Graham was about three. With their dark hair and eyes, both children resembled him more than Megan, their mother. The photograph was at least eight years old. He placed it beside the eight-by-ten and walked over to the closet. Opening the door he reached into the breast pocket of his coat and pulled out his cigarettes and lighter. He returned to the couch, lit one and inhaled, closing his eyes and slumping deep into the cushions. His chest deflated and smoke streamed out of his nostrils. When he looked up, a burly-looking guy on Letterman was balancing a canoe vertically on his chin.

Sydney and Graham hadn't spent the weekend since Christmas, and were supposed to have come to visit this weekend, which he had forgotten when he scheduled his vasectomy. When he called to tell Megan she got upset because she had made plans. "What is it this time?" she asked, "Wife's having a baby? Is it your birthday? Are you going on vacation? Or are you spending the weekend in jail?"

When he had explained, even though it was really none of her business, she had congratulated him and suggested he call when he wanted to see his "other" kids. Ed had started to defend himself but she had hung up. It wasn't that he didn't want to see Sydney and Graham; it just never seemed to work out. It had become more inconvenient when he and Darla had moved to this house, twelve miles from town, just before Caitlin was born. The recent loss of his driver's license really complicated matters.

Ed extinguished his cigarette, got up and went to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator but all he saw was Shopper's Choice Cola on the shelf above the vegetable drawer, where the beer used to be. He closed the door and walked to the pantry. Inside a clean circular imprint outlined by a fine layer of dust made him aware that he was performing a ritual. The imprint was like a ghost—of Jack Daniels past. Still he seemed indifferent, staring without expression at the empty bottom shelf. There had been no alcohol in the house for six weeks, one DWI charge and five AA meetings ago. He wasn't exactly craving alcohol; he had just been looking for it out of habit. But at least for a moment he wondered how he would have reacted had he found any.

Ed leaned against the pantry door, looking pensive. His eyes were focused somewhere beyond the imprints and dust. He was recalling the first AA meeting and how after he had said, "Hi, I'm Ed," everyone had stared at him, each of them grinning in a stupid quasi-friendly way, waiting for him to continue. He had shrugged and slumped in his chair. Finally he added, "I'm an alcoholic," to which they replied, in monotonous harmony, "HI, ED." He hated coffee back then.

He hadn't experienced withdrawal. That and the absence of craving were the primary reasons that he remained unconvinced after six weeks, though he played the part, that he really was an alcoholic. He played the part, because his lawyer had insisted, because Darla had insisted. Megan had insisted, too, years ago, but he had never taken her seriously.

Megan had gone to great lengths to make him stop drinking, including telling preposterous stories about things he supposedly did when he'd had a few drinks. She had

threatened to make him leave many times. But he would help with laundry or clean the house and make it home in time for supper for a few days and things would get better. Eventually she had stopped nagging him. And then there was the night she woke him up to “talk.”

As usual Ed had stopped off at one of the local bars after work for a few beers. That night he'd left early—made it home in time for supper, after which he'd crashed on the couch. He had been sound asleep when Megan woke him. She had put Sydney and Graham to bed. He had known immediately that something was wrong because it was unusual for her to wake him up before she went to bed. He'd usually wake up about midnight needing to pee, after which he'd go to bed. In those days, he and Megan rarely talked, especially if he'd had anything at all to drink. One of Megan's complaints about ED was that she could instantly tell, she claimed, by the shape of his mouth—the way he showed his bottom teeth when he spoke—that he'd been drinking.

That night, when she woke him up to talk, at first he figured she was going to bitch at him for drinking again. Or maybe she'd found his cigarettes, or his weed. But all she said was, “I don't love you anymore.” That was it. Oh, and, “I want you to move out.”

After that, Ed had cleaned the house and had come home nearly every night right after work for a week, waiting for her to change her mind. One night he surprised her by fixing dinner. She thanked him and asked him if he had found a place to live. Ed remembered thinking that Megan was just being extra-stubborn that time. Then he became suspicious and accused her of having an affair: *Was it someone she had met at*

school or work—maybe the guy she worked for? Was it another woman? She sarcastically, but emphatically denied each of his suggestions. But she did admit, “Maybe there is someone else or at least the idea of someone else. Maybe someone who doesn't pass out on the couch before his kids are in bed; someone who is there beside me when I wake up at 2:30 in the morning; someone who doesn't piss on the front lawn; someone who—”

He had interrupted her, first to deny her accusations, then to accuse her of “being so perfect, so *self-rounded*,” to which she replied, “I think you mean *self-centered*.”

She was right.

That time, the last time, Megan had not changed her mind. He had moved into Sam's basement a week later.

Ed wasn't sure how long he had been standing in the kitchen staring at the dust ring in the bottom of the pantry. He closed the door and went back to the refrigerator, selected a can of cola, opening it as he returned to the couch. He pulled his billfold from his back pants pocket and tossed it on the coffee table where it landed next to a stack of paperbacks. He reached for the navy blue paperback; it was sandwiched between a Danielle Steel novel and another book titled *5,000 Baby Names*. Ed grabbed the blue book and the novel fell to the floor. Several envelopes fell out. He picked them up and noticed they were addressed to him. One was a Visa bill. He couldn't recall having had a Visa card for several years and was astounded at the list of charges: Baby Gap, Mother-Hood Maternity, Longaberger, Pampered Chef, Younkers, Target, Wal-Mart, even

HyVee. He closed his eyes and dropped his head against the back of the couch. It bounced slightly and lolled to one side. He was suddenly aware of pine-scented cleaner and felt nauseated. Sighing, he prepared to look at the next two envelopes. Fortunately the damages were less extensive: \$50 worth of DVDs from some discount club he hadn't joined and a letter from Family Video threatening to revoke their membership card if they did not return and pay outstanding fines on delinquent rentals. He threw the bills on the coffee table, intending to worry about them later, after the vasectomy.

Ed reached for the cola and took several more gulps. His mouth was dry and his head was starting to throb at the base of his skull. He lit another cigarette and picked up the blue book. The title was barely discernible. If he looked at it from a certain angle, he could read the embossed letters that said *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

He had received the book six weeks ago, on a Monday morning. After spending the weekend in the county jail. After he and Darla had been at his sister's fortieth birthday party. Because she was pregnant, Darla had not been drinking. She had said she would drive, but Ed refused, as usual, insisting that, even after six Beers and two shots of Jack Daniels, he was fine and could drive the 12 miles to their house. Since that night, he'd heard Darla's account of the story at least once directly from her, and several more times as she told it over the phone to friends: How she'd watched the centerline, the steadily lengthening line of cars that had formed behind them, the sudden deceleration of the car, and seeing Ed slumped in the driver's seat, his eyes closed and his chin touching his chest.

“ED!” Darla had screamed, “WAKE UP!” Headlights were blazing through the rear window as car after car pulled up short, then veered abruptly to the left and accelerated past them, their glaring taillights receding into the distance. Ed had straightened up, like a marionette suddenly jerked to life by a puppeteer. He repositioned his grip on the steering wheel and looked straight ahead as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Darla had stared at him, incredulous. “Let me drive,” she demanded, “Please!”

“I’m doing fine,” he had replied with an expression and tone that suggested the absurdity of her request.

“You were ASLEEP,” she had accused, aghast. The she added, “And don’t show your bottom teeth when you talk. I hate that!”

Ed had snorted and rolled his eyes, denied everything.

“You were; I SAW YOU. YOU were asleep,” Darla had rolled her eyes, too, and shook her head slowly from side to side. Then she had adjusted her seat belt and looked straight ahead, as if preparing for dangerous road conditions.

At first Ed hadn’t noticed the staccato red strobe of an approaching highway patrol car. It had appeared suddenly in the review mirror and slowed abruptly, assuming the speed of its prey.

“I think you better pull over,” Darla had said flatly, punctuating her suggestion with a deep sigh.

By the time Ed accepted the fact that he was busted it had been too late to change places with Darla. All he could say was “Oh, fuck.”

Ed slouched lower into the couch and leafed through the blue book. He began reading through a list of activities alcoholics are supposed to complete. He was over halfway through the list when he paused on number nine: "Make a list of all persons we have harmed" They had done this at tonight's AA meeting. Ed's list was short. He reached for his billfold and removed the list from the pocket where his driver's license had been. He tossed the billfold on the coffee table. At first he hadn't been able to think of anyone he had harmed but the leaders at AA insisted that his wife and kids should be on the list. He unfolded the list and read it; it said: 1. Kids, 2. wife, 3. X-wife.

He returned to the book and read on: "Make direct amends to such people wherever possible." He had asked the people at AA if this had to be done in any particular order. They had said, "No."

Ed lit another cigarette and surfed through the channels, eventually settling for a sitcom rerun, which was followed by another episode of the same sitcom. It was nearly twelve P.M. when Ed remembered that he wasn't supposed to eat or drink after midnight, so he quickly took several large gulps of the cola. He felt despair rising from his gut up to his eyeballs. *I should go to bed*, he thought, but he couldn't make himself get off the couch. He channel-surfed some more and located a movie channel that was running one of his favorites, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. It was just starting.

Two hours later, Ed glanced at the coffee table, looking for his phone, but then remembered that he'd left it in his coat pocket. After another trip to the closet, he returned to the couch with the phone and flipped it open. Low battery. "Shit," he whispered, heaving himself back up and shuffling to the kitchen. He plugged the phone

in to charge and picked up the receiver of the wall-mounted land line. He dialed Megan's number—once their number—and walked back to the living room. There was just enough cord to reach the couch.

She answered after the first ring. “Hello?” Her voice was slightly hoarse. She sounded concerned.

“Megan.” He hesitated for a few seconds before continuing, “This is Ed,” he said, followed by another pause.

Megan cleared her throat and asked, “What time is it?” Now she sounded annoyed.

“It's 2:15,” he replied, then continued, “I'm just calling to say I'm sorry.”

There was no reply.

“Tell the kids I'm sorry, too,” he added.

“What—what are you doing?” she demanded, sounding more annoyed.

“I'm just apologizing—” he started to explain.

Megan interrupted, “For what? What are you doing?” This time she sounded scared.

This isn't going well, Ed thought.

“I'm saying I'm sorry—for anything, anything I've ever done,” he paused, “to you and the kids.”

“The kids? Are you drunk?” she demanded.

He grunted quietly as if insulted and said, “Drunk? I haven't had a drink in six—”

“Are you alone? You sound like you're on something,” she charged.

“Nope. Just wanted to say I’m sorry. That’s all. Tell the kids I love them.” He sounded defeated.

“You—you took something didn’t you?” she asked nervously.

“I got to go,” he sighed. “Good-bye.” He poked the phone’s disconnect button with his index finger.

Ed had expected Megan to be pissed at him for calling at that time of day. The people at AA just said he had to apologize. They didn’t say what time of day it had to be. When they were first married Megan used to scream at him for not calling when he was going to be out late. He would use the excuse that he didn’t want to wake her up. After a few years she’d yell at him for waking her up when he came in after the bar closed. Eventually she didn’t even wake up when he came home, no matter what time it was. He remembered one Sunday morning: She had rolled over in bed so that they were face to face. When she opened her eyes she looked startled. “So you came home,” she had said, “I thought maybe you were dead.”

So yeah, he figured she’d be mad if he called at 2:15 A.M., but hey, at least he was apologizing. She seemed more worried than mad, though, and this confused him.

Eventually the phone emitted a series of obnoxious tones that startled Ed as he sat scowling on the couch. He poked at the disconnect button again but lost control of the receiver; the cord recoiled and pulled the phone out of his hand. It landed on the carpet and slid swiftly back into the kitchen. He didn’t bother getting up to place it back on the hook.

Ed slumped further into the couch, still wide awake. He pressed the channel button on the remote, flipping disinterestedly through infomercials, reality shows, and more old movies, finally arriving at a channel that apparently wasn't included in their cable contract. Intrigued by the fuzzy images of two people having sex, but annoyed by their equally fuzzy moans and grunts, he pressed the mute button and watched the silent exhibition.

Ed was seriously considering canceling the vasectomy when a reluctant tapping at the front door distracted him. He sat up and twisted his neck to look over the back of the couch. In the window he could see two sets of hands enclosing two pairs of squinting eyes. Ed looked confused and alarmed. As he walked to the door, he recognized his parents, Harold and Jane. They waved meekly in the window.

"Mom, Dad, what's going on?" he asked as he opened the door. He wasn't sure if he should be annoyed or scared.

"Well, thank goodness you're all right," said Jane, sounding relieved.

Ed looked puzzled.

"Is Darla here?" Harold inquired.

"Yeah, she's in bed." He answered, still confused.

Then Darla shambled into the room, yawning broadly. A string of saliva glimmered between the roof of her mouth and tongue. "Honey, why are you still up?" she asked, rubbing her squinting eyes.

Harold and Jane spoke in unison, smiling uncertainly: "Megan called."

Ed's eyes widened, "Oh," he said, glancing sideways at Darla. Her pale white nightgown was stretched tightly across her abdomen, which protruded from the gaping opening in her pink velour robe, like a full nylon moon. Still squinting, she peered at Ed, scratching the sides of her belly with both hands.

Harold cleared his throat and stared at the TV screen. Darla, now alert, stared at Ed. Ed stared at his feet. Jane looked from person to person, smiling pleasantly, as if waiting for someone to speak. When no one did, she said, "Honey, do you have a dog?"

"No," Ed answered confidently, "Why?"

"Because I think some animal urinated out there on your side walk."

Hated

(Rondeau Redoublé)

I woke up feeling hated, by whom
 I did not know, nor was I even sure
 why I should feel this stealthy gloom
 that snuck into my psyche like a slur.

I stayed awake and tried to figure
 out the source of scorn that loomed
 like a plague of shame sent to ensure
 I'd wake up feeling hated, but by whom?

And why? It started to consume
 me, made me less and less secure.
 Did it forebode impending doom?
 I didn't know, nor was I sure

why someone might abhor
 me. The less I slept the more I fumed,
 which rendered reasons more obscure
 why I should feel this stealthy gloom.

Hate sometimes abated but resumed,
 and like a zombie I was lured
 by a sickly sticky scum
 that snuck into my psyche like a slur.

Tenacious loathing clung on like a cur
 that probed inside me to exhume
 more rancor without cure,
 when deep inside my mental tomb
 I woke up feeling hated.

Those Letters

Today I burned those letters
that I've had at least ten years.
I found them in a closet
locked inside an old suitcase

that I've had the last ten years.
I found them at the bottom,
locked inside my old suitcase
under photographs and post cards.

I found them at the bottom
under tickets and receipts,
under photographs and post cards,
cocktail napkins, and plastic swords.

Under tickets and receipts
were letters that you wrote on
cocktail napkins. Plastic swords,
bottle corks, and champagne flutes

lay on the letters that you wrote
on the backs of sappy greeting cards.
Bottle corks and champagne flutes
hid letters that you wrote on

sappy greeting cards inside
envelopes with broken seals.
I hid the letters that you wrote,
beneath a dried bouquet, in their

envelopes with broken seals.
I found candles and matchbooks
beneath a dried bouquet at
the bottom of my suitcase.

I found candles and matchbooks
(found them in the closet) at
the bottom of my suitcase
so today I burned your letters.

Runaway Buddy

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, "I am running away."

"If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny."

"Shucks," said the bunny, "I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny." And so he did.

"Have a carrot," said the mother bunny.

—Margaret Wise Brown, *Runaway Bunny*, 1942

For Trent, still my little buddy.

*"If you come running after me,"
said her little buddy,
"I will be a GI Joe
and drive off in his jeep."*

*"If you drive off in a jeep,"
said his mother,
"I will chase you with Joe's chopper,
and I'll take you home to sleep."*

*"If you take me home to sleep,"
said her little buddy,
"I'll wait until you're snoring, then
out the window I will sneak."*

*"If you sneak out of the window,"
said his mother,
"I'll be waiting in the morning,
when I hear the floorboards creak."*

*And if you're out past curfew,
I'll take your phone or keys,
Or maybe I will ground you
for doing as you please,*

*And if you're burning incense,
I'll search your backpack, room, and car,
Without deceit or pretense,
I'll find out who you really are.*

*And if I find crushed leaves or seeds
Or a jagged crystal stash,
I don't know just what I'll do,
Once, I've thrown it in the trash*

*I've read this story many times
and won't concede to live it;
yours won't be the life I've seen.
Expressly, I forbid it.*

*I remember it like yesterday,
your cheeks were soft and ruddy
I'd read to you and rock you,
and you were my little buddy.*

*"You can't tell me what to do,"
Said her buddy, "You made the life we've had.
Get off my back. Leave me alone
Or I'm going to live with dad."*

Mother's House

I'm looking out the back door.
My breath clouds the window,
receding when I inhale.
I scan the greening grass past
the spa and finch feeders,
to the fence that marks the boundary
between my mother's yard
and number 9 fairway.

A gazing ball reflects pink
and white peonies that surround it
and the marble statue of a golfer, teeing off.
A hummingbird darts systematically
from bloom to bloom, then blurs
when I recall the day a different door
quivered inward on screeching hinges.

Sun seeped through cracked and blotted glass,
igniting an aurora of dust motes.

I did not know why,
until I'd run inside, stopping
when I realized I stood at the center
of a room carpeted wall-to-wall
with the dead bees,

why mother stayed
on the porch,
could not come inside,
a younger brother and a sister
on each hip, crying.

I was too terrified to move,
a bigger brother put me on his back
and galloped through the door
carving a wake of swirling specks,

before the floor could fracture
and swallow us
into a pit of swarming dark.

We left Daddy standing there
to tell the walls which of them
he would knock down.

Ironic, where we gather now,
the ones still left,
discussing addictions and
familial faux pas,
eating English muffins drizzled
with butter and honey.

I look out the back door,
see the boxwoods need trimming.
Dandelions spot the lawn
once littered with rusted cars,
hunks of mangled metal,
debris and weeds taller than me

I exhale one more time.
A circle of vapor expands,
clouds the window,
recedes and is gone.

Big Brother

I see you.

What made you boost me
to the bathroom sink so I could
slurp water sideways
from the running faucet,
swish and spit to clear the soap?

Naughty words.

Did you ever think
we'd do worse than
writing "b-u-t"?

I see you
tapping the keg,
throwing sticks into the fire,
rolling joints and telling
jokes I didn't get,
going places I couldn't go.

I saw you
walking in the shadow of skyscrapers
without a coat in January.
Whose shoes were you wearing?

I saw you
behind thick glass, phone to your ear,
talking to someone I did not recognize
on the other side.

I saw you.
You didn't
know me.
You were my brother.

What You Said to My Sister

I think perhaps—in retrospect—it's not untrue
we all connect by a mere six social links.

And thus—through mutual work
in hybrid seeds, you met the daughter
of my mother's childhood friend.

Wow. The two of you. In Hawaii for a seed company
convention, where no doubt you ate hors d'oeuvres
at corporate-sponsored parties, drank exotic cocktails
with colleagues from the States, talked genetic engineering,
bantered over alma maters.

And later in your room you poured yourself a drink
from which you took but just one sip before you slammed
it on the table. "IT WAS A MAN'S CONVERSATION,"
you told the daughter of my mother's friend.

I wonder if it startled her, the sudden crack,
the Jack and Coke and ice jumping over the rim?

I wonder what you thought when she took an early flight
back to the States? How did you explain that
to the other agronomists?

How was Hawaii? And did you enjoy the conference?

Mother says she knows I'd have done the same thing
and we laugh and think about my sister, but neither of us
asks the other what you might have said to her so
many years ago after she and I stood hip to hip
drying supper dishes at the sink.

My sister. We were never close. We never
talked about you that night. I said she could go
with me to hang out with my friends,
but she had to see you, so I said "Oh"
because everybody knew you were seeing
someone else.

Oh. Well anyway

Did you talk about the play? She and I tried out
for parts that day after school. Perhaps you remember
I played a singing cowboy in *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Or did you talk about the new girl you were seeing,
the one in my class who later had the audacity to ask
what you were doing with my sister that night
when she took an early flight

out of your car and over the edge of the world

leaving me—and our mother—to banter
silently in supermarket aisles over
greeting cards for daughters and for sisters
that we will never buy.

Fear of Falling

After Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

Do not fall silent into this clear night.
All stars should wink and gleam above this sphere;
Surge, surge against the ending of their flight

New lovers, like stars, burn brilliant and bright.
Fair words they whisper for lovers to hear
do not fall silent into this clear night.

Time sings love, burning words that were right;
Old fair words fizzle like sparks on the ear.
Surge, surge against the ending of the flight.

Old lovers clutch fragments of sparkling light,
but learned long ago that love's burning spear
does not fall silent into that clear night,

yet stays ever pendant in our hindsight.
Still, lovers hurl through space, blind to fear
Surge, surge against the ending of the flight

For we, fooled lovers, fall brief and finite.
Take, keep us now, with fair words endear.
Do not fall silent into that clear night;
Surge, surge against the ending of this flight.

Iowa Borealis

It was a half-moon mid-November night.
He'd walked the dog and brought the mail inside,
then asked her if she'd want to take a ride.
She put the milk away and said *I might*.

The ire in her voice was only slight.
She put her hands into the sink and sighed.
He put away the dishes that she'd dried.
She fed the cats, turned off the kitchen light,

put on her coat, and said, *okay, let's go*.
He drove her to a baseball field nearby
to share with her one of his favorite sights

he'd seen only in Michigan, although
that night where they embraced, that late-fall sky
in Iowa strobed white with northern light.

Seventh Anniversary Sonnet

I kiss your head where fine, fair hair once grew
in full blonde wisps cropped just below the brow
above blue eyes that no one kissed, somehow
before a time when neither of us knew
that we'd be *us*, not merely me or you.
I marvel that I love you, even now
that we've gone seven years beyond a vow
to sing the Song of Songs we sing as two.
And now, the hair we wear and shed is merged
in places that we lay our heads, where parts
of us combine in stippled strands that leave
us tightly intertwined until we've purged
desire from our souls and heaving hearts,
until the locks untangle and we cleave.

Shapes of Sleep

1

She sleeps
 in the shape of an S,
 a repose he mimes
 curve for curve, like

an eclipse
 they breathe

skin to skin,
 their listless wrists
 entwined, elbows aligned
 and fingers fisted
 palm to palm
 and side to side, two

bodies burrow
 in the earth like
 worms squirming,
 slowly twisting,

writhing deep
 into the loamy silt of sleep.

2

He sleeps
 supine,
 a solitary
 I,
 and dreams
 to have her
 there with him
 to take
 the shape
 of nested S's
 resting,
 letters listing
 in their slanted
 spell
 of sleep.

First Bike

My big brother got a bike
when he turned five:
shamrock green,
white pin-stripes,
a kickstand and a bell.

Dad ran beside him,
one hand beneath the seat,
until one day
my brother pulled away,
legs pumping madly
down the street.

I still see them:
smiles as wide
as the sidewalk.

My brother got a bike
when he turned seven:
three-speed,
dandelion yellow,
monkey handlebars,
a glitter-speckled
banana seat.

He laid the green bike
on the ground, told me
I could have it.

So I got a silver bucket
from the sandbox,
filled it at the spigot,
and smiled as I washed
my bike,
because I was green
with happiness.

Headwind Haiku

She rides red metal
inside an arbor tunnel,
tires crushing leaves.

She drives leg muscle,
flesh pistons pumping pedals,
pushing brawny knees.

She tugs through the gale
sweating, chilling, growing pale,
beneath tawny trees.

She turns on the trail,
changing headwind into tail,
rides red-metal breeze.

Heron at Dawn

A slender-throated heron wades,
mirrored lean and sooty blue
in the shallows of a misted lake,
waiting to plunge and snatch unwary
fish that graze the glassy surface.

The narcissistic sun, barely ascended,
lurks along the distant shore, like a voyeur
captivated by its own reflection, mating
with the muted morning sky.

Something, a fox or just the wind,
moves hushed and fleeting
in the brush along the nearby bank.

The heron ceases fishing,
extends its munificent wings and lifts
into the startled sky, its spindly legs
trailing like braided strands of string.

Swimming in the Sky

Before I learned to swim
I'd sometimes dream
that I could fly

but now that I can swim
I think in my old dreams
that I was swimming
in the sky.