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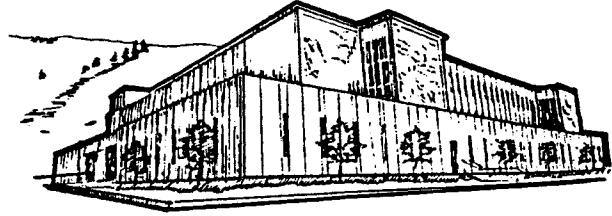
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ROOTS AND RHIZOMES

by

Judy Blunt

B. A., University of Montana--Missoula, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

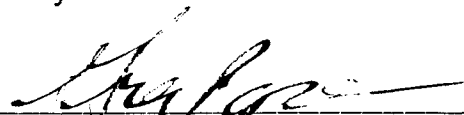
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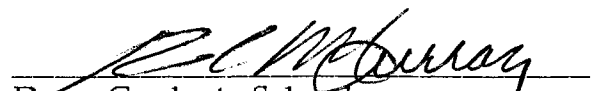
Master of Fine Arts

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1994

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Breaking Clean

I rarely go back to the ranch where I was born or to the neighboring land where I bore the fourth generation of a cattle dynasty. My people live where hardpan and sagebrush flats give way to the Missouri River Breaks, a country so harsh and wild and distant that it must grow its own replacements, as it grows its own food, or it will die. Hereford cattle grow slick and mean foraging along the cutbanks for greasewood shoots and buffalo grass. A two-hour trip over gumbo roads will take you to the lone main street of the nearest small town.

"Get tough," my father snapped in irritation as I dragged my feet at the edge of a two-acre potato field. He gave me a gunny sack and started me down the rows pulling the tough fan weed that towered over the potato plants. I was learning then the necessary lessons of weeds and seeds and blisters. My favorite story as a child was of how I fainted in the garden when I was eight. My mother had to pry my fingers from around the handle of the hoe, she said, and she also said I was stupid not to wear a hat in the sun. But she was proud. My grandad hooted with glee when he heard about it.

"She's a hell of a little worker," he said, shaking his head. I was a hell of a little worker from that day forward, and I learned to wear a hat.

I am sometimes amazed at my own children, their incredulous outrage if they are required to do the dishes twice in one week, their tender self-absorption with minor bumps and bruises. As a mom, I've had to teach myself to croon over thorn scratches, admire bloody baby teeth and sponge the dirt from scraped shins. But in my mind, my mother's voice and that of her mother still compete for expression. "Oh for Christ's sake, you aren't hurt!" they're saying, and for a moment I struggle. For a moment I want to tell this new generation about my little brother calmly spitting out a palm full of tooth chips and wading back in to grab the biggest calf in the branding pen. I want to tell them how tough I was, falling asleep at the table with hands too sore to hold a fork, or about their grandmother, who cut off three fingers on the blades of a sickle mower and finished the field before she came in to get help. For a moment I'm terrified I'll slip and tell them to get tough.

Like my parents and grandparents, I was born and trained to live there. I could rope and ride and jockey a John Deere swather as well as my brothers, but being female, I also learned to bake bread and can vegetables and reserve my opinion when the men were talking. When a bachelor neighbor twice my age began courting me when I was 16, my parents were proud and hopeful. He and his father ran a good tight spread with over 1000 head of cattle. They held a 30,000-acre lease. They drove new Chevy pick-ups.

After supper one spring evening, my mother and I stood in the

kitchen. She held her back stiff as her hands shot like pistons into the mound of bread dough on the counter. I stood tough beside her. On the porch, Jack had presented my father with a bottle of whiskey and was asking Dad's permission to marry me. I wanted her to grab my cold hand and tell me how to run. I wanted her to smooth the crumpled letter from the garbage can and read the praise of my high school principal. I wanted her to tell me what I could be.

She rounded the bread neatly and efficiently and began smoothing lard over the top, intent on her fingers as they tidied the loaves.

"He's a good man," she said finally.

In the seventh grade this year, my daughter has caught up with the culture shock and completed her transition from horse to bicycle, from boot-cut Levis to acid-washed jeans. She delights me with her discoveries, Knowing little of slumber parties, roller skates or packs of giggling girls, sometimes I'm more her peer than her parent. She writes too, long sentimental stories about lost puppies that find homes and loving two-parent families with adventurous daughters. Her characters are usually right back where they started, rescued and happy, by the end of the story. She watches television now.

"Do you hate daddy?" she asked once, from the depths of a divorced child's sadness.

"Your daddy," I replied, "is a good man."

In the manner of good ranch men, my father and Jack squatted on their haunches on the porch facing each other. The whiskey bottle rested on the floor between them. Jack's good white shirt was buttoned painfully around his neck. Dad had pushed his Stetson back, and a white band of skin glowed above his dark face, smooth and strangely delicate. When I moved to the doorway, their conversation was shifting from weather and cattle to marriage. As Dad tilted back heavily on one heel to drink from the neck of the bottle, Jack looked down and began to plot our life with one finger in the dust on the floor.

"I been meaning to stop by...," Jack said to the toe of his boot. He looked up; to catch Dad's eye. Dad nodded and looked away.

"You figured a spot yet?" He spoke deliberately, weighing each word. Like all the big ranches out there, Jack's place had been pieced together from old homesteads and small farms turned back to grass.

"Morgan place has good buildings," Jack replied, holding Dad's gaze for a moment. He shifted the bottle to his lips and passed it back to Dad.

"Fair grass on the north end, but the meadows need work," Dad challenged. Jack shifted slightly to the left, glancing to the west through the screen door. The setting sun was balanced on the blue tips of the pines in the distance. He worked at the stiffness of his collar, leaving gray smudges of dust

along his throat. Settling back, he spoke with a touch of defiance.

“If a person worked it right....” Then his eyes found his boots again. He held his head rigid, waiting.

Dad smoothed one hand along his jaw as if in deep thought, and the two men squatted silently for several minutes. Then Dad drew a long breath and blew it out.

“Old Morgan used to get three cuttings on a rain year,” he said at last. Jack’s head rose and he met my father’s steady look.

“A person could make a go of it,” Jack repeated softly. Dad’s shoulders lifted slightly and dropped in mock defeat. He placed a hand on each knee and pushed himself up, Jack rising beside him, and they shook hands, grinning. Twisting suddenly, Dad reached down and grabbed the whiskey. He held it high in a toast then leaned forward and tapped Jack’s chest with the neck of the bottle.

“And you, you cocky son-of-a-bitch! Don’t you try planting anything too early, understand?” They were still laughing when they entered the kitchen.

I talk to my father twice a year now, on Christmas and Father’s Day. We talk about the yearling weights and the rain, or the lack of rain. My parents lost a daughter when I moved away, but they will have Jack forever. He is closer to them in spirit than I am in blood, and shares their

bewilderment and anger at my rejection of their life. As the ultimate betrayal, I have taken Jack's sons, interrupting the perfect rites of passage. The move was hardest on the boys, for here they are only boys. At the ranch they were men in training, and they mourn this loss of prestige.

"I used to drive tractor for my dad," my eldest son relates to his friends now, and they scoff. "You're only 11 years old," they laugh, and he is frustrated to bitter tears. He will go back, that one. He will have to. But he will return an outsider, and his father knows this. The first son of the clan to cross the county line and survive will find it easier to leave a second time if he has to. If he spends his life there, he will still have memories of symphonies and tennis shoes and basketball. If he marries and has children, he will raise them knowing that, at least technically, boys can cry.

* * *

I stuck with the bargain sealed on my parents' porch for over 12 years, although my faith in martyrdom as a way of life dwindled. I collected children and stress-related disorders the way some of the women collected dress patterns and ceramic owls. It was hard to shine when all the good things had already been done. Dorothy crocheted tissue covers and made lamp shades from Styrofoam egg cartons. Pearle looped thick, horrible rugs from rags and denim scraps. Helen gardened a half-acre of land and raised 200 turkeys in her spare time. And everyone attended the monthly meetings of the Near and Far Club to answer roll call with her favorite new recipe.

These were the successful ranch women who moved from barn to kitchen to field with patient, tireless steps. I kept up with the cycles of crops and seasons and moons, and I did it all well. I excelled. But I couldn't sleep. I quit eating. It wasn't enough.

I saved for three years and bought my typewriter from the Sears and Roebuck catalog. I typed the first line while the cardboard carton lay around it in pieces. I wrote in a cold sweat on long strips of freezer paper that emerged from the keys thick and rich with ink. At first I only wrote at night when the children and Jack slept, emptying myself onto the paper until I could lie down. Then I began writing during the day, when the men were working in the fields. The children ran brown and wild and happy. The garden gave birth and died with rotting produce fat under its vines. The community buzzed. Dorothy offered to teach me how to crochet.

One day Jack's father, furious because lunch for the hay crew was late, took my warm, green typewriter to the shop and killed it with a sledge hammer.

A prescribed distance of beige plush separated us. On a TV monitor nearby, zig-zag lines distorted our images. Jack's face looked lean and hard. My face showed fear and exhaustion. The years were all there in black and white. Mike, our marriage counselor, stood behind the video camera

adjusting the sound level. We were learning to communicate, Jack and I. We each held a sweaty slip of paper with a list of priority topics we had prepared for this day. Our job was to discuss them on camera. Next week we would watch our debate and learn what areas needed improvement. We talked by turns, neither allowed to interrupt the other, for three minutes on each topic.

Jack was indignant, bewildered by my topics. I, on the other hand, could have written his list myself. Somewhere in a dusty file drawer is a film of an emaciated, haggard woman hesitantly describing her needs and dreams to a tight-jawed man who twists his knuckles and shakes his head because he wants to interrupt her, and he can't. His expression shows that he doesn't know this woman; she's something he never bargained for. When it's over, they are both shaking and glad to get away.

"Jack," Mike once asked, "How often do you tell your wife that you love her?"

"Oh, I've told her that before," he replied cautiously. I cut into the conversation from my corner of the ring.

"You only told me you loved me once, and that was the day we were married," I said.

"Well," Jack said, injured and defensive, "I never took it back, did I?"

The break, when it came, was so swift and clean that I sometimes dream I went walking in the coulee behind the ranch house and emerged on

the far side of the mountains. It's different here--not easier, but different.

And it's enough.

Lessons in Silence

That first week of school the indoor air was sultry with held-over August heat and farm kids too recently reined in and washed up. I was tall for my age and sat toward the back, looking down a row of raw necks and fresh haircuts. The sound of a pickup on the county road lured us like a bird's song. When it shifted down for the corner, we went along with it, anticipating each rev and crank of gears--some neighbor going to town, checking cattle, returning a borrowed tool somewhere up the road. In the next second the familiar pattern broke and we came to full attention. Instead of swelling, then fading into distance, the noise grew steadily louder. Dust streamed through the open windows as a rust-colored pickup eased around the building to the east side and rattled to a stop by the front steps. The engine cut out, lugged a few times, and was still. Five heads lifted in the sudden quiet; five pairs of eyes fixed on our teacher's desk.

Mrs. Norby licked a gold foil star, tapped it into place, then squared the papers on her desk and rose to attend to this new business. I remember the tiny catch in her posture as she glanced out the window, not a motion or a movement exactly, but a slight drawing in as she smoothed her skirt. At the time I interpreted her sudden freezing as fear, and today, 400 miles and 27 years away from that moment, I believe my instinct was accurate. There was no reading her face as she left the classroom. I can think of nothing that would have kept the five of us from the front window when the door closed

behind her.

My older brother Russ, myself, the twins Guy and Greta, and a neighbor boy named Stevie made up the student population that year, filling four of the eight grades taught at our rural school. Standing in the shadow of the drapes we could see outside without being seen. The battered red pickup was not one of ours. The driver's door opened with a stiff pop and an old man eased slowly from behind the wheel. He stood with a red and black plaid cap in one hand as Mrs. Norby walked down the steps toward him. The cab rocked slightly to the passenger side as a woman got out and made her way around the dented nose of the pickup. At the steps she turned and produced a little boy from the shadow of her skirts, prodding him forward until he stood in front of her.

Mrs. Norby had her back to us, and through the window we could hear her sweet, modulated voice. The man spoke very politely in reply. "We didn't know the school had started," he said. His smile held as many gaps as teeth. The woman said nothing. Mrs. Norby spoke in her lecture voice, at ease now; there was nodding and smiling, a gentle laugh from the man. The boy turned to hide his face when Mrs. Norby bent over to talk to him, but when she straightened and held out her hand, he took it.

When the man raised his arm to put his cap back on, we flushed like grouse and were innocently at work by the time the second cloud of dust

cleared and Mrs. Norby entered, towing a small dark-eyed boy with a mop of black hair. His name was Forest Walker, and he was starting first grade. He lived with his grandparents who were working for the Longs. These things she told us. The rest we saw in the formal tilt of her head, the blank smile, the way her hands cupped together at waist level. Our company manners appeared on cue. That he was an outsider goes without saying; we had cut our first teeth on each other, and we had never seen him before. But Forest was different in another way. Forest was Indian, and his presence in our world went beyond our experience, beyond our comprehension. We welcomed him to our school politely, as we had been taught to welcome the children of outsiders. But we would have been no less bewildered had we glanced up from our math drills and seen a grove of seedling pine take root in the hardpan outside.

Forest Walker. Even in fourth grade I was struck by the irony. We paid attention to names, and there wasn't a forest of note for hundreds of miles. Our community was identified by several layers of place names that signified ownership. The plains tribes who hunted that prairie had left hammers and arrowheads, tepee rings and medicine stones, but no names. Trappers and immigrant homesteaders had labeled the land as they pushed the Indians west, and by the time of my childhood, those earliest names belonged to the land alone. Carberrey, Whitcombe, Krumweide, Cruikshank-

-to say the aloud was to conjure a place long separated from a face or a family.

The chunk of short grass prairie we called Regina had been named by French-Canadians who drifted south out of Saskatchewan to trap beaver along the Missouri. The first homesteaders inherited a legacy of French place names that roll across the tongue like music, black-bottom draws and treacherous creeks and drainages identified by hisses and coos. The actual places seemed unrelated to the black letters and blue lines on the official Bureau of Land Management maps. We had little use for maps. Any rancher who wanted to see his land picked up a piece and rubbed it between his fingers. But the maps with their foreign spellings--Beauchamp, Fourchette, Peigneux, DuBuis--drew a solid line between insiders who knew the history of the land, and outsiders, who only knew maps and could not say the passwords. We all had our favorite stories.

"Had a guy up here yesterday, Government feller, asks me directions to Regina," a neighbor might say. We'd all grin and lean forward. The name "Regina" applied to some 2500 square miles, but on the maps it appeared as a little gray circle, just like a town. "I tell him he's looking at it, but he ain't buying any of that. So we get to jawing and pretty soon he goes for his map and there she is." Here he'd pause and lift his eyebrows and hands in one gesture of innocence. "So hell, I give him directions."

Strangers who were rude or adamant enough about the little gray circle on the map were sent there, to the Regina Post Office. The best part of the

story was imagining the driver's face when he pulled into our mail carrier's barnyard. A big official sign was nailed to the front of an old converted chicken house where Jake and Edie sorted the mail on Saturdays. The flag that waved over the Regina Post Office could have covered it like a pup tent.

We measured the wealth of our knowledge against the ignorance of outsiders, and judged ourselves superior. We pulled cars out of potholes, fed lost hunters at our kitchen table, sold gas from the big drums we kept behind the shop, and for the most part, we did so graciously. We could afford to be kind. But social or political upheaval going on outside seldom intruded, and families who managed to tuck themselves into a fold of flatland and hang on seldom went looking for something else to worry about. Their priorities were immediate--wind and heat and hoppers in summer, wind and snow and blizzards in winter. Our isolation was real. The nearest town lay an hour's drive north when the roads were good. To the south, the land plunged into rugged breaks and badlands, then dropped abruptly into a mile-wide stretch of water the maps called Fort Peck Lake. We still called it the Missouri River. In late summer a double row of dead cottonwoods reared out of the water where the original channel had been, and we could point to the site of submerged homesteads, name the families flooded out when the dam went in in the 30s. Halfway between the river and town, my parents bullied a hundred acres of winter wheat away from the silver sage and buffalo grass, and grazed cattle on the rest.

Our fences marched straight down the section lines, regiments of cedar posts and barbed wire strung so tight it hummed in a strong wind. The corners were square and braced to meet the bordering fields of neighbors just like us. Our families had homesteaded, broken ground and survived into the third generation, and we shared a set of beliefs so basic that they were seldom spoken aloud. I remember them as adages: Hard work is the measure of a man; A barn will build a house, but a house won't build a barn; Good fences make good neighbors; That which belongs to everyone, belongs to no one. "This is no country for fools," my grandad said, and these truths were what separated fools from survivors. They were the only explanation I was ever given for the way we lived.

Mrs. Norby left Forest squirming in front of the class while she and one of the boys fetched a small desk from the teacherage store room. A great deal more energy than necessary went into the shoving and arranging of desks to make room for the new one, and a haze of dust silted down around us by the time the sharp snap of our teacher's fingers cut through the ruckus and settled us into them. Throughout the process, Forest remained where she had left him, staring back at us with eyes so dark I could not see the pupils. I heard my sister's quick gasp and the teacher's weary voice in the same instant, "Oh Forest!" A wet spot had appeared on the front of his jeans and a puddle spread slowly along the uneven floor toward the first row of

desks.

Mrs. Norby handled this second disruption with cool efficiency, but there was an edge to her movements, and we dove back into our books without being told. She rummaged through the box of cast-offs we wore for art projects and came up with a pair of bright cotton pedal-pushers and a large safety pin. These she handed to my brother Russ with instructions. Most of us had been in Forest's predicament at one time or other, and remembered our own drawers draped across the oil stove or flapping on the barbed wire fence outside. Russ took the little boy's hand with awkward gentleness and led him away to the outhouse. They were gone a long time. Mrs. Norby had finished *mopping up* and was back to grading papers, but she kept *glancing at the door*, clearly exasperated. Forest finally returned, still wearing his wet jeans, and went straight to his desk. From the doorway Russ met the teacher's raised eyebrows with a small shrug, empty-handed.

At recess, Russ withdrew into his grown-up persona and refused to tell us what had gone on in the outhouse. It was none of our business, he chided, and with his moral superiority established, he dropped the subject and organized a game of Annie High Over. He was 13 and full of adolescent wisdom, infuriating. Later in the week we sat around the kitchen table after school, munching slabs of fresh bread we had buttered and sprinkled with brown sugar. Guy had captured our attention with stories about Forest. They had been paired up for a project, and Guy basked in the glory of inside

knowledge.

"I had to show him everything," Guy bragged. "He didn't know nothing."

"Anything." Mom corrected him absently from the sink.

"I asked him stuff, but he don't know how to talk."

"Doesn't," Mom said, sliding more bread from the oven.

Russ chewed and frowned at his little brother. Until moments ago, he had been the silent expert. "Can too," he said. In the two days Forest had spent at South First Creek, we had not heard him say one word. He would nod or shake his head, he would follow directions to get this or fetch that, but he had not spoken.

"I suppose *you* would know," Guy said, rolling his eyes. Russ responded to the challenge, telling us about the first day, the walk to the outhouse, Forest's stubborn refusal to be talked into the orange pedal-pushers. He would not undress himself.

"Then I thought maybe he was just bashful, so I gave him the pants and told him I'd wait outside," Russ said. Within seconds, Forest had pushed open the outhouse door and was walking toward the schoolhouse. Russ made a hasty search for the dry pants. Forest had thrown them down the toilet hole.

"So what did he say?" I asked eagerly, caught up in this drama. Russ picked up his half-eaten bread.

"He said *Nc*" Russ replied. "When I tried to help him with the button on his pants." He chewed thoughtfully. "He meant it, too. He's tough."

Forest wet his pants on a regular basis, and we came to prefer his damp earthy smell to the reek of bayberry Mrs. Norby left on her after-the-fact rampages around the room with a can of Glade. She never asked, and to my knowledge, no one told her the fate of the orange pedal-pushers, but after the first day, Forest wore his wet pants unchallenged.

To her credit, Mrs. Norby never gave up on Forest, although his lessons soon resembled a series of skirmishes. She always began cheerfully enough, settling us to work by ourselves then calling him up to her big desk where they would spend until recess working on the big alphabet cards. Our first grade year, we all measured our progress and accomplishment by the growing row of cards, memorized and thumbtacked to the wall above the blackboard. We adored them. On each card the stout black lines of upper and lower case letters were incorporated into a picture and a story. The letter C, I remember, was a profile of a mouth lined with teeth; the sound of Mr. C coughing was the sound of the letter C. Lower case F was the tail of a frightened cat. Mr. D was a soldier, and when he stood straight and beat his round drum it went duh-duh-duh.

The first time Forest spoke, Mrs. Norby killed our reaction with one remarkably vicious look, perhaps afraid that we would frighten him back to

silence. But Forest loved the stories, and his soft, surprisingly deep voice became background music for our own lessons. He learned the cards quickly, repeating the sounds, grandly embellishing the stories unless Mrs. Norby stopped him, and she must have expected him to take the next leap as effortlessly as we had. But he did not. He saw nothing in the shapes and sounds of the phonics cards that connected to the words written in a book. Mrs. Norby persisted like a trainer with a jump-shy colt, putting him through his paces, around the cards faster and faster, gaining momentum and then the book would appear and Forest would brace his feet and skid to a stop.

Against her decades of experience he had only endurance and a calm, sad stare that he seldom directed at the words she pointed out. After a few days he would have the words of Dick or Jane or Sally's exploits memorized and matched to the pictures on each page. Mrs. Norby would open to a page, he would look at it closely for a few seconds and then begin reciting the story that went with the pictures, sometimes adding bits from previous pages and often as not, reading with his eyes focused on his fingers as they twiddled with a paper clip or a bit of paper. When her voice grew clipped and brittle, he waited her out. Forest did not think in ABCs; for him the story was all.

From my position as third-row observer, I found Forest's academic failures neither surprising nor disappointing. Looking back, I can see it was his inability to read that kept him alive in my mind. From the first days I had

attempted to find the mythical Red Man in Forest, and he had failed me on every other front. We had studied plains tribes in social studies. We had read the books, and when TV came to the county we were devoted to shows like "Wagon Train" and "Rawhide." The Indians we admired had no use for reading; they wore buckskin leggings and medicine pouches on leather thongs around their necks. They had eagle feathers and long braids, they danced and hunted and collected scalps. Forest showed little promise of living up to this exciting potential.

Greta and I were more given to fantasy than the boys, and we were the worst. It became a game. Every morning we all hung our coats and placed our lunch boxes in the hallway near the communal water crock. Every morning either Greta or I would ask permission to get a drink, using the few out-of-sight seconds to lift the catch on his lunch box or pat down the pockets of his jacket. His jacket held no crude weapons. His bologna sandwich was as boring as our own bologna sandwiches. No pemmican. No buffalo jerky. Obviously, we knew more about being Indian than Forest did.

My brothers, sister and I spent our childhood summers playing at myth. We made bows and arrows from green willow and cotton string and bounded barefoot through the creek bottoms, communicating with gestures and grunts like Tonto did on "The Lone Ranger." We had horses and could ride like cowboys, but my sister and I rebelled at the discipline of saddles and rules. We rode naked to the waist, hell-bent through the meadows on a

palomino mare and a black, half-Shetland pony. We turned them out to pasture in late fall with heart-shaped bald spots where our butts had worn through the hair on their backs.

We had no bridge between make believe and the reality of children like Forest. We knew our land and its people, every pore, every pothole and every heartache of a close, contained world. From that knowledge came identity and security. But we had only the vaguest sense of our place in the larger world. The Fort Belknap Reservation that lies 25 overland miles from my parent's ranch is no more real in my memory than New York City. What I knew about this place I learned indirectly--jokes overheard, fragments of conversation, phrases that slipped into dialogue sideways, in reference to other whites. Shiftless as a reservation buck. Stank like an Indian camp. Drunk-squaw mean. Wild as, lazy as, dirty as. Racial slurs discounted as harmless because they did not refer to anyone we knew. The people we knew were ranchers, neighbors who lived like we did. Indians were dark and dangerous and different. They got in bar fights and car wrecks; they hung around the Rez and took government hand outs; they did not make good hired men. They were like the man we saw behind the rodeo arena pouring his horse a big feed of commodity oatmeal, U.S. Government stamped right on the sack. There was, my father said through clenched teeth, no goddamned excuse for that, no goddamned excuse in the world.

Forest and his grandparents were gone before Christmas. I never knew

where they went or why they left. I suppose the extra desk got retired to the store room, but I don't remember that, either. What I do remember from that time is the lingering sense of nobility I felt for being kind to him. Tolerance was a gift I could have chosen not to give. I knew Forest would never belong to our school or to our community, just as I knew it wasn't proper to talk about it. These were things I knew without knowing why, things I learned as a child listening with half an ear to all that was said, and most intently to all that was not said. I remember the silence most of all.

The trip to Havre is in my honor, my first trip to the dentist. He pulls four baby teeth to make room for the new ones sprouting through my gums at odd angles, and there is blood. When we leave the dentist's office I make it to the parking lot then vomit all I have swallowed and feel better. Breakfast happened before dawn, before dressing our nicest clothes, before our three hour drive. My father hands me a clean handkerchief to hold against my mouth and drives through downtown Havre in search of an inexpensive cafe. Afraid that misery is catching, my brothers and sisters crowd against the far side of the back seat. Under the stained hankie my cheeks feel heavy and pliant, like wet clay. My father swears at the traffic, a white-knuckle driver unaccustomed to stoplights, and I close my eyes to shut it out.

The cafe we pull up to is small but not crowded, and my stomach wakes to the perfume of hamburgers and french fries, a treat so rare that we

could count their every appearance in our short lives, each event of “eating out.” But when the food comes I am stunned to find a bowl of chicken soup set on the place mat in front of me, the kind my mother fixes when she’s too busy to cook. I stir noodles up from the bottom of the bowl and sulk, while the others take turns squeezing ketchup over hamburgers and fighting over split orders of fries. Even driven by hunger, I can’t keep the soup from leaking through my numb lips, and when life becomes too unfair to stand, I slide to the floor under the table and begin to cry. My father drags me out by one arm and sends me to sit in the car until I can straighten up.

Outside, I lean against the bumper in pure defiance of direct orders. But the day is too warm and the wait too long. My attention wanders to the bench just outside the cafe door where an Indian woman sits holding a baby. I’m drawn to babies, and this one is a black-eyed beauty, her fat belly peeking out of a crocheted sweater, just big enough to sit upright on the old woman’s knee. The woman sees me edging closer and smiles. “You like babies?” she asks, and I nod, my tongue still too thick to trust with words.

The woman is dressed in layers of bright color, wide skirts that brush the ground, a man’s flannel shirt buttoned to the neck and a shawl that falls from her shoulders and drapes in folds around the baby. Thick gray braids coil at the nape of her neck. She bends her face near the baby’s and clicks her tongue, tickling at the chubby brown chin, and the baby dissolves into giggles, her eyes fastened on the grandmother’s face. The babies I have seen are next

to bald, but this one has thick black hair standing up all over her head. I'm getting up the nerve to touch that hair when the cafe door opens and I leap back, scrambling toward our car, expecting my father. I turn, hand on the door handle, and an old man stands next to the woman and the baby. They are all looking at me, surprised.

The man hands the woman a wrapped hamburger and a paper cup of milk and walks back into the cafe. She lets the baby suck on the edge of the cup while she chews the sandwich, her lips disappearing with the motion of her jaw. She sets the cup aside, and I freeze against the car in wonder as she dips into her mouth with two fingers and pops a bit of chewed food into the baby's open mouth. The little girl works over the mashed hamburger and they rock gently on the bench, each gumming her own bite until it's swallowed. After a sip of milk, the baby leans forward comically, eyebrows arched, mouth and eyes round, ready for more. My own stomach shivers, squeamish, thrilled, but the process is done so gently that I can't be horrified. I watch the wonderful shuffle of food from mouth to fingers to baby, the easy sway between bites, until I'm full to bursting with news.

Back inside the cafe, I ignore the cold soup and dance against my mother's arm, conscious of slurring as I tell the story of what I've seen. Her nose wrinkles and her voice drops to a whisper as she hushes me.

"Did you talk to her?" she asks. Her voice is too flat and even, a trap I can't quite read. I nod, ready to work my lips and tongue around an

explanation but her hand snakes out and grabs my ear before I can speak, twisting it, her knuckles pressing against my swollen cheek. Her eyes lock mine into full attention.

“You were told to get in the car.” She says nothing else, but continues to glare, giving my ear another jerk for emphasis. Stunned, I walk with under-water steps out the door, straight without looking to the car and curl up on the back seat, heat thumping in my stomach.

It’s a long ride home that night, late and dark, and the back seat is a crush of packages and sleeping children. My mouth has been awake for hours, throbbing. In the front seat my mother tells my story of the Indian woman feeding the baby. My father says “Jeezus Christ.” I hear it in their voices and my belly fills with anger and shame. The old woman tricked me. On the outside nothing is what it seems, and I long for my own bed, the quilt my mother sewed from wool scraps and old coats, the comfort of a sure thing. My father drives automatically now, slowing for ruts and cattle guards, banking the gentle curves of the county road. Lonesome Coulee. Jackson’s Corner. Taylor Hill. I press one cheek against the cool of the window and close my eyes, drifting with the motion of the car. Almost home. I can tell where we are by the feel.

Fighting Fire

When he finished his chores, Grandpa squatted down beside me in a corner of his old barn. I settled back on my heels so he could reach the new litter of kittens curled together on a pile of empty feed sacks. He stroked their overlapping necks with a pinky finger, then gently pulled the jigsaw of kittens apart. Turning to the manger window, he tipped each one upside down in the light and studied its underside, handing two to me to hold. The three females he set aside in an empty five-gallon bucket. They scabbled in the bottom, and I reached in to nudge them together so they would comfort each other. We don't need any more girl cats, he told me.

"How can you tell it's girl cats?" I asked him. He looked startled for a second, then his eyes began to dance.

"You look at the bottom of their feet." When he grinned his dentures clicked together. Still polite at age five, I looked away from him, down at the nest of kittens in the bucket.

He repeated his punch line, *bottoms of their feet* and chuckled to himself, storing it up for later. When he told it over the dinner table, eyebrows arched and knowing most likely those words would be mine, and everyone would laugh. I'd learned the dot and dash method of sorting boy kittens from girl kittens. I understood all the reasons for thinning out litters. Too many cats around a place might starve, sleep with skunks and get rabies,

start to eat eggs or even chickens. But what no one would tell me was why the limit was on girl cats. How could he tell when he had enough? Why were the girl cats the first ones to go?

“Wouldn’t it work,” I asked him, “to get rid of all the boy cats?”

Grandpa’s back and neck had fused over the years into the shape of a lower case f, so when he swung a wary eye in my direction, his whole body turned. We seemed to be edging closer to the topic of how kittens came to be. I could have told him about that, too, but I knew better.

“Well,” he said, clambering to his feet, and reaching for the pail, “a person could do that, I suppose.” *But*, I thought, as he pointed me off toward the house, *they never, never do.*

I knew this injustice wasn’t limited to cats. Our ranching community applauded the birth of stud colts, bull calves and boy babies. We celebrated the manly man for doing the work of two men and the little woman for whipping up man-sized meals. Then television followed electricity to south Phillips County in the early sixties, and for the first time I caught an outside view of how the world went together. It confirmed my suspicions. I got from television names for what I already knew, an adult world divided neatly into Matt Dillons and Miss Kittys. I reached for the role of gun-sliding marshall. If the twins and I played house after our baby days, we played wagon train, trekking cross country to the stack yard and building a little soddy out of bales. We pretended to be mustangs, mountain lions and

coyotes. When we played people, we played men at war: cowboys and Indians, cattle ranchers and sheep herders, sheriff and bad guys. We rescued the womenfolk regularly, roles we saved for the battered baby dolls, but even a forked stick with a rag dress could wring its hands in a pinch. As we grew older and more daring, we tailored our play to the precise role of Phillips County Man. We played fire.

The twins and I formed a tripod out of sight and downwind from the buildings, our heads touching as we crouched to shelter the matches I struck, one after another over the sun-cured grass. When the fire caught, we nursed it along, offering it tender bites of dried moss until the flame grew large enough to feed on its own heat. The game was on. The burlap sacks had been selected for size and heft from the pile in the shop, dipped deep in the stock tank and held until they no longer tried to float. We stood back now, armed with the sacks, learning the creep of flames through buffalo grass, the jagged spread of fire picking its way over sod, around hardpan, the sudden dart upward at the taste of tall bunch grass. Still we watched, stepping in only to steer it shy of hard fuel, woody sagebrush that burned hot enough to light the green leaves and raise smoke, waiting until a matter of seconds separated game from emergency.

The adrenalin rush that followed was real. Fanning out, we formed a line of attack, slapping out flames with two-fisted, overhead swings, nailing

the fire to the ground in a matter of seconds. Mop up took longer for these play fires than it might have for a genuine lightning strike. We started at the point of ignition and scrubbed the prairie with our sacks, blending the black ash into dirt and stubble, until the fire site could pass for a patch of short-clipped grass.

In the aftermath, the twins and I sat in the shade of the old pull combine, puffing on contraband cigarettes and passing a bottle of rank booze we'd concocted from supplies on hand: equal jiggers of any real whiskey we could scrounge, chokecherry wine, lots of lemon and vanilla extracts, Listerine and Aqua Velva aftershave. The recipe amounts were guesswork, but the ingredients we knew from stories of the neighbors' hired men who came home off a week's drunk and chased the snakes and shakes with anything they could find in the boss lady's cupboards. The resulting brew was swill, but we didn't have to swallow it. For the purposes of the game, tipping the bottle and numbing a small spot on the tongue was plenty of realism. The rest we acted out with staggering, slurring, back-slapping abandon.

The only honest swigs of our home-brew went down my father and a couple neighbors who discovered it while robbing scrap iron from the old combine. They carried our bottle to the house. The twins and I formed a trio of round-eyed innocents, exchanging sly glances as the bottle went around, thrilling to the adjectives and expletives that graced the sniff test; each adult touched the bottle to his nose then tipped it up. Dad brought it down with a

shudder. "Christ!" he wheezed. The three of us beamed at each other. High praise, indeed. The bottle circled the table a second time, and Mom tried some too, rolling it around in her mouth, sorting flavors. Lemon extract and after shave. The work of old Marvin Rice, they agreed, although it was strange, out-of-character you might say, for old Marvin Rice to have abandoned such a bottle ninety-nine percent full.

Marvin's stint in our hayfield one year had been brief, sober and uneventful, but legend held sway. Some years before, he had shambled into every bar on Main Street at the tail end of a month-long binge, pleading with bartenders until one took pity and let him hock his false teeth for one last quart of Jim Beam. If the story was true, he never got them back. I had observed him at our table, a slow, polite eater, face collapsing around each bite, the toughest steak going down on nothing but gums. As speculation circled the kitchen, and the twins and I came close to believing he was guilty, ourselves. Legends make anything possible.

We never replaced the bottle. By the time Dad confiscated it, a strong dose of reality had cured us of fire games. The last fire was a camp for traveling cowpokes set in the duff of rotten hay by the corrals, a less-than-brilliant location, but we had become complacent. We were not ignorant of the consequences of fire. We could point virtuously to the many precautions we took, forgoing our games when range conditions were dangerously dry or windy, using a coffee can or a circle of rocks to contain the flames of a cook

fire, keeping water, shovels, sacks in arm's reach. But the day was windy enough for us to seek the shelter of the windbreak and barn, a convenient setting for cowboy-on-the-trail games. We imagined our storyline through the first campfire without incident, smothering it and scattering the remains through our fingers to make sure the ashes were cold.

The story might have ended there, but for something that separated us, a squabble perhaps, as Gail and I grew bored with the game, or maybe a voice cutting through the wind, calling us girls back to the house. Alone, Gary lit a second campfire. This one went underground.

I imagine his panic as the fire began to sink through the packed brown compost of ancient hay that we had all mistaken for dirt, flames crawling into earth and springing up out of reach as he stomped and dug and tried to bury it deep enough to die. Whatever terror he may have felt, when the moment of decision came, that instant when both he and the fire crossed over and quit pretending, he was man enough to run for the house. Smoke roiled over the windbreak by the time we formed a human chain to the well house, Mom and four of us children running water to my father, who stood on the smoldering hay and tossed it, bucketful by bucketful, against the east wall of the barn.

I remember that fire best by its sounds: wind whipping flames through the gaps in a board fence; milk-pen calves bawling inside the barn; the rush of fire in hay, like static or wasps, and the snap where it hit dry wood. And like

a roar in the background, I remember the absence of human voices. No one yelled or screamed. No one called the neighbors. And even when the fire was finally out and we gathered in the house, the enormity of this error, the obvious shame of the charred windbreak and blackened barn wall, made words superfluous.

“You understand what you did.” My father’s voice broke and drew thin over the last word. His huge shoulders stuck in mid-lunge just over Gary’s head, his arms pulled straight on either side. At that point, Gary could have folded and spread the blame; we wouldn’t have faulted him. The rules of sibling loyalty were foolish in the face of this father whose legs still trembled from exertion. Had it been me, I would have confessed on the spot, every illicit match. Gail and I held our breath and waited. We could not volunteer, we would not deny. Gary never flinched. He owned up with one bloodless nod, so far beyond sorry that the beating we all expected would have been welcome. Instead, there was silence, a dismissal.

I think Dad could have forgiven Gail or me had one of us taken the blame for that fire, girls with too much time on their hands, girls whose stupidity and carelessness were explainable, but there were no words to explain any son of a cattleman who would willfully, deliberately betray his land. For months, Gary followed Dad with his eyes, and for months, Dad focused an identical blue gaze on a spot just over Gary’s head.

By the time I hit twelve, I had given up questioning why it was different to be a girl and fought to separate the biological fact of being female from the roles that went with the plumbing. I had no quarrel with the God-given facts. I was fascinated with babies and birth, curious about sex, in love with James Arness and the young Clint Eastwood. The roles went like this: every rancher who stepped out the door scratching a full belly through a clean shirt had a partner willing to stay indoors and wash another load. "Someone to make the mess, and someone to clean it up," as my mother put it. Most of the women in my community were like my mother, strong, capable women whose names were listed on the ranch deeds alongside their husbands', but who accepted second say in the business of it. On the fringe of their wifely example lay stories spawned in the homestead era and passed down through generations, a mythology that held just enough truth to be dangerous. These were stories of the third sex, land-owning women admired for their staunch independence, tough women who hired cooks and ran their own ranches. They were in books. They had their own TV shows. And every ranch wife I knew crossed over just enough to make the stories seem possible. In a book, when myth met reality and crashed, I simply skirted the wreckage, taking what I wanted from the opening chapters and flipping through marry-the-foreman and turn-over-the-reins scenes two pages at a time. In my real-life, Out West community, the depressing sequel was being written as I watched and the weak parts were harder to skip. I knew women

savvy to the working of cattle and horses, women who rode the hay rake in June and took to the fields at harvest. But without exception, they picked up a thank you and walked back to tackle the work that was theirs alone.

Woman's work. If I learned nothing else in my early years, I learned the scorn that twisted those words into insults.

My mother despised the repetitious and thankless nature of housework and was an expert horsewoman, characteristics that brought her closer to my ideal than most. The downside was her unshakable sense of duty. I was a daughter, and must be pinned to my seat with threats until I learned to cook and sew and butcher chickens and can beans. But it was also Mom who hazed for me the first time I left the corral on my green-broke bronc, riding up to turn him from the barbed wire fence as we bolted across the pasture. "Stay with him!" she cheered, and I did, until the front cinch broke and the colt bucked straight through the reservoir with her good saddle hanging upside down on his belly. I dusted off my pride while Mom rode after the colt, leaning sideways at a full gallop to jerk the buckle on the flank cinch and snub the hackamore rein to her saddle horn. Womanly arts be damned. I wanted the ease, the power of my mother, horseback. I wanted the real myth, and I set out to get it.

The fall I turned twelve, the sole member of my peer group defected. My cousin Lois turned thirteen, and despite our blood-sister oath forbidding such things, she put on a bra, ratted her hair into haystacks and kissed the

hired man. I worked on my own appearance with grim determination. I spit and crossed my legs like a field hand. I peeled my nails off with my teeth, and kept my hair bobbed away from my face. I preferred stacking bales, working cattle, and ducked house chores when I could. I climbed trees, rode the milk-pen steers to a standstill and strung frogs ten deep on a willow spear. Come winter, I read myself into the strongest characters of half the Malta library. I made it last a year. And when, in the inexorable process of time, my body betrayed me, my rage was terrible.

That spring I stood exposed to the cold draft of the bathroom, one ear tuned to the night sounds that crept through the locked door, my father's rumbling snore, the shifting squeak of the double bed my brothers shared. My sister slept just inches away through a thin sheetrock partition. I steadied my hands against the sink and leaned forward, recording the changes I saw in the medicine chest mirror. Dark brown hair, sun-faded to the color of old hay, ear length and shaggy, needing a wash. A big, rawboned girl, my mother said. Tall for twelve. A square, horsey face, I thought, eyes hidden by owlsh glasses, chin jutting like a shoe horn, my father's chin, and his wolfish teeth wrangling for space behind the tight lips.

Hands shaking, I shrugged into my pajama top, giving up, finally, on the buttons, then lowered the lid on the toilet with exaggerated care and sat down, waiting for the rubbery, queasy feeling to subside. The lump on my

chest throbbed like a heartbeat, moveable under my fingers but still firm, despite a tiny trickle of blood. The rest of me felt numb with dread. I hadn't expected a permanent cure. I just wanted a little more time, a few months, maybe a year.

My idea was a product of bad pasture. With Kenny gone to Malta for high school, I'd been called on to help Dad work half a dozen cows with abscessed jaws. Sharp-pronged seeds from cheat grass or fox tail had drilled through the lining of their mouths, infecting the flesh. We hazed each cow into the chute and caught her lopsided head in the squeeze gate. Some of the abscesses were fist-sized, others filled the jawline from chin to throat, tight and ripe as watermelons. Dipping the thin second blade of his knife in iodine, Dad slit each swelling, standing to one side so the first geyser of pus and blood would miss him. I worked the vaccine gun, pumping a dose of penicillin into the meaty part of their rumps. Dad explained, as he cut along the bottom of a lump, how gravity kept the wound open and draining until it healed from the inside out; cut too high and the abscess would form again.

In the months that followed, I thought about the sure jab of his knife, the slick sideways cut, the gritty sound of the blade slicing tough skin, the immediate release of pressure. I thought it through, modifying any steps that appeared unreasonable. I suspected the procedure was painful, though with cows you couldn't tell. That night I tip-toed to the bathroom, selected a clean sock from the laundry basket and gripped it in my teeth, just in case.

After dabbing my bare chest with alcohol, I attempted to lance my breast buds with a darning needle.

My first bid to become sexless left no scars, aside from the mental anguish I suffered when the punctured breast actually swelled larger for a little while. But it marked my last quest for an easy answer.

In late August the prairie hills rippled in the wind, bunch grass grown tall in a late, wet spring, sun-cured by July, six weeks of heat with no rain. The excitement started before noon, the first call coming in as a dry lightning storm, all wind and no rain, still popped to the east and the phone bristled with static electricity. One bolt had hit the face of a dam on Bill's reservoir, a few miles south of us, a small fire, slapped out within minutes. Dad and Bill stood in the lee of a pickup cab for awhile, watching the dead burn for signs of resurrection. Later, the day would be told as a story, and it would start with this red herring fire, a fire the size of a kitchen table, the ease with which two men soaked a gunny sack and smacked it out in an ocean of knee-high grass. "We were still congratulating each other," my dad would say, "when Bill looked over his shoulder." To the northwest, a knot of smoke hovered at the sky line.

The community fell together. Wives grabbed the phones, husbands and older boys jerk-started rickety fire trucks and aimed for the smoke, picking up speed on the fencing trails heading west. Younger kids stood out

of the way, absorbed by one of the rarest scenes played out in our community: visible panic. Grown men ran. Rules were broken without pause--fences cut, gates pitched open and left. In the seconds before it pulled away, I stood beside our pickup, working the zipper on my fuzzy coat, trying without success to catch my father's eyes as he topped off the gas tanks. To distract him by begging or arguing would be shameful behavior in the heat of an emergency. Kenny threw an armload of burlap sacks over the tailgate, Dad jammed them into the water barrel and the two of them swung into the cab, a team working in tandem. A team. My chest thickened with unspecified resentments. I hadn't expected to go, really, but I had changed my sneakers for heavier shoes and stuffed my leather gloves into my coat pockets, just in case.

After they left, I wandered back to the general uproar around the house. News was routed to our place as the fire closed in. Pickups bounded into the yard, pulled up and revved once while the screen door banged and Mother dashed into shouting distance, pointing, directing, watching as they pulled out in a spray of dust. On guard inside, I waited for the phone to ring, ready to fly through the same screen door and screech "Telephone!" then dart back in to watch the receiver until she got there. It was an important job, like keeping tabs on a snake until she fetched a hoe, but one that was quickly taken over, as the house began to fill with neighbor women who rode along as far as the dooryard and leaped out with whatever they had grabbed from

their own kitchens--a sack of cookies, a loaf of bread, a jug of Koolaid. Black plumes in the lighter gray grass smoke were reported breathlessly upon arrival, and the kitchen conversation turned to tense speculation. Was it Nesbit's garbage dump, or their house? Could corner posts treated with creosote burn that black, that big? Or perhaps a truck overtaken by the fire, cut off, someone's husband or son.

By three o'clock pickups began to break through the haze and roll toward our well to get water; boys too young for the fire line raced to string hoses and fill buckets from the stock tank. When our outfit pulled up and my mother emerged from the house for an update, I trotted behind her to the pump house. Dad's Levis were filthy with soot, and sweat traced clean stripes from his hat line down each cheek to the point of his jaw. A red rash dotted the V of bare skin at his collar. Mom followed him with phone messages, while he pulled off his gloves, wet his bandanna and bent over the tank to rinse his face. I fidgeted and eyed the door of the pickup.

"The fire passed the Nesbit place," he said, voice muffled and urgent through the hankie, "came a stone's throw from the barn and corrals." I edged around the nose of the pickup. Wind held the driver's door open, dirt swirled along the floorboards.

"When the fire got close, Grace comes out with a broom," Dad was saying, "a wet broom."

"I tried to call. I thought she'd gone," Mom said, "I wondered." Their

voices closed in, talking fast. I slithered under the steering wheel to the far side of the bench seat, eased my gloves on and tried to breathe the fine dust quietly. The hose thumped against the back window.

“Hey!” Gary scrambled out of the back end, whining. “Why does she get to go?” The voices died away.

I settled deeper in the seat. Clenching my teeth, I called up the familiar shape of Gary’s head and placed it in the center of my mind. Blond crew cut, crooked grin, wide blue eyes. Perfect. I squeezed my right fist and his face exploded in slow motion, pattering against the windshield. Behind me I could still hear his voice. I rewound the tape and played it again, depressing the plunger slowly, deliberately. Ka-boom.

“Dad, can I go? Why does she get to go?” The pickup rocked as the tailgate slammed. Ka-blooey. Dad slid into the cab, the smell of sweat and burnt grass. The engine roared up. I looked at him sideways. His eyes were bloodshot and watery, not unkind.

“Not this time, Sis.”

Mom opened the door on my side. I was holding up the show. Gary stood at her hip, smug but wary, edging a prudent distance from the cab as I jumped out. The door shut with a solid chuff. I pulled at the fingers of my gloves, casually removing the evidence of my folly, as the grind of the motor dwindled and dissolved into the clamor of wind in the cottonwoods. Mom’s arm lifted as if to circle my shoulders, and I ducked it smoothly. There were

sandwiches to be made, God knows we'd be feeding the Russian army when this was over. Her voice carried behind me halfway to the house, until it, too, was lost in the roar.

* * *

From the shelter of the tall windbreak fence, I stared out at the familiar outlines of the farmyard blurred by smoke, willing myself not to blink, calming the hitch in my chest. The weakness that came over me that spring had grown worse as the weeks wore on. It started out gradually, like a tightness in my chest, then moved up, swelling my throat until I could no longer swallow. The cure was crying, gut-deep and out of control, the sort of watery-eyed, lace panties, town girl behavior I especially detested. I pushed up a sleeve of my coat, and ran a thumb along my inner arm. A faint pattern of yellow and lavender stippled with fresher blue began at the tan line on my wrist and disappeared under the coat cuff at my elbow. I folded a patch of clear skin carefully between two knuckles and began to twist.

The coat was a hand-me-down from my brother, charcoal gray fake fur bristled in a buzz cut, cool nylon lining against my skin, baggy enough to hide the disfiguring lumps on my chest. I'd worn it straight through the heat of summer, perfecting a mute and sullen shrug for adults, turning so savage under teasing that my brothers and sisters left me alone. I hated being looked at. I would not be touched. I relaxed my fist and focused on the bright throb that bloomed on my inner arm until I felt calm, then opened my coat and

rubbed my face against the inner lining. Across the barnyard, house lights burned and women moved behind them, passing in shadow along the west window. All afternoon my mother and the neighboring wives had circled the cramped kitchen, side-stepping from sink to stove with the grace of square dancers. Chairs had shuffled aside and the table shoved tight against the wall to make room. A two-gallon coffee urn burped and moaned, dripping progressively darker drops into the cup under its spout. The enamel dish pan of canned venison sandwiches and the half dozen cakes were draped with flour sack towels to keep the flies off.

In four hours the fire had traveled eight miles, and in the time I spent indoors, smoke had closed in around the buildings. The wind was visible, streaming overhead until it ran out of sky. I took a deep breath and rested against the haystack. My arms and legs trembled, my throat still tender where the knot had unraveled. The fire had moved within sight of the windbreak, and I became conscious of distant shouts floating up whenever the wind eased. I sat up, burying the past hour with a fresh sense of purpose. Hay bales leaned against the windbreak like giant stair steps. Where they left off I jumped to grab the top and swing a leg over. A four-by-six brace ran along the top of the boards, a narrow bench I could straddle in relative comfort, fifteen feet in the air.

Clamping my heels to the rough boards, I swiveled away from the house, balancing the wind gusts by reflex, leaning to offset the steady push

against me, rocking back so I didn't fall forward when they turned loose. My cheeks pulled taut in the heat. I held on with my legs and tongue-wet my jacket cuff, scrubbing at the salt crust around my eyes before I looked up. Squinting one eye shut, I held my hand arm's length in front of my face and located the sun, a lighter gray smudge in the sky two fingers above the Little Rockies. The wind churned smoke four fingers higher than the sun then blew it straight east like chaff off a flat palm.

On the near horizon, flames topped a ridge and poured down the other side. A quarter mile closer, a slash of raw dirt opened slowly behind a rust-colored road grader. From the north, another neighbor stood over the steering wheel of his John Deere tractor, legs spread for balance as he careened toward the firebreak in high gear, a three-bottom plow bouncing along behind like a child's pull toy. The tractor slowed and veered to one side of the grader's path, and the driver dropped to the seat to shift down, reaching behind with the other hand to jerk the plow line and set the shovels to sod. The plow skipped once, twice, then it bit and the tractor squatted with a jerk, bellowing a thundercloud of diesel smoke. Behind it the prairie began to boil.

The fire ran low to the ground, rearing up on its haunches when the wind fell off, then dropping down to sprint on the next gust. Men with pitchforks fought to clear the fence line ahead of it. A stream of tumbleweeds raced for the firebreak, bouncing over each other as they neared the line and

crossed the ribbon of dust without slowing. Heat devils rose from the flames and skipped through the grass a few feet ahead of the fire. A flatbed tank truck crawled by the fence line collecting the pitchfork crew, then jounced across the plowed strip and stopped. The figures tumbled off the truck with wet sacks and formed a line facing the fire, ready to slap out airborne sparks.

Another jagged stretch of men laced the south edge of the fire, arms lifting and falling, funneling the fire north toward the meadows. I studied the size of the silhouettes along the line. Boys were out there behind the lines, making things happen. I worked myself up and spit deliberately over the side of the windbreak. Kitchen duty had not been without satisfaction. Assigned to the sandwich team, I'd pushed up my sleeves so they didn't drag and set to work without back talk. A little nod of encouragement and Mom set about her own business. She was as immune to my coat as I was. Dolores and Jackie were not at all immune, and stared dumfounded as I plunged a lightly rinsed hand cuff-deep into the pickle jar and began knocking homemade dills into chunks, absorbed by the growing ache in my throat and chest. My fellow sandwich makers drew up on either side of me.

"Aren't you hot in that jacket?" Jackie asked sweetly. She smiled, eyes wide with effort, fanning her face with a potholder. A clue, perhaps, to the correct answer.

"Not at all." I smiled back at her. Sweetly. Dolores seemed mesmerized by my sleeve, and I glanced down, gratified. Mine was truly a

coat of many colors. In addition to hay and oat chaff, the clipped gray pile carried evidence of a palomino mare, a black Angus steer and half a dozen cats. To me it smelled doggy and comfortable, but I wasn't stupid. From the corner of my eye, I saw Dolores wrinkle her nose and look first toward Mom, on the phone with a finger stuck in her other ear, then at Jackie. I breathed through my clenched teeth. I did not belong in this kitchen. I knew that. Everyone but my mother knew it. But their eyes measured me with, what... scorn? pity? disgust? I would make their job easier.

Baiting them, I set down the knife and scooped a drippy fistful of pickles into a huge bowl of ground venison and onions, squishing the mess together with plenty of arm action. Their mouths drew down, but they kept up an idle chatter, poised on either side of me. I paused in my venison mashing, and held my slimy hands over the board, as if considering what to do next, and they moved in. Jackie snatched up the paring knife; Dolores went for the pickle jar. I took one easy step back and their elbows met midway in the space I left. Wiping my hands on my pants, I sidled out of the kitchen, easing the door shut in a thrill of restraint.

The new job description I worked out was a natural. The windbreak and some cottonwood trees around the yard screened the fire line from the house. In the next twenty minutes, the fire would reach the firebreak of raw dirt and either deflect toward the meadows or jump straight across and aim for our buildings. If the fire crossed all hell would break loose, but

somewhere a pickup waited, ready to carry a warning to the house. They would pass the very windbreak I perched on. My duty, as I saw it, was to beat the pickup and spread the alarm myself. I would be a Fire Scout.

I flexed my legs one at a time, feeling for pinpricks, staying limber, planning the steps. I would launch the second I read panic on the fire line, cut across the feedlot, fall and roll under the pole fences rather than waste time climbing. I would slow to an urgent stride by the house, calm, in control. The women would turn to look at me when I stepped into the kitchen, my shoulders filling the doorway. "Gather up," I'd say, "we're clearing out. The fire jumped the line." My mother would wheel around to the window and turn back slowly. I imagined the fear in her eyes and shivered.

I modified the scene every five minutes for the next hour, but my dream died with the wind at sunset. Pickups that had raced through the farmyard for hours now lurched and rolled to a stop, as if hit by sudden waves of exhaustion. The men climbed out slowly, and lined up at the basin set up on a bench by the front door next to a pile of ratty towels. They ate in shifts, new rigs rolling in as others pulled away. The breeze, when it reappeared, smelled damp. Lying hidden on top of a haystack, I fingered my collar, holding it snug around my neck, waiting for the yard to clear and the people to go home.

When the fire died and the smoke began to clear, I had worked my

way along the tall fence to a power pole and stood for a better view of the mop up. Fire rigs lumbered over the naked landscape, patrolling for live embers, gathering in groups of two or three on hilltops to watch for flare-ups. A raw black scar narrowed as it rounded the north end of the firebreak, flowed east for another mile, then dipped through the barrow pit and stopped in a neat line. Tank trucks stretched nose to tail along the county road. Pressing my arm against the pole, I turned, finally, to the west and stood for a long time.

The glow of dusk seemed part of the air, a soft light that washed the gentle step of hills evenly, without direction or source. The grass had burned clean and fast, but wisps of smoke still rose from the range fuel, the cow chips and sagebrush. A row of stumps flared along the fence line like candles, flames that bled out and disappeared against the sunset. Wherever my eyes touched, the land lay twisted and bruised. Five thousand acres of grazing land and grain fields, once as familiar to me, once as comfortable and taken-for-granted as the coat I pulled around me, stripped wide open, every wrinkle and rock exposed. I slid down and kicked a bed in the top of a hay stack, lying hidden as a true darkness grew under a thin blanket of clouds.

There are moments of recognition that empty you, times when no amount of arm pinching can mask the who and what of you that stares back up from the hollow. Some games are played for real. My brother had learned that in one harsh lesson. It had taken me several.

There had been the day two years before, when I tethered a half-grown kitten to the headboard of a hayrack, measuring the twine leash carefully so he couldn't jump off either side, tying him so he would be there when I came back to play after lunch. I left him some water, I studied the shade that the headboards cast ladder-like across the bed of the hayrack, made a rag nest for him in the coolest spot and walked away, confident of my own brilliance. Unable to escape off the sides, the kitten did the one obvious thing I hadn't seen. He crawled between the boards he was tied to and jumped for the wagon tongue. When I returned with my pockets full of lunch scraps, he was already cool, his eyes open to the wind that swung him gently, the tips of his hind toes brushing softly, back and forth, as if smoothing the faint scratches he had left in the silvery wood of the wagon tongue, or perhaps pointing out how close he had come to surviving, how unforgivably cruel his death had been.

Years later, pushing my son on a playground swing, I would catch our shadow at the corner of my eye, the sway of a two-year-old in a kiddie seat, the laddered bars overhead, and the memory would punch through the surface so fast I would plead aloud, *I didn't know, I didn't know*, standing with one fist buried in my hair, mindless of the stares I drew, the way my two older children gathered close to my legs, watchful, protecting me for long seconds until it passed.

Mercy, I've discovered, is hard learned and slow to stick. A whiff of

burning grass can still fill my head with color, the terrible bloom of sunset through smoke, the endless, aching stumble of hills over the land below. From this distance I can see myself squirming a bed in the top of a stack, and know it was not disappointment that held me there, nor defiance that made me crouch lower when the dinner bell clanged and my father's whistle pierced the silence. It was failure, a shame so pure I absorbed it in tiny gusts, flinching when lights and voices drifted up from the house. Inside, they would be telling stories of the fire, a community of men and women pulled together by the work they had done for each other, and their pride in doing it well. Work had to do with the land, with people big enough to fight fire with a wet broom if that's what they had to work with. I had not set myself aside and pitched in. In the end, I had done the one thing worse than doing nothing. I had rooted for the fire.

Lessons in Physics

I. Relativity: phenomena that take place in a frame of reference, with respect to an observer

A father's sudden whim and she swings
on his great right arm to the barn,
a gift of time, and common chores
light up like plain features transformed
by a smile. She will remember
the light of early evening, the way
a cow settles gently to her oats,
the shadow gray stripes of a kitten
drunk on the promise of warm milk
weaving against her shins, and a quiet man
lumbered down to fit the stool, uncommonly
patient with this child between his knees
and the weak piddles of milk she wrings
hit or miss down the sides of the bucket.
There must have been
 a final second
when everything turned on the arc
of a small cat, the lazy ripple
of claws still reaching, not yet sunk
in the post of a cow's hock, a final safe
breath she might have taken deep and used
to separate her father's arms from the clench
of haunch and cow hide that follows,
the tin-burst-crash of stainless steel

from the coiled bounce of split hooves
on the bones of a man's back, blows
she feels like tremors in the thick chest
tucked around her, like echoes in the dirt
against her cheek.

She understands
the man who gets up, a wild man
familiar as the grip on her belt loops
and the roar of him pitching her over the fence,
but she'd never seen him go smooth
in one breath, like a catch and shift of gears,
and even the cow goes still. The search
is deliberate, the kitten pinned
and snuffed in a brief dance, boot heels
landing twice, then squared to balance
the solid heft of the pail, creased steel
upended and swung, tolling every cut
on cow's humped spine until she sinks
to her corner, beaten.

Chores are over
when the cow staggers out to pasture
and the kitten spins a limp cartwheel
on the manure pile, but the girl holds
the fence until his eyes settle
the lay of the barn and his chin lifts
at her, leading the way out
where the light is better. He checks
the damage, one hand spanning her head,
bracing her against the heavy push

of the other dusting her jeans, picking straw
from her hair, then suffers her brush
at the tracks stamped on his ribs.
She says, *I'm sorry* and he nods,
no harm done. *You have to be careful
with cows*, he says. As if it were full,
he offers one side of the battered pail,
and bends down to carry it home.

II. Work, that product of motion and force
expressed in footpounds

She finds it cooler walking barefoot
through the fields, away from the house
where canning pulls the heat indoors and flies
lie drunk on mounds of pits and skins.
She packs her father's lunch on her belt, ripe
tomatoes, cold venison and bread, water
in a glass jug wrapped in wet burlap
gripped against one thigh, and every step
it drips and hoppers burr ahead and sink
in air so dense it reeks of change.

A mile from home she tops a rise
and stops to study a new line stamped
across the sky, mirrored below in pale
shadows where stubble borders grain.
And when a breeze skirrs dust around
her feet, she looks back the way she came,
then again to the cloud bank trailing dirty
gray sheets through the sagebrush one farm
west, and she wonders which rule applies--
the one called Common Sense that changes
every time it's used or the one that says
Any Work Half-Done is Work Undone.

She waits in the hush of uncut wheat
for the race to draw near, her father

on the starting lap of the last field,
the storm raking up chaff behind him.
The silver Gleaner shimmers down
a far ridge and slides from sight and still
she waits, less sure of what's important
now, but ready to measure up, stand straight
where he can see her, swallow fear
for the sake of a job well done.

She waits

 until pride no longer matters,
until thunder pops overhead, and then
she drops it all and runs, feet pounding
between rows toward her father churning
toward her on the cutting edge of a hail storm.
He stands, legs forked for balance, gripping
the wide wheel with both hands, turning
his head to glance behind. The first slush
stones land black in the dust on his hat
and when he turns back, she can see everything
in the grim line of his jaw, the power of ice,
the relative value of a man's work,
and he waves

 her off with one arm
toward the shelter of a rock pile,
thirty years of field stones still
warm on the downwind side where she falls
so tight against the earth her heart meets
the pound of machinery drumming up
through her shirt, her father, hands full

of blades and iron guts roaring past
as she ducks down, small hands saving
face against a shatter of shelled wheat
blown from the auger's mouth, thick straw
fanned in arcs, and the hail starting small,
a slant of clear seeds cast evenly
though space, spinning red, spinning cold.

III. Friction = Resistance Overcome

At the conference with Mr. Seen
the girl studies his tie while her parents
hide their anger like bad teeth
behind small, tight smiles. It seems
like an ordinary tie, wide stripes,
maroon and gray, intriguing
the way the knot remains level
and smooth at his throat as he talks
about her flair for failing tests
despite the twice-weekly sessions
after school. The tie disappears
into the neat vee of his suit coat,
and she knows her father will focus
on the color of the man's shirt,
Fairy Pink, he will call it, because
he has nothing to say about tactile
methodologies employed to overcome mind
blocks and persistent math phobias.

Her mother will never understand,
she says, this girl's stubborn lack
of gratitude, and Mr. Seen's wide chest
swells against his tie. Listen, he says,
where there's progress we expect a little
friction, and when he drops this word
to the girl staring at his chest, the heat
creeps up her neck and the tie's red stripe

bleeds into pink, into gray.

Twice a week
 after school Mr. Seen slips off his tie,
 his coat, opens his shirt two buttons deep,
 stretches both arms back to loosen up, then
 begins, voice throbbing, soft as a pulse:
*the idea here is to relax, free your mind
 to learn.* The girl in the straight-backed
 chair pretends to close her eyes
 on command.

Imagine,

he croons, lifting the long heavy hair
 at the back of her neck, *imagine a wall
 in your mind.* His finger draw heat
 from her neck, her hair, combing,
Relax And she begins to imagine
 clouds, so dense she can mold them,
 a pinch here, a tuft there and a man appears,
 a tie cinching tight around his naked
 throat, and tighter, until his face turns
 dull brick red and quiet. Most of the hour
 she spends reading posters--her favorite one
 shows a stylized tree, psychedelic leaves
 and large black letters: **Natural Law
 Allows for No Violation of Basic Rules,**
 and in smaller red script, *The Apple
 Always Falls Down.* She studies that,
 mixing the letters to make bold headlines:
The Leap-Yaws All Won; The Pale Sway,

As Now. Mr. Seen has noted great leaps
in her Power of Concentration, anticipates
a Breakthrough Any Day, but the girl knows
it all comes down to the test, each one
harder than the last.

Her father's eyes are glazed.

Mr. Seen in his tight, untrustworthy tie
runs his warm fingers over the test,
explaining in simple sentences just how
the bold equations at the top might
or might not apply to problems spaced
at half-page intervals where this Little
Dickens has, Frankly, in the face of All
Reason, inexplicably taken the Fifth--
I respectfully refuse to answer...
in careful print on every line.

He lifts his heavy hands in a gesture;
he cannot express his sorrow. Her mother,
reading upside-down, calls it pure
unmitigated gall. Her father, unmoved,
studies the closed pink shirt. And the girl,
and her steady brown eyes, watch the tie.

The Customs of Hardwood

Like any worker trained in preparing the dead,
I've made peace with this labor,
the callous appraisal of board feet needed
for last rites, oak and maple laid out,
drum-sanded into something less than tree,
something more than strips and headers
smoothed and neatly dressed for viewing.
Reverence is the measure of true skill
in this craft, the ability to believe
there is mystery in death when you know
the secrets, to marvel at the complexity
of wood grain, unique in every board,
and balance this joy against the reality
of trees, of growth rings ripped lengthwise.

Laying floors, I feel a wonder, Like
grief, that even dead and dismembered
this wood recalls a primal need, and left
alone with flesh exposed, will dowse
moisture from the air and swell, struggling
against the subfloor, each length pushing
soft against the shoulder of another.
Even ground to dust it draws belly sweat
through my skin, taps my lips and drinks
until the taste of this work becomes one
bite of salt and sap and heat. At dusk
I leave my floors preserved in the reek

of formaldehyde and drive home, windows down
to catch the end of spring, an honor guard
of trees crisscrossing overhead, each oak
and maple bristling with crows, black crowns
of thorns that shift and settle deeper as I pass.

On my block it's maples. I kneel
alongside the curb to wash up, humming
around old songs, imagining Black Velvet
and sleep, thinking my last gentle kiss, good
love, Mary's Texas fried chicken, anything
to help the sting of solvent and the small
coarse brush erase the dirty work, fingers,
palms, whorls and lines, the blood of trees
and mine, the shimmer of oil scum and crab
petals blown to sequins, gutter wreaths
that glow pastel in the last pink light, like
fish scales, like opals poured in water.

The Courtship of Wild Houses

The moon lingers on unfinished stories,
a foundation of gray river stone
frozen in round vowels
of astonishment, tiers of tempered glass
sashed to green studs and a stark line

where the siding leaves off and a new tarp
toadies to the wind, hem rucked high
over bare dormers, grommets tapping
two-four time against steel cheaters
at the joints of a hundred board feet.

Inside where light touches, pink
tufts of insulation bloom at the jambs,
and pallets of banded oak ripple
shades of rose across the subfloor,
a wing of east rooms gone soft

at the skylights, the whole of it
half-dressed and wide open
to plans. The workers are cautious
when it comes to tools, the good ones
cleaned carefully and taken home,

and by dark there's nothing left
but suggestion, walls lingering
shadow deep in old saws, hammers
buried head down in dinged up pails,

a litter of cold chisels and square rules.
Spread out flat, the blues predict
a shuttered porch restrained
by tasteful dotted lines, perhaps
a lattice trim one day when the steps
are poured and the front door bolts

from the inside. But now, half-done,
the concept seems negotiable, the footings
unsettled, rough as fur, likely to rise
on a half acre at dawn and shake off bricks
like the balance of a bad dream.

With Food and Mother

She leaps off the boxcar like a wild mare
or maybe she walked the whole way
holding her purse over her stomach.
Either way, the tag on her coat says it all.
She stands in the wind until I claim her
then tells me her hands are cold. Her old shoes
shame me. It's their job. Will nothing
make her happy? I take her with me
trying to lose her secretly in grocery stores.
It could happen anywhere.
She gets tangled in the carts keeping up.
She slips oatmeal and knuckle bones
into the bodice of her dress, opens
the last bag of potato rolls and hands them out
with dabs of jam. Casual shoppers ply us
with smiles, but I can see the manager
frowning in the round mirrors
overhead. His face stops me
one aisle past dry beans and rice:
she is sampling the sweet pickles.
I make excuses, pointing out the bad shoes,
the old way of bunions and neglect.
I can pay! I tell everyone who'll listen
but already the crowd drifts. She waits
for me to check out, patient, preoccupied
with the black olives on her fingertips.
It would help if you were sorry

I hiss at her but she has a history of not understanding. She pinches my arm.

I've been looking for you a long time
she whispers, and there's nothing mild
or wrong about her eyes. She helps me
to the car and takes me home the long way,
her feet barely touching the brakes.

Birthing

When I was barely 19 and swollen with you
I would stand before the mirror, naked
and watch you move, wondering what your name
could be, wondering what to call these
hard veined breasts that grew dark
rings above you. We grew together
to a rhythm as quiet and old as a tomb
and I as lost as you inside its walls,
knowing nothing except how little
this all had to do with love. By October
our movements slowed and we settled
toward the earth, panting through the first
hard cramps on the edge of the sterile bed
where your father left us, the labor room
where we learned this ancient craft
of being strong alone, pacing the worn trail
from bed to window, breathing, knees buckled
with the force of your coming.

Toward the end, I gripped the window sill
and helpless through the brittle panes
we watched the woman die on the street outside,
die, even as the doctor buried his hands
in her chest so flayed by a shotgun blast
that shreds of her hunter's orange vest
still clung to his gown a half an hour later
when he stood between my knees and coaxed you

toward the cold stink of antiseptic and steel,
the rush of light and sound that waited.
You seemed to know, and even when every inch
below my heart squeezed, you fought to stay.

That single instant we split in half
and you were born a girl-child, quivering
as I breathed for you one last pulse of the cord,
I saw your beauty, streaked like sunrise
in all the colors of morning glories
and your face was my face, twisted
like grief, your first frightened cry, my own.

for Jeanette

Showdown

Grounded to her room, my daughter shook out wings on her way up the stairs, spread them at the window, then bailed out of childhood in freefall, an evolution of will I caught by chance as she sailed off the eaves to the back lawn, a flash of color filling ten empty feet of air, and gone. Captured two blocks from home, she weighs my invitation and shrugs, folds herself, clipped and calm into the car, surrendering nothing on the short ride back, discovery defined in lofts and curves pulled sharp as sealing wax, solid as new muscle, as final as that.

There will be no humble retreat from this one, no return of the martyred princess who drifted through past trials with great show and moderated sighs. At 16 she's grown a first way to leave, and I find it impossible to choose between fear and pride at her poise, this defiant crossing of lines that separate a mother and a daughter, stepping into power she's pieced together from scraps of mine.

Right now I can imagine

no ritual of distraction, no moving on
to other things with this near-woman
caged in my house, cocked and sure
on her feet, bangs spoiled stiff
over eyes that measure me
by inches, this
girl, pacing by the window, turning
to stare outside, leaning to touch
the pane with no reflection, no
backward glance and nothing
but time, spinning, loaded
on the tips of her fingers.

Opening Day

From the bleachers the view is apocalyptic.
Fielders throw mitts and kick the grass.
Basemen collide and fall. Fathers
scream rules through cupped hands,
and the worth of a small boy hangs
by one bad call in a field of values
that function like religious belief--
a collective faith in tradition,
in rumors of old miracles. First inning
the pitcher is sobbing long before
a thirteenth runner slides safe
to home plate, and his coach paws air
as if to bury the outfield, or, god-like,
pull a pattern of stars from the chaos.

Love affairs between games and men
produce ten-thousand things
from elementary particles. Call it
sand or grit or backbone, whatever
makes the boy a man, it's meant
to toughen the sons of mothers like me
who feel the weight of every dropped ball
in the slack of their bellies. Mothers take
what we're given. We grow flesh
from flesh to make boys, and whatever luck
is born we carry long beyond
a limit of innings.

Our sons step up to bat, jaws set,
scared pale, and in silence we watch
what we must, our love, a common prayer
rising on every swing. Ragged and radiant
boy, valiant in tears, we create glory
precisely for this: a heart
capable of transcendence, of loss.

Making Peace

Start with apples. Pick as the frost lifts
in a nimbus of crows and the orchard rings
with harsh predictions. Pick a dawn
when the children of three nations
are pulled slack from the same rubble,
when a crowd of gaunt Somalis tease
a pile of dead white men
and tanks thunder
in Russia. Pick
indiscriminately.

Take pale fruit from the shelter
of inside limbs, any warped, wasp-gutted
end of season red left hanging. Pick fast
from a bad perch in an old tree in the chill
of early winter warnings. Pick them all.

Call in sick. In Detroit, two boys are shot
in a game of Truth or Dare and a man of God
admits the rape of parish children. Wash the apples
thoroughly. Use the sharpest knife, open them
with slick snaps, pile them to the lip
of a four gallon stock pot, add a dash
of pure water and cover to hurry the fire.
Boil until the juice gutters and pieces
bleed together, until the bulk of it sinks
in the stroke of a wooden spoon.
Save the flesh in a clean pot. Bury the rest
trowel-deep beneath the asters. Water well.

Throw open the kitchen windows. In Butte,
a girl gives birth in a toilet and flushes
and flushes. Taste the sauce, determine
a ration of sugar, measure cinnamon
in a cupped palm, cloves by the pinch,
vanilla by drops. Jack up the fire
until the kettle ticks and the sauce rolls
with sores that burst and heal in dulcet clouds
of steam. Seal it all, then pour a cup of tea.
Sit where the late autumn sun will touch
the flawless lines of fifteen Mason jars,
capped and hot to the touch. Listen
for the kiss, the quiet straining
of lids drawn to the brink, quivering
until the first gives in and the others
follow like bells.