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SEARCHING FOR HIGHER GROUND

By

Mary C. Fineran Luthin

B. A., University of Notre Dame, 1977

Presented in partial fulfillment

of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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1986

Approved by

Patricia Gedicks

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Richard Murray

Dean, Graduate School

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Date

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Part One:
Behind the Elm

A PRAYER

In the absence of God, dear God,
send us your agents, all-knowing,
to walk in our midst and tell us
we are all right,

for even in love,
long and true, the real McCoy,
we stay a secret from ourselves
and can't see what we do.

I have a plan, dear God,
and I think it's good.
Send your angels out to truck stops,
cafes, coffee shops,

buses, trains--wherever
we sit and think and taste uncertainty.
Have them look like us, but more
assured, with more authority,

neither local nor foreign,
but like strangers we could trust,
like Willie Nelson or Jane Pauley, even,
if that's what a person needs.

For me it should be
a tall man in a suit,
attractive yet plain,
sipping coffee at the counter.

(stanza break)

As my husband pays the bill
I'll sit alone a minute,
as one does, and look up
to find this man

searching my whole soul
and life in one glance, sweeping
and complete. I'll be afraid.
Then he'll say to me

You're all right.

It's OK. You're doing fine.

Your life is going well.

I'd have this angel smile

and tip his hat and leave.
It would only take a moment,
dear God, only once in a life.
Once in our long, long lives, amen.

HEAT

A July night in Illinois,
my mother lifts me out, our skin
and thin clothes sticky with sweat.
She sets me half-asleep on a cot
beneath the tree. I watch neighbors
spill into their yards, fathers
silhouetted against porch lights,
the glimmer of sheets spread out
on the grass, lawn chairs tossed
from a porch. Screen doors slap
all along the block. A boy
caught prancing in his yard
is set at his parents' feet,
commanded again and again to be still
until we all are, finally,
porch lights winking out
one by one, darkness and quiet
settling back in. Bullfrogs
take up their drowse, a train
drifts at the edge of town.
Above my head a thousand leaves
never stir. Someone's dog
laps water from a bowl,
a moth brushes my hand,
and my parents start to talk, low words
always hidden in the house:
grownups talking only to themselves,

(no stanza break)

never the word love but the sound of it,
parents taking care of things
while heat lightning flicks behind the elm
and on bodies small beneath the stars
dew falls like a cool blessing.

LOCUSTS

Wild for climbing
from the flat town,
I heard locusts drone
that day from the trees
and searched my kingdom for them--

through maples simple as ladders,
chains of ants like necklaces
on their warm trunks,

in the treacherous cherry trees,
rotten-limbed with sticky bubs
of sap, bark curled sharp
to cut my shins,

and in elms, best trees, thick arms
forked high and creaking, bark
that crumbled like cork in my hand
and leaves that rasped my skin
like hair rubbed backward--

and still the locusts hid.
Their brittle honey shells
clung to bark around me,
molted, empty, the only clue
to what I had to see.
Again I climbed the tallest elm,

(no stanza break)

beyond a rotting squirrel's nest
I'd never reached before.
The drone grew here to pain.
Branches shrank to twigs
beneath my feet as I rose,
each step a shower of sticks.
I swayed in the top

and saw the locust in the leaves,
cracking from its shell.
Its eyes came out,
two globes, lidless black.
Long wings of veined
cellophane trembled through
as its thorax strained up, wet,
the underbelly parrot-green.
Swelling bigger than my thumb,
it flexed above the husk.
It was free.
One needle leg at a time
stepped along the twig toward me

and the locust found its voice,
joining its mates in the leaves:
down, down, down, a pulse
louder than I could shout,
so far down to scramble
as bark and limbs, branches, leaves
whipped and tore at me,
a girl of ten no longer king.

THE SHADOW OF WATER IS A LIGHT CAST BACK

My brother and I in a boat,
a nest of tackle at our feet
and the still lake in late afternoon
a glass casting back sunlight
brighter than the sun's.
Not quite eighteen, he waits
in the glare, not moving,
his fishing pole steady.
Like an overexposed shot
already faded in my album,
his face grows old, puffy,
all color bled out. His eyes
are small with worry.
I wonder what I see:
a tired man staring into
his bathroom mirror
beneath fluorescent light,
his paycheck just bounced,
his children crying in the heat--
or a salesman on the road,
driving toward another Holiday Inn
as headlights flash by, wondering
if a woman waits for him
three states away--
or my brother in Vietnam,
not moving, waist-deep in the dark pool
of a rice paddy, rifle held out,
face lit by incendiary flares.
We fish until dark, silent
and waiting for strikes.

GRACE

Don't tell your Grandma, now, he'll say,
forgetting I've kept his secret for years.
Each visit he waits as I tell them the news,
last week's repeated for bulk.
Grandma maps a sweater on my back
as I talk, then nods off, the bone needles
trembling in her lap. He'll wait until
she whistles her sleep, then take my hand.

I had another girl, he'll say,
low and sly. Not her.
Some visits the story's short, squeezed
between coughs and the shaking. Sometimes,
while Grandma wakes and dozes,
the other girl's tale lasts all afternoon,
baroque with carriage rides in the snow,
rushlit country dances, feather hats.
Her name is always Grace. Her skin,
he says, was pale as the moon,
and her fate, to be left by him.
The rest changes each time it's told:
the color and style of her hair,
her voice, the look in her eyes.

Sooner or later he reaches the end,
the years of secret letters,
the last scene where he sent her the priest.

(no stanza break)

Grace dies again, still young and pale,
and Grandpa cries for what he remembers
and forgets. Don't tell your Grandma, now,
but every night I say a prayer
for Grace's soul.

He'll fall silent then. Grandma
gives us time before she wakes
with a start, sets her knitting aside,
and helps him to his bed.

TEMPER

When he finally saw
he'd never get that piano
through the door and into the house,
no matter how hard he pushed,
not even with the doorjamb off,
my dad walked to the garage,
came back with an ax,
and smashed the piano to bits.
And I, too young to see
the sting of a gift gone wrong,
stood at the window, cried harder
with each blow. Not for the broken
strings and ebony keys scattered
in the snow-- for him and his
sacrilege down in the yard, a carpenter
who loved wood, who'd trace seasons
in the grain, rub his sanded work until
its flecked rays shone like silk,
now swinging his ax, chopping off
another leg, a perfect cherry spindle,
cracking the polished top, ripping
scrolls and carved roses right off the wood,
smashing it all in the snow
and cursing for joy.

TWINS

Seventeen sets of twins.
 A family party seems a trick
 with mirrors, the same voice and face
 in two corners of the room, the same
 trick repeated all over the house,
 all thirty-four of them looking alike
 with the same horsey Irish cast,
 and more born all the time.
 At the funeral of a Fineran,
 a dead man lies in a box
 and stands next to himself in tears.
 In this family you soon learn
 the power of two. Each is different,
 of course, but it only makes them greater,
 one person a banker and a nun,
 another one two teachers, the terror
 of all the children in both schools.
 Violet and Viola, Patrick and Patricia,
 doubled lives for each, dittoed,
 best friends in the blood, their spouses
 settling for less than half.
 My mother's twin shouted at her
 when I was born alone--
 a few of us are.
 We're told this makes us precious.
 Instead at times we think
 the whole thing didn't come through.
 We separates tend to move away,

(no stanza break)

writing gentle letters to each other
at Christmas: "I live quietly
as a secretary in Detroit."

"Boot camp is great. The army
treats us all alike." Still we miss
someone never there, remembering the time
we tried to get the mirror to talk.

I am afraid to marry. Twins
wait to be born, and I'll
think twice about that.

ON A PHOTO OF MY ANCESTORS

They stand before their house,
husband and wife, apron and vest.
Even in best clothes they look alike,
stiff and bent, faces cracked
from too much sun, noses grown huge
in the constant reek of hay, dung,
and milk. They try their best to look
dignified. Still, the stone house
wears them like a dusty boutonniere
pinned fast by the wind.

Their son John took this photograph.
He built the house, chiselled
each block from the quarry,
dreamt in stone that he'd wash the soil
forever from his hands.
Hitched to ponies, the blocks
plowed furrows as they went.
When the house was done, two blocks
remained. John counted again
and died, leaving two sons,
one with an eye kicked out
by a mule, the other a ladies' man.

I keep the picture on my desk.
When I turn off the light,

(no stanza break)

they move in their frame,
flickering like an old movie.
Great-great grandmother
whacks great-great grandfather
over the head with a rolling pin.
His eyes cross. Keystone Cops arrive
with live chickens and banana peels.

It's not savageness or sepia tint
that makes me think this way.
All lives reduce to formula
in the end, the dead shrinking back
to ballads, fabliaux, morality plays.
Chance alone determines which:
an old joke, a few scrawled words
in a family Bible, the way the sun
beats confusion in one's eyes
on a dusty afternoon.
My good farming folk are caught
in a scene they never played--
as I will be, in someone else's frame.

THE BACKYARD

I lived between three apple trees,
my swing a cracked board on long ropes
hung from the tallest. If I pushed
hard enough, I'd catch the sky,
then drop straight down until the ropes
caught the arc again and pulled me back and forth,
flashing over dry dirt where I took off
and cowards dragged their feet. Once,
leaning back to watch the rush of leaves,
my head smacked hard against the rut.
I remember the sudden dark,
the weightlessness, floating up
and up. It took Mom a month
to work the dirt from my torn-up scalp.

At twilight, dishes done, I'd run out
between those three trees
while swallows tumbled to their nests.
I'd throw a baseball high as I could
and call to the bats in my highest voice.
Like shadows from shadows they'd home in,
spiralling down with the ball
to my feet, where they'd thud, stupid
and surprised, and flit along the ground
while I screamed and ran in circles,
hands in hair, until they'd flutter up again
like rags against the sky.

(stanza break)

When I fly, I always launch
from that backyard at dusk, lifting up
between the apple trees.

The technique is all its own.

Sometimes I get it too right, caroming off
like a haywire hummingbird aimed at space.
It's tricky then. I can't afford the view,
too busy using my big feet to brake,
then busy with my elbows fending off a stall,
heading down in circles that tighten
to spiral as the ground comes up.

But if I bend my knees just right,
roll off my toes at exactly the right moment,
a wave passes through my legs. I float
like a helium balloon, rising far above the trees.
I see old Joe down the street in his garden,
his back humped like a cockroach in the braided rows.
Next door, the minister tends his barbeque,
its twisting line of smoke too far down
to smell. Fireflies spark in the yards.

Our roof is gray. I hear the clatter
of Mom in the kitchen, putting away the pans.

Coming down is easy then,
like a balloon up too long,
out of gas, nudging down to earth.

I fly often. People say it means
all sorts of things, but it doesn't.

It's good to fly. To land at home, at dusk.

VIGIL

I was a morbid child
 although you never knew.
 Days, in your house at the edge of town,
 you'd teach me a novena as you knit
 for the boys, straight-backed in the old chair.
 Or standing just as straight, you'd teach me
 the best way to hem a shift
 or to sprinkle cotton for ironing,
 teach me other lessons I hardly understood:
Plant potatoes by the moon.
Never sell an acre of land or admit
the corn's doing fine. Never trust a Swede.

But nights, when the gray moon rose
 and the corn rustled and stretched in the field,
 I thought I learned something else. It seemed
 a prairie wind struggled to take your breath away,
 gusting in your lungs, slamming the doors
 of your loose-hinged heart. I stayed awake
 all night, afraid it would take you,
 praying my new prayers fast. Next day
 you'd have to send me home sick.

Now you lie curled in your hospital bed,
 and the moon glints even here in the city.
 I've come again to my vigil,
 my prayers unlearned, Swedes reduced
 to common men. The boys are gone,
 and the farm. Doctors say you'll die.

(no stanza break)

The priest has sprinkled you. Nurses
roll you over like an empty husk.
Again I hear that whipping wind.
Did it wrap your skirts around you
while you waited for the men, hungry
and young, always coming in from the fields?

I'm too old to fear the wind, to be afraid
of your unwilling breath. We grow into
new fears. What holds you here holds life
to the empty body: some hidden bone
or tightened nerve the doctors can't find.
I wait now for something to give,
some small, winged hinge, perhaps,
like that which joins the halves of a nut.
I can give you a glass of water, smooth
the sheets. I'd help you go if I could.

STAY

Around the fire,
we watched dusk settle
greens and rust,
bringing together
the rose, the nightjar,
the pungent juniper.
You guzzled beer,
sweating, your voice
never still, listing
the waste of your days:
petty mail, the phone,
sickness after drink, workmen
pulling down the sagging barn.

A dying man knows more
than he cares to say,
using lesser words
to keep the rest away.

A year later, the air curls
around these same things.
The nightjar tumbles, rips
the air to petals. I watch it
for you, almost hear you laugh
and say aloud what you caught at
and lost: It is beautiful,
and will not stay.

Part Two:
Night Train

CHOPPING WOOD

This October morning,
the banked gray rain
stiffening to ice on the grass,
the blue heron gone
from the river fog,

I swing my ax.
The seasons split
like this--
opened wood, geese
a wedge behind trees,
the tang of sap
and metal: snow.

NIGHT TRAIN

The only moment held
lasts hours on a night train.
It is warm. You have stopped.
You wake alone among the six strangers
sealed with you in the dark;
the breath of each,
slow, signalled. You look out onto
the station platform: one light
casting no shadow, an empty bench,
no sign, no clock; clean lines of bare
concrete. The train is still.
The light outside the window hums.
Somewhere out of sight, voices begin:
foreign men who watch the train
walk along it and touch it. You
can hear them. You do not move
but lie with eyes open.

There is one click beneath you. Then another.
The station moves away. One man at its edge
waves, then slides past as the hills come in,
now a house, now a light in a field, now the land
passing until darkness closes your eyes
and you listen to the sounds of a journey
to nowhere you've known.

LABYRINTH

Closed, the old man says, guarding the ruins,
holiday. Honeymoon, you answer, covering
my ringless hand, pressing money into his.
He steps aside. In its olive grove
the broken palace shimmers, falls into itself
like a puzzle. Beneath red bull's horns
("reconstructed," you say) we start down.

We linger in stone cataracts
just below ground. Blue sea light
honeycombs murals with the sound of waves.
A stone griffin guards an empty room
fragrant with lemon and orange,
its mane curled soft as tips of fern.
Above silver waves a porpoise arcs
on azure wall. We follow a red wall down.

In the deepest rooms there is no light.
We separate, sense shapes of wall and stone
like bats. I think we're lost, you say
from another room. From where I stand
I smell the farm in rain, the scent
of a home I won't leave.

We won't marry, I say. I think this trip
is over. Under my hand a last porpoise,
lost in its past, forgets to break the sea.

FEAR OF THE DARK

The bang of a car door makes me flinch. Alone at night,
I lie stiff, my ears full of sounds hardly there:
sounds miles away, sounds in a dresser drawer.
Long before a plane's burr rolls in the valley,
its malevolent word drones in my head.
I hear a shoulder brush the bookcase. Rap of knuckles
on the wall. Heat rising from the furnace. I feel
the suck of a palm pressed against the window,
seeking an open pane.

That's why I ask you, my friend, so often to my bed.
Not the only reason, but the clearest. When you are here
I count the others along your spine, need not listen.

Alone, on my side, I recite another list:
cat's cries, empty womb, dismemberment.
I make my fears jump like sheep
over the sliver of light on the rug.
Hours ago, I pulled the curtains
tight with my hands, sealed off
that sliver. Now I cannot look away from it,
cannot look at the window, see it
burst into silver, curly head pushing through.

FOUNDERING

The rains that do not cleanse us continue.
Outside our gate the street's edge
runs undetectably to mud.
Sunday papers swell and choke
the flooded ditch. They say in the country
crops are bursting. Horses bloat
and founder, call from the too-green fields,
sink through curled and useless hooves.
We no longer promise each other
anything. When we walk through town
I watch your face in store windows,
listen to our footsteps echo
on the bridge. We pray for lightning,
thunder, snow, any resolution.
Nothing changes. I have the same
dream every night: teeth
soften, lose edge, loosen.
The rusty taste of blood, tongue
pushing pulp, the endless falling out
of things grown familiar-- echoes
of rain on roof, the fevered horse's
plodding search for drier ground.

INTERIM

Ask me to marry you.
Then I might not dream
of my spinster aunts,
their fallen hairpins
spelling out silence
on cold tile beneath the sink.

Ask me to marry you even though
we never will. Last night's fight
foreshadows an end. We speak uneasily
of next year, doubt the significance
of these long afternoons. We'll keep
our separate apartments and pets.

You think I dream of a house
and a two-car garage. But if
you'd ask, I could imagine
all I now forbid myself: your face
changed by years, my blood stopped
in its monthly circle, our blurred children
acquiring faces and the ability
to pass through this fatal hesitation
and reach their own loves. Ask me
to marry you. Trust me
to refuse.

OUR LIVES THE WAY WE'VE THOUGHT OF THEM

We've gone broke. Not so fast
that you noticed-- you've slept
through that time of night
when the train whistled and I ground
another digit off the balance, adding,
subtracting too much to leave me sleep,
hoping this new city would ease up
enough to keep us safe. It's late.
Now that we haven't the cash,

I can't imagine that train
taking us anywhere. Without
the price of two tickets, I count
only what we've lost, taking away
all that could be left.
I want money to buy back

a home, our lives the way
we've thought of them: the tulip's
cocky stand in a blue vase
across a book-lined room, a garden
thick with bloom, you and I
with nothing on our minds
but love, the latest fashions,
how the children do in school,

or one gold coin to pay off
the thief who stole my careless
nights, the train, the simple home
of your sleeping back.

ANOTHER LETTER

Rain beads the black wires,
not birds. An uglier fall
I've never seen: no fire
in the leaves, no crunch.
Cold mists bleach them
to parchment flesh. Black
tires hiss at streets,
the pulp mill bilges its cabbage reek

and I write this letter to you.
Words turn back to sticks,
scratches, piles of rock.
"Hello, love. Hurry back."
Your letters hem and haw,
lose their voice. I warn you,

at night I dream of a man
whose fist I open on the beach.
I kiss his palm. I know it isn't
you. The warm sea glares so,
I can't see his face, but maybe I can
in the dream. Maybe this man and I
rest beneath a banyan tree,
drinking rum and whispering, couched
in glittering sand. I can't remember
that, but at my desk, the afternoon
cracked with sleet, so many things
I forget. Love, hurry back.

LIGHT IN THE NORTH

When it finally happens
I'll need to find the phone.
I'll think someone ought to know.
One quake will knock me out of bed,
out of the splintering house to see
the flicker of lanterns on the hill.
The next shakes Grandma loose.
I pick her up and carry her
down the cracked street to a makeshift camp
but find no food or shelter there.
I lay her down under a tree
still thick with peach blossoms
and scent. I make a nest for her.
She just clucks as I leave.

The north will start to glow
as I walk toward town. It will
light the empty streets and stores,
ripen the windows left intact
to a bursting orange.
No one's around. The saloon
is silent, except for the swinging doors.
Broken bottles and shotglasses drip
their last whiskey on the dirt floor.
I'll go upstairs in search of a phone,
look down over the street, and see
the first of the animals crest the hill,

(no stanza break)

running for their lives. Halfway down Main
the first thin legs trip from the shove
of the herd behind. Elk pile in,
choking the street as they fall. Buffalo
shudder as they hit. Bears
tear their way through.
They'll all go down.

The new creatures will slink quietly in.
They'll have curly hair and beards,
pectorals a graceful curve
where human throat joins lion's chest.
They slash the throats
of thrashing animals, dart in and out
to end each struggle, staying clear
of the blood. When they finish,
the pile will be still. They'll turn slowly,
blue eyes searching the street.

They'll be beautiful.
They'll spread out, stalk
in pairs toward the buildings.
I'll hear claws sharpening
on the banister downstairs.
I'll reach for the phone and dial.
Someone will answer. I'll tell them
I'm about to be killed. They'll tell me
I'm lucky I'm not in Dubuque
and hang up as the north takes fire.