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LEAVING NORMAL

By

Genean A. Granger

THESIS

Submitted

to

Northern Michigan

University

In partial fulfillment of the
requirements

For the degree

of

MASTERS IN ENGLISH

Office of Graduate Education and Research

2014

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: **LEAVING NORMAL**

This thesis by Genean A. Granger is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

Committee Chair: Dr. Austin Hummell Date

First Reader: Dr. Lesley Larkin Date

Second Reader (if required): Date

Department Head: Dr. Raymond Ventre Date

Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research: Date
Dr. Brian D. Cherry

ABSTRACT

LEAVING NORMAL

By

Genean A. Granger

The poems in my thesis are written in free verse and have been written in the course of my classes at Northern Michigan University. I have added poems this current semester, Winter 2014. When I embarked on this journey to learn more about the craft of poetry I had no idea where it would take me. I have been challenged and inspired by my fellow students, by the poetry we read and wrote, and by the renowned poets I have met while attending Northern Michigan University: Donald Hall, Henry Hughes, Natasha Trethewey, Martha Silano, Laura Kasischke, and Naomi Shihab Nye. The faculty at Northern Michigan University that I've been fortunate to work with has enabled me to find my voice in poetry.

My thesis is titled *Leaving Normal* and is presented in four sections. The first section is titled "Looking Back", and is largely biographical and reflects my personal history. The second section is called "Slices of Life" and is more imaginative, being a composite of feelings and emotions and is my take on subjects I have struggled or been intrigued with. The third section is a group of poems titled, "1924: A Nun's Life", the story from birth to death of a ninety year old Carmelite Nun and reflects my Catholic faith. I've included three elegies to friends I have lost this year in that section. The fourth and last section is titled, "The Fifth Day." It reflects my love for the beautiful Upper Peninsula.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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2014

DEDICATION

For my family, present and gone.

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Grateful acknowledgments and thanks to my thesis director, Austin Hummell. One of the most important gifts he's given me is to open my eyes to how much stronger my poems are with careful revision. Besides class time, I thank him for his willingness to be available in his office for my innumerable questions and his graciousness during the birthing of this thesis. Also his help in crafting "1924: A Nun's Life" was invaluable. He helped me win the prize for the 90th Anniversary Convention theme at the 2014 Sigma Tau Delta convention in Savannah, Georgia. I thank, Alisa Hummell, for her graciousness.

To Lesley Larkin, thank you for being my reader and my friend. I know your tutelage helped me win a first in Original Poetry at the Sigma Tau Delta convention in New Orleans in 2012. And, your support, when I presented in Portland, Oregon was greatly appreciated.

To my fellow students who have delighted me with their words. This may not be everyone, but Rebecca Pelky, Cory Ferrer, Caleb Nelson, Ashley Goedker, Zarah Moggenberg, Linda Sirois, Alex Gubbins, Nicole Koroch, Christen Leppla, and Amy Hansen, you all have a special place in my heart. I hear our joy and laughter. What an amazing way to learn.

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INTRODUCTION

In my thesis, *Leaving Normal*, I wish to demonstrate the journey I have undergone in the pursuit of my degree. I also want to express the joy this pursuit has given me. My manuscript is divided into four sections: “Looking Back,” “Slices of Life,” “1924: A Nun’s Life” and three elegies of friends I have lost, and “The Fifth Day.”

Words have been an important part of my earliest memories. Being read to as a child, I embraced “Wind in the Willows,” “The Velveteen Rabbit,” “Raggedy Ann,” and the “Wizard of Oz,” plus countless others. They peopled my mind and became real. Learning to read meant I could swallow those words myself. Even today, the quest to find the right word for a poem is like a hunger. The stories and poems these words provided were enriching and filled a void like nothing else could.

The first section, “Looking Back,” is largely biographical. It contains my joys and sorrows, tells about my birth, my childhood, my abusive first marriage, and the healing that came from being a mother, a wife and being loved. It also signals a return to normalcy when I was able to restore my faith in myself as an individual.

The second section, “Slices of Life,” is just that. It’s my take on Alzheimer’s, nursing homes, my best friend caring for her Down syndrome sister, and my more imaginative twists and themes that come from some visceral part of me. These poems came from dreams, were written down in the middle of the night, and I carried the phrases and stanzas for them with me for weeks until they came into being. From the sestina about an extinct stegosaurus, to a poem about swimming in a pool in tropical Costa Rica, I gave my imagination free rein to gather words and create poems. Six of them were presented in New Orleans at the 2012 Sigma Tau Delta Convention. I won first place for Original Poetry. It was a trip.

The third section, “1924: A Nun’s Life,” is a group of poems that follows ninety years, from birth to death of a Carmelite nun. It is drawn from my Catholic faith and the close association I had with the Carmelite Monastery near my childhood home. The group won the 90th Anniversary Convention Theme prize at the 2014 Sigma Tau Delta Convention. The three elegies that follow this group of poems were my way of dealing with the sudden loss this last year of three people I loved.

The fourth and final section is titled “The Fifth Day.” The title refers to the day in Genesis ‘where the waters abounded with life and the winged creatures flew below the heavens’ (Genesis 1:20-23). I picture the creation of the Upper Peninsula, a place I have loved since my eyes first opened as a newborn.

I have played with fixed forms in my thesis. I have included a sestina, a villanelle, and a pantoum. It’s been fun to bring contemporary subjects to life in these old traditional styles. I have included two letter poems. Lastly, I have admired Adrienne Rich’s poetry since Austin Hummell read “Living in Sin,” in my first poetry class. Another favorite of mine of Rich’s poetry is her poem, “Delta” (Rich 224). I have taken the eight lines of this poem and used two lines each as epigraphs in the four sections of my thesis.

LEAVING NORMAL

I
Looking Back

If you have taken this rubble for my past
raking through it for fragments you could sell

--Adrienne Rich

Hello My Dolly

Nights we fell asleep to her rocking
the least of us. Mama was an orphan
never chosen. Our house bulged
like the Old Woman Who Lived
in a Shoe. Children came to us

scarred by folks whose job it was
to love them. Mama taught them
trust again. She'd rock each one
to change the rhythm of their lives.

A man's hanky pinned to her apron,
she waged war on noses and drool;
wiped clean doll and baby faces. With
a string of suckers hung from a hook
she taught potty to the toughest holdouts.

Blanket-wrapped, a child, I slept
to the whirl of her sewing. She
fashioned velvet dresses, fur-trimmed
capas for my dolls. I wondered what
drove her. Mornings she'd hold
me close and whisper Hello Dolly.

She found money for a bus to Biloxi
when I was 12, where the cure for asthma
was dangled. Four days we traveled, me
bus-sick and Mama bent on my being
whole. I drank spoons of elixir
until it ate a hole in the tablecloth.

Grief made her sugar climb,
gangrene took her leg. I stayed
by her side in ICU. She woke
from the coma, whispered,
Hello my Dolly,
and stayed awhile.

The Ringmaster

Because I know the fat lady's heart
is breakable, I cheer her cheerless
chores. I ice bruises and mend injuries
that may not be from her job. Because
she cries I hand out Kleenex. I know her
weight by stone. Social Services want
to know who taught her son to call
his teachers' dildos. Her mind plays
the same song over and over. I know she
measures herself against her 90 pound
daughter—bent beneath the weight of HER
lover. It's driving her around the bend, images
of her man and this child she carried. I phone
when she's a no-show, log her absences
as excused. I ask the union to dicker
and defend her job to management.
It isn't easy being ten-percent, to be
the brunt of jokes. Beneath jeans
and worn-out tees, her bras and panties
sparkle like jewels. She paints her lips,
wears perfume, can't seem to catch a break.

Past Forgetting

She's in the john for the fourth time
this morning.

I measure out five sheets of Charmin
so the toilet won't plug.

The Crest is hidden –

she brushes

morning and night

but uses a squeeze

that would sparkle the teeth

of a family of eight.

Alone, in the bathroom, she believes

no one can hear her.

She talks to God and his Angel

about failures and sins that never took place.

Some days her mind is a grey slate lake

with no words to guide her.

She struggles into underpants, rolls

and unrolls the same pair of socks.

Worn out she hunts for the rest of her

clothes.

Her address book is buried deep in the snow.

Some days are blessed. She smiles,

becomes the *she*

before thinking failed.

Some days her mind works with the tides,

erases the remnants of memory not eaten

by a Great White with shiny, sharp teeth.

Dirty Laundry

It's not the whitened circle from the ever-present can of Copenhagen
worn into the fabric of the right back pocket,
smoke rings blown towards a Gibbous moon.

It's not the leather belt I remove with its weighty
silver buckle that resides beneath his umbilicus.

It's not when they're on a heap on the bedroom floor,

It's when they assume his shape, when those long legs climb
into them, take on that swagger.

It's the blueprint created by many wearings and washings that hide and reveal
the workings of the body I crave, the fly curving around his penis,
weighty, whitened, frayed.

It's when I hold the jeans to my face, inhale wood smoke, the musky
male smell that is his alone, a pungent intoxicant that stirs my senses.

It's when I touch the soft cotton, so like caressing his bare skin that I want to howl.

A tendril of white string, intimately trundled to my groin, has unraveled from their hem
and tickles my nose as I release them into the wash water.

War Baby

When Daddy was declared 4-F
he and Mama celebrated his
not going to war. Their seeds
of celebration became me.
Uncle Sam needed fighting men,
they checked Daddy out again,
found him fit for soldiering.
I swam into life two months early.
The doctors wagered seven months
womb time was not good odds.
Though the Gods were against
survival, Mama didn't listen.
She willed me to live. Tried to keep
from crying when well-meaning
folk said, She's pretty.
Mama knew they lied.
No hair, no eyebrows or lashes,
no fingernails,
Just not done.

Red Feathers

The axe hangs, a second hand
from his hand, with its flash of silver edge.
He walks through the skittish flock.
They scatter, sense a fever change,
predict a storm on this clear day, as I cling
to chicken wire.

With a single motion he grabs a copper hen,
pins her to the bloodied stump. The axe falls
once. Leaves severed head
with one unseeing eye. He throws the body
to the sky.

Brilliant red, petal upon petal sprays,
like the scatter of late roses
on a chill November wind.
Screams scorch my throat.
With bloody bird clasped in butcher's hand,
Daddy stills me in his embrace.

I whimper before sleep,
beg to leave the light on.
Beneath tight shut lids, I see
petals upon petals of brilliant red
as rusty feathers spiral.

Friday Night on the Main Drag

We score a great spot in front of Kresge's.
The air is thick with the aroma of hot roasted nuts,
freshly baked doughnuts, the grease luring us in.
I'm twelve; it's Dad's payday.
My two quarters allowance is clutched in my palm.
I'm worn out trying to decide between paper dolls
or a Classic comic. My youngest sister ate hers,
a tin-roof sundae. My brothers have checked out
BB's, baseball cards, and tried to page through girly
magazines at the Bon Ton. They're wary
of combining their wealth as ownership's
been a problem in the past.
My folks lean against our Chevy,
visit with passersby's. A couple
of my first cousins run past.
Lumber trucks rumble on through.
Fats Domino's *Blueberry Hill* vibrates
from outside speakers. Old Mrs. Dempsey
stops to talk and I stare at the goiter on her
neck. It's like a prow on a ship. Eventually,
it will choke her to death. Mom swats me
for staring, but not real hard. Petie Wender
wanders over to ask if he can take
my older sister to the dance on Saturday.
I can smell cow shit on his boots. Don't
know how she can stand kissing him. She
does though.

Leaving Normal

At eighteen, I married
a man I barely knew.
Teen hormones ignited
passion until
betrayed by lust
I turned the knob,
and the door swung wide,
away from family hugs,
and kisses. Learned to lie
about bruises and broken
bones. Learned to say I'd
fallen, and *Oh, I'm fine.*
Learned to wear long sleeves
and smile while pain
curled me into my shell.
Was taught to not believe the myth
of happily ever after. When I did
confess, the priest said,
divorce was not an option.
He said I must lie in the blessed bed
the Catholic Church had fashioned.
I studied the blueprint of my parents'
mating, my grandparents' 55 years
of courting. Fueled by Jim Beam,
my husband screamed,
It's your fault that I hit you.
His words left me ashamed
I could still love him.

His violence, my fear,
became the paint upon our walls,
until his rage
turned towards our daughter.
I soothed her cries, closed the door,
and she and I left for normal.

Grede Foundry's Nurse

Through the eye of the magnifying lens, I
absorb the swirls, whorls, begrimed tunnels
worn into his fingers, discover the splinter
driven deep beneath
his black-ridged nail,
the angle of his hand in mine,
the measured beat of his pulse.

The tweezers grasp and free the wedge
of rotted wood, blood bubbles in the
newly absented space,
spills over.

We are pleased it is gone.

I submerge his hand
into a basin of warm water,
his body relaxes,
the metallic smell of the smoky foundry
seeps from his sweaty tee shirt,
a momentary reprieve in a grueling
gray shift.

Blueberry Picking

Just days past summer solstice, I push my son's
buggy down the winding path.
Beneath the mosquito netting, he's soothed to sleep
by the tinny lullaby of buckets clinking together.

Gnats gnaw on the sweat at the back of my neck,
rosy sunburn grows fierce
in the shimmer of midday sun.

When I stop to pick, ants
climb the towers of my freckled legs.
I brush at them, but they navigate
trails up my blue-veined highways.

I pick my fill. Close my eyes against the heat
and hundreds of blueberry eyes stare back at me.
Purple juice stains my fingers, saturates the oval
of my mouth.

Heavy-bottomed bees hover over the space
we share, land like tiny helicopters on
the dense bushes, sample sweet liquid
before they move on to a fresh patch.

My baby turns in his sleep, jiggles the cans.
Startled by the clanking, his hands splay,
brown eyes open, and he smiles
through his gauze cocoon.

Gathering

It is a cuckoo's nest of Granger cheer.

Dippy's got the hiccups, Laura Lee's tipsy, the baby's spitting up prunes.

Football pools, arm-wrestling, rug-rats are screaming, we're short two chairs.

No fights over politics or religion, we share jokes and hors-d'oeuvres.

Dippy's got the hiccups, Laura Lee's tipsy, the baby's spitting up prunes.

We are grateful our worries huddle outside the door.

No fights over politics or religion, we share jokes and hors-d'oeuvres.

They knock and they knock but they aren't welcome here.

We are grateful our worries huddle outside the door.

There's turkey and dressing and plenty of boozing.

They knock and they knock but they aren't welcome here,

piled high on plates with pumpkin pie prayer.

There's turkey and dressing and plenty of boozing,

football pools, arm-wrestling, rug-rats are screaming, we're short two chairs.

Piled high on plates with pumpkin pie prayer,

it is a cuckoo's nest of Granger cheer.

Beecher, Wisconsin

They say the fried chicken served for dinner
at Mary's Place makes Sunday worthwhile.
My hubby hums *Drive by Mary's Place*
each time we hit the town limits. But, we don't
drive by, we pull on in. We sit at oilcloth-covered
tables, the pattern rubbed down to white slick.
Your bare elbow gets gummy if you lean
too long on it.

There's been a For Sale sign out front
for the last eight years. Bessie, our waitress,
doesn't bother with the hard sell she gives
strangers. She knows what we'll order.
The Faith Baptist Church crowd
are hungry after the long service.
You can tell the mood of the sermon
by their happy or solemn faces, by

the pile of chicken bones left on the plates.
Most local kids are home-schooled.
No shaved heads. No Goth. No piercings.
World events are topics discussed by truckers.
US141 runs dab-smack through Beecher's middle.
Townpeople stick to gossip of weddings
or deaths, and who'd been arrested.

The bus boy, Mary's nephew Hughie, has Down's
and a smile like a lit jukebox. He wears
his favorite Packer tee shirt, waves a big Hi.

Two guys in double-breasted
suits sit and bitch. They're
Beecher butchers. College kids
stole their new sign last night—
Beecher Meat. My hubby glues my hand
to the sticky oilcloth to stifle my giggle.

Neither Earth nor Sky

Day leaks through slits of
shades. A moth quivers
where light fades. Your beard
scrapes along my face, lips pin me
to the pillow case. You part my knees,
our hips bang, cymbals celebrating song.
Smells of moist and musk envelope us
as your tongue goes round my ear.
You whisper my name – Holy, Holy.
The moth still quivers on the wall.
Our toes dig in, bodies turn
like a carousel in the dark.
We arrange, are guided,
not domain of just our minds.
Catch a brass ring, cross the chasm.
My lips taste the salt of distant rivers
where need for speech or song has gone.

II

Slices of Life

know that I long ago moved on
deeper into the heart of the matter

--Adrienne Rich

Shall Not Hurt Them

I was seven when I laid hands on Missy Milburn's head
and stopped her fits. I felt the Spirit working
through me and her twitchin' ceased.

Learned about herbs—where to find them, how to
use them, that stingin' nettles can be brewed into tea
and yeller yarrow works as a poultice
an' such.

Serpents, I jes' started handlin'
on my own.

Timber rattlers, cottonmouths, mostly.

Love the shift of their skin, the sleep of them
sunnin' on warm rocks,
like babies in the cradle of the gunnysack.

Coming out of darkness
they coil around me, like the arms
of a mother scared to lose her child.

There's holiness there.

Mama passed about a month before
my thirteenth birthday.

Now, on nights when the moon's riding high
and Pa's got a skinful of shine, he comes
looking for me. I keep a gunnysack
full of snakes by my bed. He catches
sight of the brown burlap moving
like a giant muscle and he finds
elsewhere to lie.

Chagall Dreams

Caught in a net of sameness
she pretends she is alone,
not in bed with the lump
that used to be her sister.

She burrows into the pillow,
turns on the T.V. at three a.m.
and surfs for *me* time. She cares
for a 55-year-old Down's with
early dementia –who's forgotten

how to dress herself, who can't wipe herself,
who gets stuck on the stairs and cries
she does not know how to go up or down–
who now sleeps and travels through a night
peopled with blue cows and floating churches
and no vocabulary to explain any of it.

Life doesn't turn out the way you expect
it to. Her day will be spent looking after
and for things. The gas bill is crumbled
in her sister's pocket. The car keys
are warming in the oven. The list of lost
things grows daily.

They go to Mass where one evokes a novena
to an unlistening God, bargains, pleads
that for a little longer
this child she never birthed

will not forget her name.

The other croons gibberish,
sings the chorus of *Oklahoma* during
the hymn, nibbles the host with relish
like an hors-d'oeuvre, and hugs half
the parishioners after communion.

The child/sister falls asleep in the blue beanbag
chair watching reruns of *Little House
on the Prairie* as an ocean of wheat
drowns the smiling girl.

Last Dance

They sashay a slow waltz in wheelchairs and walkers
to the music of rubber-soled nurses and the clang
of bedpans. Their harmony is sneezes and wheezes
and snatches of forgotten songs. They drive their wheelchairs
over the threshold,
their cart and their plow over the bones of the dead.

Hours of waiting no clock can measure.
They no longer recognize their face in the mirror.
Served three meals as tasty as dog food,
they crave dessert, anything chocolate,
and eat it first.

They mourn children and grandchildren
who rarely visit, shuffle faded photos
with bent edges like collections of worn
baseball cards. No one collects baseball cards.
They've lost who they were before age invaded.

The gift of a hug, a bright ribbon, or a few minutes
to listen to their over-told tales –
everything's more important than charting
the body's decline or the mind's failure.

When they no longer speak and curl
into the womb,
when memory flies to the moon
their hours of waiting will end.

Loose Connections

Dear Marley,

On this gray day, I ducked into the Whitney when drizzle turned to rain. I was drawn to the Edward Hopper exhibit. Fragmented light altered the map of the functional and mundane, into art. Night shadows hid the grimness daylight would impart. My eyes, my mind, were drawn to the interaction of his figures, his staging, how he pulls the observer in. In those empty spaces I entered his paintings of diners, gas stations, rented rooms.

I think of us in those rooms, the shadows of you hovering over my ready body, sweet slick as skin meets skin. We listen as Lady Day's bluesy voice circles up from the bar below.

I think of us, in Hopper's all-night diners facing empty streets. Of us, shoulders touching, while I watch your pulse beat in your wrist. I went to our diner on 53rd Street. No one spoke to me. I am invisible without you. I can't see myself in the mirror; only through your eyes do I exist. I stand before my class, look over my students' heads, so many baby robins waiting to be fed. They flutter their wings, unable to fly without a push from the nest.

I sleep with your blue shirt. It is losing your scent – Irish malt whiskey, Johnson's baby shampoo, the ineffable smell that is just you. I followed a man six blocks. His hair curled over his collar like yours. He turned, angry, because I had such desperate intention. Ashamed, I ran to the sub-let and howled until the cat hid in the closet.

Your assignment was for three weeks, but it has been three weeks, six days, sixteen hours. The only address I have is CNN headquarters in Kabul. Are you still in the hills? Come home.

Your Nighthawk,

Lucy

On Many a Dark Night

Dusk is shrouded, night a fevered wish,
I bury my mojo beneath a conjurer's rock.
My bloated belly stares at an empty dish.
I weep because black magic can't stop this futile clock.

Blue lightning zips, rips, cleaves open stone sky,
loses chase, spreads my soul over my Master's field.
Leave the big house to the buzz of a bluebottle fly,
whisper over my baby's grave, Let escape be revealed.

Feel the earth through my bare toes, bleed open my mind,
know there is no safe place to hide.
pursued by death, I'm sure that they'll find

my body's bones before the moon is too bright.
Freedom's a forgotten wish, a place inclined
to exist beyond my reach as I run through the night.

Battle of Helix Nebula

The Night has vowed to fight upon this sky.
From dusk to dawn, novas battle bright
stars. The birds of twilight – huddle, mutter,
cry. There is a void between novas' life and
death. Duane's vest is bullet-proof to wage his war.
He glides through heaven in an armored car.
Gangs brandish guns forged of dust and
rings of moon. In far-off galaxies bullets
ricochet like meteors. On the spiral side of
nebula no law exists. The dead become
diffused as stars roll up Night's dark blanket.

Ta – Thanks

Ta—to Mary Katherine O’Malley, the storekeeper on the long, unpaved road from northeast Belfast to Donegal, who herded me into a rickety sedan on a down-pouring day, drove me miles and miles out of her way to a hostel managed by elderly old maids, regaling me with—Ireland would be a wonderful country if it only had a bit of roof on it and that’s the reason there’s so many redheads, tis’ the rust!

Ta—to Katy Margaret O’Neil from the backwash of Connemara, who married her dully handsome first cousin, who has since gone to fat and rotten teeth. She loves him and their four idiot sons, whose noses and drool she wipes, coaxing smiles from their vacant minds, counting them her treasures.

Ta—to Granny Cassandra Mellon –the oldest living female in Shannon, Because she’s old, she’s given gifts of glass after glass of Guinness. Her immense bulk overflows the chair as she sips, knowing a body can live on Guinness as long as you remember to eat a bit of cabbage now and then.

Ta— to Annie Kelso MacAfee, a slovenly housekeeper who’s newly inherited a run-down mansion in Galway and opened a B&B, but alas, there’s no breakfast as the milk curdles on the stoop, the cats roam the cupboards, and rusted plumbing rests in the stained tub on the second floor.

Ta— to Valerie Annie Peltham, a Belfast housewife, who grew up in the Cyprus sun, fell in love with David Peltham, an Irish minstrel with wandering eyes and a smile to break your heart. She gave birth to their daughter, Zoë, alone after thirty-two hours of labor, her narrow shutdown face lined with dissatisfaction for both weather and wandering.

Ta -- to Brigit Murphy McPherson, a barmaid in County Clare, with a mustache and a wart on her nose, but whose singing of *Waltzing Matilda* sends chills down one's spine. Who was judged a "Good Craic" by the lads in McPherson's Pub, for any man in need of a glass.

Traveling

Train windows offer a world through panes of glass;
chug to Ile St. Louis, Istanbul, or Marrakesh. Fires set
to pyres piled with marigolds, like pyramids of coins.
Taste ripe berries in Tuscan wine with bourgeois stew
and crusty bread. Above a roofless church a cappella
hymns climb.

Tell Me about Despair

The conductor rolls down the aisles on sea legs,
a metronome cadence beneath his feet,
he punches tickets to the rail's cough and wheeze.

For thirty years, passengers like penitents
choose seats, stow baskets, bags, and coats.

The 6:02 chugs out of Penn, leaves behind
the blare of track and time. Smell of diesel,
seep of heat, it eases out of Queens. Long
Island bound are kids, couples, teens.

Windows reveal cottages, grand
estates. Island history in each name—

Wantagh,

Amagansett.

Mind the Gap.

Alone a woman cries, face
to the glass.

He touches her hand
and smiles.

Advice from a Prehistoric Pet

Did you ever think what it would be like to be extinct?
Did I die mid-lunch? That would stink.
What did scientists' sifting eggs and bones think
when they dug holes in the sand? Did they find a missing link?
Was it before the Ice Age when Planet Earth became a skating rink?
I was a stegosaurus. Archeologists predicted a brink

within the margin of human error that bridges that brink.
Why did I, my family, even my friends become extinct?
If I'd known, I would have put on skates, danced on that rink.
You can't moan over bad luck or raise a stink.
Was my veggie diet of low plants, my tiny brain the link?
Nope. That wasn't it. No jinx or hoodwink. Think,

the meat eaters, T-Rex and his pals are gone. Think
what would you do with this edict? How could you brink
a life without sex, unable to find a love-link,
no baby dinos, no eggs in your nest, besides be extinct?
We weren't given nick-names like Jo, Bugsy, or Stink.
In Greek, dinosaur means *terrible lizard*. T-Rex is so rinky-dink.

Who wants to be terrible, to be the bully on the rink?
Use your manners, be kind. Reconsider. Hope. Think.
We lived in the tropics. Hot and steamy was our precinct,
nested near swamps, swam, and lived on deltas' brink.
Tail-spikes, armor, big as a bus, nothing helped to not be extinct.
Today's crowd should be wary, check Animal Planet's link.

gone were the dodos, the albatross, too, in a wink.
There's clues inked in dirt that earth may become an ice rink.
I don't want to alarm you; it's up to you to think,
to plan before you stand upon that brink.
The pendulum swings over an abyss that might sink.

Being homeless or hungry does stink
and those in charge must shield this interlink.
Perhaps we'll change before we all sink.
If not, I will skate with you upon the rink,
or swim in caldrons as mercury rises. Think-
clean waters, before no one can swim, fish or drink.

Doing nothing stinks. The ice is thin upon our planet's rink.
History link predicts that what happened once should make us think.
We balance on tiddlywinks. Beware of extinction's slink.

Pound

An hour past lunch I drove into Pound,
a village too small to be called a town.
Read a worn sign for *Sandwiches, Fountain Drinks*.
Two duffers sat at the table eager to converse.
I ordered a grilled cheese, a cup of green
tea, took out a poetry book and started
to read. They noted my book. One of them
said, you might like to know our town
was named for Ezra Pound's grandpa,
a tycoon here in the lumber boom.
Eighty-year old Orville began to quote
'In the Station of the Metro.' When he finished
the verse, Bobby spoke from memory
in a quavering voice. My sandwich was crumbs;
my tea was gone, I sat spellbound
by their eloquent charm. The pair continued,
Nope, not much going on.
The town's drying up. No jobs can be found,
most youngsters move on when they
graduate high school. Two Baptist Churches,
built a block from each other, each
promising heaven. On the outskirts, as I drove
down the highway, a shabby sign read – Pound-
Population- 357.

La Piscina

I tread water in this Olympic stretch of pool,
the water delicious in the afternoon heat –
a mere 10 degrees from the equator.
the baked blue tiles at its bottom shimmer –
their checkerboard scored by a grid
of white grout,
wavers to the water's surface –
wiggles into the saw-tooth pattern
of rick-rack sewn on my mother's kitchen
curtains, circa 1958. Halos of rainbows
rumba where the sun blesses
the ripples, slide into an intricate dance
as I move from one end to the other,
my legs ghostly white, disembodied
as the pool claims them as its own
in this womb of water.

Uncoupling

Daddy left
one Sunday morning
for bagels. Mama held
open auditions
for his side of the bed. Enough men
to string around the Christmas tree
in Rockefeller Center.
I never believed the Grimm
tale of a Princess walking on razors
for the man she loved.
I believed in banging for pleasure.

We hooked up in Florence after
too many glasses of grappa.
For two weeks we hunkered down
in a pensione. My naked foot
in your bare-ass lap as you
painted my toes. I watched your
fly-catching mouth as you slept.
I felt your heavy hand on the
curve of my belly, the slack sleep
of your penis when sated. I close
my eyes and see your pulse quiver
as you lean your head on me.

III

1924 – A Nun’s Life and Three Elegies

If you think you can grasp me, think again:
my story flows in more than one direction

--Adrienne Rich

The Hand of Fate

Doc knows without his help she
can't give birth. A hand as elfin

as a thumb dangles where the crown
should be. Gentle fingers enter

the birth canal, find and free
the caught shoulder. The baby swims

out in a rush, gulps its first breath. He
binds the limb to a torso smaller than

a can of soup, massages salve into
bruised flesh, and rocks the newborn

until the sun comes up. Tired eyes take
in the dirty shack; the father passed out,

the mother a stone. Outside, on
a snowy hill, names are carved

in splintered pine, of three babies
he did not deliver.

Sometimes, he believes there is no God,
some days he wishes he could take back his oath.

Crooked Red Thread

She cowers by the woodstove,
leans against the kindling box,

rocks her doll and whispers
Sshhh. She smooths and pats

her straw-filled child, one leg
plump with dried stalk, the other

limp with less. Her tears fall on its
button eyes, soak the crooked red

thread that's not a smile, straightens
its gingham dress over and over.

She shudders at the thud of fists
on flesh—wonders if, somehow,

her folks are trapped inside the wall.
Their night voices frighten her. She

hears the rattle of the brass headboard,
a screech as casters skid across bare floors.

Walking to Daily Mass

Her mother breaks trail. Bootless, she follows
the hollows in the snow. They ford the swollen
river across a swaying plank, her wet feet
frozen numb. The windows of the church
gleam through the pines. Inside, the devout
never vary, claim seditious rights to pews
like squatters. She exhales, the vapor of her breath
a spume. From the altar Jesus speaks to her.
She leans the ear Pa boxed while drunk one night,
but she cannot hear. It's not the smells of incense,
wet wool, and unwashed bodies as her feet
sting and thaw. It's not the halos circling vigil
candles, the glow of gold from thurible, patten,
and chalice. A wafer and wine is not breakfast
for a child. She ignores her stomach's mutterings
because she's safe. Here no one finds fault
with daydreams, no one laughs at her feed sack
dress. Here she's not a failure because she's
poorer than the rest. Here peace settles like a veil.

Dear Miss Augusta,

Thank you for writing me that Pa died. I might never have known, as I'd not seen Pa since he left me at the Convent gate.

Mama died more than a year ago. Neighbors took in my little brothers, but had no room for a grown girl. Aunt Ann, a Carmelite, sent word the Order would provide room and board, in exchange for menial chores. Pa said it was meant to be.

Each day, Reverend Mother writes down what she needs. I talk to no one. I wash and iron, scour floors and walls, cook, do all that's asked of me. The Sisters take a vow of poverty. I've been poor all my life. I hear their murmurs through the walls, their voices lifted in song. They are shadows and I live apart. Not one of their Community.

I've been here sixteen months and I've asked to be a postulant. Tomorrow, my Sisters will dress me in a habit and I will enter in. When I turn nineteen, I take Final Vows.

Miss Augusta, I am home. Thank you for your kindness, the mittens you knit and the books you've shared.

You're in my prayers. Yours in Christ,

Soon to be,

Sister Clare

The Keeper

A day among the villages of hives
offers reprieve from cloister life.
Shrouded by a canopy of net over her
black veil, she hitches her habit high,
bares calves and ankles to summer's air.
For a moment, the weight of double veils
has disappeared. She's a child again,
the sun a blessing on her head. This
is where God is. The bees make music,
moan and stir, but stunned by smoke
are powerless to fly. Above, a red tail hawk
soars, while as far as eyes can see a sea
of grasses undulate. She quiets her breath.
The Angelus calls her from reverie to home.
Her lips move in silent prayer and the setting
sun ignites the Carmelite sky.

The Crossing

This business of dying is tiresome,
like taking a trans-Atlantic voyage
where people from your past drop in.

My younger self, a child of six,
skips rope, bare legs flashing in sun.
This business of dying is tiresome.

Mama's hand folded around my palm,
wrapped like a birthday where
people from your past drop in.

My sisters in Christ climb on my bed,
we squeeze into Lifeboat Number 10.
This business of dying is tiresome.

Miss Frye, my first grade teacher,
called me White Trash in front of everyone.
Some people from your past you can't forgive.

The prow of the ship cuts the organdy
of ocean froth. A thumb in myrrh oil
absolves the people from my past. Drop in,
my spirit. This business of dying is done.

Bernadette Angelina Jolie Anderson

That's what she named herself
and her Shih Tzu, too. I sift through
thirty years of photographs—
her Glamour Shot,
her chewed up smile,
the lizard eyes of Down's.
No one knows why she loved Paris so,
why she wandered off. She took
the reins from a carriage driver,
raced through streets of Patmos.
In one photo, she raises a glass
at the swim-up bar in Punta Cana.
In another, she nearly touches
a donkey in Turkey. Recall her
skin's copper glow,
how she loved days on the dock,
the color orange,
her address books.
Hear her last message
on the last answering
machine in the Universe.

Lord Love a Duck

Yesterday, I saw Dr. Z in a passing car.
I thought I did, though I was at his funeral Mass.
Heard how he'd been found, fishing pole
in hand, after a fatal heart attack.
Think how we talked about our kids, solved
weighty problems of war and peace. Recall
how I'd shared my daughter had a new "used"
car, a Vulva. He laughed until tears fell.
At first, I blustered at my faux pas,
but his laughter drew me in. Remember that
Spring was his favorite time of year,
because girls riding bikes down bumpy roads
wore tube tops. We told jokes and disagreed,
had fun while hours flew.

Knocking on Heaven's Door

Sarcoma sounds like a pretty thing,
the name of a flower, or perhaps
an Italian dessert. Nurses dish out
health advice, but seem unconcerned
about their own.

By the time she was diagnosed
it had taken hold. Doctors tried
surgery, chemo, radiation, but
the tumors grew. She wanted
to last until her daughter's
first baby was born. She
fought until we said –
don't fight any more.

Last month, I smelled
the tang of antiseptic.
I looked for my right-hand gal.

Before the days of flex-time
we job-shared so I could finish
my degree. She wanted it for me.

I'm reminded how she'd tell me
things with an arched eyebrow,
how we talked shorthand
and finished each other's sentences.

December I'll bring down my Christmas
things, will hang the tree with her teapot
and its holly ring, the tiny Nursery book
with ribbons red.

IV

The Fifth Day

a delta springing from the riverbed
with its five fingers spread.

--Adrienne Rich

The Road In

I edge off M-95 onto the gravel road,
Set my teeth to the jaw-jarring of tires
from the washboard left by too many lumber trucks.
ABBA is blaring. My head is full of alliteration,
assonance, and resonant verbs, detritus from Poetry class.

My eyes follow a hawk overhead.
On the two-rut road, gouged with potholes,
I am distracted from *Fernando's*
heavy drumbeat. I watch for hidden rocks
and pause as I pass Big Bend camp,

take pleasure in the hug
of the curve of the Michigamme.
Afternoon sun flickers off the water.
Currents eddy around deadhead logs
and up-heaved sandbars.

Change its pace. Slow it down.
Recharged, it moves rapidly,
finds momentum. I pass the spot
widened by loggers. On hot summer days
I pushed my son's buggy here. He'd

sleep, lulled by buckets bumping
together. I ate and plucked wild blueberries,
and juice stained my mouth, my fingers.
Berries no longer grow there. Beyond

the absent berry bushes, lush hardwoods
are erased. Shaking aspens, virgin maples,
and oaks are gone. Larches, red pines,
and scrub trees remain –shoddy substitutes.
The forest seems shamed. Fiddlehead ferns
curl and brown.

I round the corner by Eckloff's camp.
At the last turn and I see my loons circling
as I park between the birches.

Early Lessons

He taught me to fish, to dig worms and bait a hook. His hands atop my small we cast out lines in perfect arcs.

The river gulped our offering and bobber's eye stared back. I prayed for bass or pike, shivered with each minnow's bite.

Lunch was bologna on home-made bread, washed down with Kool-Aid from a thermos with the taste of tin.

.

Dragonflies cast spells and black flies hovered. Mosquitoes droned, ate at ankles, while clouds of gnats gnawed our ears.

River swallows sun and we pack our catch, four small bass.

We head for home with new fish stories.

Summer Storm

Yesterday's skies were opaque, heavy
with humidity, carried the scent
of impending rain. It was a sky thick
with portent, dirty flannel, oppressive,
as binding as a shrunken nightgown.

My garden quivered, thirsty
for the promised water. Heads
drooping, petals sunk low,
tendrils of vines tired and listless.

The sky split open, a pod bursting
forth fresh peas. Peas the shape of sluicing,
silver rain, rapid, rhythmic,
a staccato measure against the metal roof.

Tree limbs bent beneath its deluge,
the front porch shook as I stared
into the streaming street.
Cars maneuvered, wipers on fast forward,
visibility as fleeting as a metronome
on prestissimo.

Silver rain, silver sky, soaked into
the parched earth. It pooled, puddled,
ran into gutters dragging leaves
from half-bent trees. Twigs, bits of jetsam
are jettisoned from crannies as rain sought them out.

As quickly as it began, it ceased.
The zipper of the sky fastened,
left the plock, plock of cascading drops
as drenched trees recalled the fury.

Loons

Praise the constancy of these black-billed birds –
their piercing cries carry over fog
before dawn breaks. Echoes from the far channel,
a distant aria, as if another wedded pair
have come to nest. They circle, dive, feed.
Each searches for the other when their
winged bodies slice the silver of the lake.

In slow concentric patterns, they waltz and talk,
flutter feathers of deepest snow and night,
wear tribal bands about their necks,
true partners in this sacred place.

Rabbit Hole

I clothe my nakedness
in Night's dark cloak,

shed the skin of adult self,
and fall down childhood's crevasse.

The wonderland I find myself
of puddles, fields, and ponds

invites me to come and play.
I skip and dance and jump,

run headlong into redolence
of gardens put to sleep.

Fragrant with crocuses' pursed lips,
past judgmental hyacinths,

where irises acquiesce
and oozes of wet earth

curl between my toes.
I rest in spring-green grass,

inhale a breath of clouds,
follow a vee of wild geese.

Outside, indigo recedes
and dawn peeks in.

I climb into Mama's lap.

She sews a skein

of day's bright dress

with night's last loving stitch.

Zen Bird

He angles his limber neck,
juts the spout of his bill
skyward. He balances
on wobbly feet,
waddles with ungainly gait,
a yoga pose
at odds with his grace
when in air or water.
No kin fly
in the sky above,
no squawk returns his cry.
He holds the silence within—
his breath slows,
and the lake is calm.
This is where he belongs.

Laws of Nature

Geese are noisy birds. The laws of nature should control their hoarse, pre-dawn discussions from the observation deck on Crystal Lake.

Nature has no interest in my getting a good-night's sleep.

The migrants honk on about their sunny winter destinations.

I burrow my sleep-starved face in the pillow, think of the icy winter ahead, try to navigate the road back to REM.

To the East, a Chicago-Northwestern freight train blows its whistle, a sound of loss, traveling blind through town after town.

A nano-second of sleep and I'm

on the train,

ancient windows frame gothic bridges in Prague,

click like a slideshow behind shuttered eyes,

down the Dalmatian coast, past Romanian farms,

to the clatter of wheels on silver rails, moving

out of earshot, going somewhere, everywhere,

a faint far-off, final whistle.

The spoor of skunk slinks behind my hydrangeas.

The dog across the alley catches scent, yaps frenziedly.

Covens of mourning doves walk electrical lines

like Cirque du Soleil performers, mutter and coo

incantations. Two doors down, our neighbor guns

his rebuilt Harley, tears down Cook Street

to his minimum wage job. The geese circle,

honk over the house. Incessant pounding

sets in, an early morning repair job

that pins me to the pillow with each

hammer blow. I shut my alarm off

before it rings.

Fishing for Words

I cast a net upon a river of words,
pull them toward my boat,
repeat the casting, the pulling,
until the hold is full. I row
against currents that eddy like
a dark kite, until held captive
by its bank. I scatter my catch,
shimmering words, flipping, flopping.
The blood red gills of their breath
open and close like scarlet umbrellas.
Pick me.
Choose me.
And I do.
I arrange the words into stories,
poems, precious, and painful memories.
Arrange.
Rearrange.
Seek an ordained place for each,
use the fragments to make a whole.
Some words – wounded, unacceptable,
I return to the river for another day,
a separate purpose.
I am caught in the rhythm of words
and water along the curve of the stream.
Dunes of sandbars and deadhead logs
alter its pace, slow it down
until recharged it finds momentum,
rages into rapids.

I toil through the long twilight
until the face of the moon
arches high in the blue-black sky,
illuminating sentences.

I close my eyes,
say, It is good,
and sleep.

Renvazuru

I Fold, bend, crease.
Repeat.
25 strings of 40 cranes each.
Kimono-colored cranes dance
their messages for peace,
winged wishes for a thousand years of happiness.
A bride's wedding gift from her doting father—
to a newborn for luck and long life –
they dissolve in rain, wind, and snow,
release their wishes to a bowl of sky.

II Morning fog lifts and the white crane
hunts the water's edge,
for a wayward frog, a dragonfly,
a sluggish bug. The reflection
of his stilt-like legs wavers
in the murky water, the current blurs
their image, as if adjusting the aperture of
a camera's lens.

His mate bugles from their marsh nest,
hungry from minding twin eggs.
His long neck bows at her call
and he takes wing like a paper crane.
He pillages a farmer's field for food
that does not need a hunter's skill.

A Field Guide

I walk into the woods,
to a world of hemlock, spruce,

and fir. Add gifts of cedar and juniper.
The scent of pine arouses me.

Beneath snow-burdened branches I stand.
Blankets of needles, cones cushion

my feet. Their hush and height
and patch of sky are church.

Birch stands accent the varied shades
of green. Slender companions, white-robed nuns

who chant and sway. The wind between
the trees take up their cry. I hear the clunk

and click of ice unmoored from river's
edge by winter currents. The only human stains

are my way in. But I am not alone. Finches
skitter from branch to branch. Chippies

frolic in the snow. Icicles glitter overhead,
open their dripping mouths to speak.

Above an eagle dips a wing
in benediction to this day.

Turkeys in the Snow

Vulture kin,
beaks pecking
like a third leg on a balance beam.
They move through corn-shorn snow.

A cacophony of noise marks their
movement as they search and savor
frozen caramel corn from vanilla
popsicle hiding.

Reptilian, obsidian-eyed.
Cold as black ice, unfeeling, uncaring.
Scavengers eking out their livelihood.
Wattles waving to their hungry, hurried beat.

Turkeys in the snow, moving on talon-tipped toes,
masticating, pebbles of fodder
moving rhythmically down
wrinkled goose-fleshed necks .
Featherless as plucked skeletons
above winged clutched coats.

Sentinels in the field –
metronome-bobbing heads,
babbling and chanting
to Grain-giving Earth Gods.
Turkeys in the snow.

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