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### Letters home

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LETTERS HOME

By

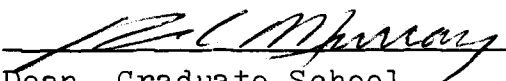
Judith Alice Hougen

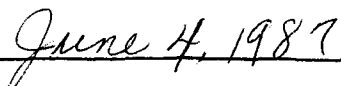
B.A., Bethel College, 1982

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
University of Montana  
1987

Approved by

  
Chairman, Board of Examiners

  
Dean, Graduate School

  
Date

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LETTERS HOME

Poems By

Judith Hougen

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The poem "She Spoke Of Tomatoes" appeared previously in CutBank magazine under the title "Tomato Growing."

To my mother and father for their loving support  
and to Carolyn, Dave, John, Mary and all who helped make  
a home for me and my poetry in Missoula.

SECTION ONE

## THE MAILBOX IN WINTER

Before the heat remembered to switch on  
my limbs bunched together like nameless  
fawns dreaming the clock-blurring hour  
of my father's coffee. My mind walked back  
to me slowly, a wide winter field, pocked with deer  
prints leaping towards the wood.  
My toes felt their way past the empty  
blue cups of hooves, following  
the click of dishes warming my ear. School  
mornings, before I knew anything, I drowsed  
beneath blankets thick as my mother's orange  
peel cradling upon her plate. Outside  
the mail truck creaked like new  
leather shoes in a fresh sweep of snow.  
The engine grumbled up to our box, idling  
till the think of the cold metal door  
scattered for good the rustling antlers.  
In flannel pajamas, I padded across the cool  
crack of linoleum beneath my double-socked  
feet. As I skated to the table, my father's boots  
tromped in the door, envelopes wedged  
in the mountain of his mittened hand  
kettle steam erupting from the stove.  
One more morning had given us back  
our names, given for winters later  
a ragged-edge stamp of memory  
for all the coming meadows of unbroken snow  
postage enough for mailing myself letters home.

## SUMMER ON LAKE MINNETONKA

## I

We put out in old Uncle Howard's pontoon boat  
 with a canary canvas roof.  
 I grabbed the rail, my neck swallowed  
 by a pumped-up orange life preserver.  
 The boat chopped frothy caps,  
 I glanced back--  
 the cabin, Bredeson Point,  
 that late summer greenery merged  
 into one long mess of shore.  
 I crouched down by one foot of the boat,  
 letting plowed slats of water  
 kick at my fingers.

My younger sister and I stood  
 ankle deep in lake, motionless,  
 minnows scooting around  
 our great, silent toes  
 or coaxing surface with midget mouths.  
 Clean peanut butter jars held wide,  
 we swooped like kingfishers,  
 scooping up a pocket.  
 "Judy, I got one!," she cried.  
 Uncle Howard allowed a nickel a dozen.  
 Unconcerned, they shashayed  
 in cloudy water, shining past  
 my glass magnified thumb.

## II

I plopped potato salad on my plate,  
 piled like the eroding stones  
 lining the Point.  
 Older cousins disdained picnics  
 and littered Bredeson's dock, edging  
 towards bronzedom. My older brother,  
 thirteen and glandular,  
 lay buried in the fraying hammock  
 eyeing the underwear ads  
 in the Ladies Home Journal.  
 Bob Bredeson strolled over,  
 waiting for a new load of rock,  
 arms crossed, determined to stone  
 each slap of water,  
 the slow ransacking he could never stop  
 and never quite forgive.

(Stanza break)

Bass, northern, walleye.  
 Daylight, 1969, my sister  
 and I hold humble poles,  
 baskets meager with perch and sunfish,  
 dreaming of a meaty tug.  
 A granddaddy bit at dusk,  
 whacking us with water  
 as I strained him to surface,  
 a long whale of a thing,  
 a spit up burst of beast,  
 spine fins spiked out,  
 tail hacking air,  
 re-swallowing lake, indignant,  
 jaws jerking line, snapping off  
 the bamboo tip of my rod.  
 My sister ran off the dock shrieking  
 and wouldn't swim for a week.

### III

Great Uncle Howard  
 paid two hundred thousand  
 to remodel his cabin two years  
 before brain cancer.  
 Last time I saw him  
 half his head was bandaged, safety pins  
 holding the bows of his glasses  
 over mumified ears, hoisting  
 a clumsy smile no longer  
 of this world,  
 the old dance of his long  
 hands adjusting  
 the pontoon's skewed canopy.

At evening, Mother ferreted out her own,  
 found me in my grass-kneed jeans,  
 brown feet in P.F. Flyers,  
 fingers carefully tightening  
 around pancake rocks  
 skittering black on Minnetonka.  
 Her hand nuzzling into mine,  
 chill air sifted over  
 our salty skin.  
 We navigated towards  
 the single porch light  
 as a dark, mammoth sound slapped  
 head first into stars,  
 the stony fish eye  
 watching us breathe, rise, drown.

## COMING OF AGE

We skidded up in late afternoon  
to the lake cottage  
hot, steel bucket in the back seat  
bulged with wild strawberries  
the cologne of July  
in our full blown hair.  
Engine off, the day  
squeezed close again  
like the sweaty arms  
of my old aunt  
damping our clothes dark.  
The women buzzed the bucket  
to the kitchen  
in a rush of blue aprons.  
I dug out the hulls  
green hats flopping into the sink  
my mother's words rising clean  
as the scent of fresh tableclothes  
snapped open in the dining room.  
My nails, hemmed  
with russet horseshoes  
remained unscrutable for days.  
After dinner, the berries  
baptized in heavy cream  
dreamed in our mouths.  
We relaxed in a humid breeze  
barely breathing off Minnetonka  
the sky sinking into a last  
cup of lukewarm coffee.  
I was twelve, growing up  
old enough to sit amid  
the women's tribe  
in loose, poppy-print dresses  
and red-faced toenails.  
Mosquitoes whined past our ears  
in a heat evening couldn't shake.  
In our patch of porch light  
I learned the dark postures of grass  
the lost sound of waves  
voices I could no longer see.

## SHE SPOKE OF TOMATOES

June, they'd arrive in the driveway,  
jungled in the trunk  
yawned up to divulge a hundred  
dumbfounded flowers  
suddenly famous with light.  
Mother pounded down stakes,  
smiling, shredding  
a loud daisy print dress  
worn ten years ago.  
Drenching holes all afternoon,  
she smoothed out the roots in mud.  
By July, they'd punched out,  
fists that woke hard and green in her palm.  
Mid-summer brought a ritual morning hosing,  
souping each plant till cracked ground  
remembered again how to drink.  
She burlaped them in September  
from mean arguments of frost  
and Canadian winds.  
Come harvest,  
tomatoes lit up the kitchen counter,  
gorgeous redheads scattered sexy  
at her elbow, picked  
when ripeness most approaches speech,  
when her low garden whispering  
swelled to a perfect answer.  
They were mother's pumped-up  
opinion of summer,  
a private conversation rowed  
on the brown windowsill,  
what she and the sunlight  
said to each other.



## LEARNING TO DIVE

My toes twitched the air beyond  
the redwood planks of Bredeson's dock.  
The damp tulip suit plastering my body  
made sleek the steady concentration  
of my back hooked over Minnetonka.  
Form was achieved in an afternoon  
but it took a long time to teach  
the body to tip headfirst  
from the solid, let go the bad stare  
of the drowned fisherman  
who floated in to me like a water lily  
with white, rain-clean hands  
softly bumping shore, arms rocked  
in a limp hug of lake.

Half the summer  
my flowered belly banged into the lake until  
I was sore enough  
and willing to give in  
to the unsteadiness of water  
remembering high cannonballs, the thump  
into sandy floor in a slow motion  
undersea movie dazing  
the brain to not know up.  
My legs bent slow  
the smell of seaweed darkening my hair  
like a field for sunfish to walk.  
The soles of my feet peeling up  
from the dock, lungs locked shut, I watched  
my wet shadow scatter gnats.  
My head tucked for the first  
breaking of water, hands pressed  
white in a prayer that my arms  
would row me back, shoulders embraced  
in a cool breath of sky  
my chest a bloom of new air.

## THE ANNUAL HOUGEN STRAWBERRY FEST

Small, deep flame, ready in my palm  
poised proper as a girl in church  
tilt your warm ear, keep time to the thick  
thick plucking you into my cardboard box.  
Picking since nine, I squint  
as shadows shorten up into a humid noon  
that damps down my temples.  
I think about the next three days  
face pressed to the pink breath of preserves  
that will ring in nostrils a week.  
Sealed with a thick fog of wax  
jam enough to make me forget my knees  
aching blind in top soil, Carver sun  
puncturing my back. But now  
my berry-creased nails pop another  
into my hand. June ruby  
craved till my tongue  
juices to the right pitch of crimson  
till our voices agree  
and I leave, my box thirty pounds full.  
What summer had said straight out  
in mile rows boggles taste buds  
rusting forever the lines of my hand  
that lifts one more, desire dressed  
in a hundred seeds, crushed fist over fist  
down the good red muscle of my throat.

## LAST LIGHTS

I surveyed my sister from the beach, three years smaller than me, launching a suspicious smile a hesitant wave from waist deep water. It meant she was peeing in the lake again. There wasn't a move I made she didn't broadcast for our mother, the annoying chihuahua of her voice crazed on all fours in my ear. My older brother lurked in a crew cut behind every tree. Lacking local boys, he taught he baseball. Strikes, balls, fouls, I couldn't get it right much less match the grace of his brown-armed swing. All afternoon, the eternal pitcher I bird-dogged balls in the bushes, a clumsy glove clumped on my hand. Come evening, we quested after fireflies drowsing in the backyard. We allowed my sister to tote the peanur butter jar with an ice-picked top. My brother and I trapped the bugs in our hands, depositing each glow with a quick snap of the lid until they were the last light possible. Downstairs on the kitchen table, they leaped and rested in darkness while we slept, constellations silently bumping glass.

## THE HOTTEST JULY IN MEMORY

Sweat and lake water juiced  
down the dark mat of my hair  
blotting the T-shirted middle of my back  
like an old map of July.  
I sprinted across the lawn  
after swimming with my sister  
my cool, raisined fingers jumbling up  
stones, wet-shined pennies and dimes.  
Circling my sleeping father, I watched  
his small breathing catch the attention  
of a handful of gnats, dizzy  
for the soft rush of the next breath.  
The old mountain of his body  
on the chaise lawn chair  
I wished to wake those eyes  
coined shut with huge, Old Testament heat.

After a too-much-fruit-salad-with-marshmallow dinner  
the adults sat bloated and spent  
watching the final bit of sky collapse  
into the molasses-slow traffic of waves.  
Unable to sleep that night, I lay  
on the screen porch daybed, a shoebox  
of rocks on the floor, dry and unbeautiful  
the hot weight of stars needlepointed  
in the wire mesh. I braced  
my palm upon the screen  
pressing the lighted stones against  
the warm lines of my hand.  
They were bright coins with the jingle  
of the authentic that could buy something  
beyond a stinking hot night, silent  
except for air sucked through the wet rags  
of my lungs, its sound clean in my mind  
and more and more a clear, fearful gift.

## NIGHTMARES AFTER THE HORROR MOVIE

Accompanied by the comforting  
cracks of the rocker, small bedstand  
light and her voice stroking  
a tired scratch of blond hair  
your mother reads you into sleep.  
Tonight, there is a darkness  
in your closet thickening into something  
awful. The blue-tufted, leaping lamb  
quilt smoothed to your chin will never  
warm you as before. Your ears  
prick past the story towards shifting  
floorboards, the chair dressed in dirty  
clothes shadowing up the wall  
stories with more believable plots.  
She trembles the air with fables, but  
her voice cannot follow your life  
behind the door you slowly close  
into sleep, cannot help leaving you  
mid-story, alone in a world  
without the wonderful ending, the one  
soft glow spoken for the deaf ears of night.

## MY FATHER HAS GONE TO WAR

A year's turning of knobs  
for brief, hourly news.  
Packages of Oriental dolls  
arriving in the afternoon mail  
wrapped up with stories written  
in a threatening tongue.

She'd wash, I'd dry  
poking a fistful towel  
into the single blue coffee mug  
pegging it beside the other  
dust tasting its lip.

The twist of the doorknob  
a man, a telegram, it took  
twenty minutes to  
tremble the paper apart.  
It only announced a baby somewhere  
but she cried anyway.

Her dreams snapped on, off  
like the bedroom light.  
All night in our separate rooms  
they bled on our front lawn  
the faces of men  
with astonished mouths  
shining in streetlight  
not moving  
absolutely not moving.

## TWO THINGS MY FATHER TAUGHT ME ABOUT HORSES

Giving a horse sugar or  
apple slices, stay on your side  
of the fence, clutching the gray wood  
rail. Bend your hand so it arches sleek  
as the body of a woman, thumb  
tucked like a board beside  
your fingers. The stallion's lips  
will thunder upon your hand  
blind in its dark creases and  
his hay-stained teeth, large  
as hammers, might mistake a thumb  
for a stub of carrot.

When gripping  
the reins, keep them taut. Stretch  
your arm like granite, jerk firm the left  
rein for left, right for right, wrist  
snapping leather, his jaw  
will respect you, even if you're one  
tenth his size. Especially on the blackberry  
road, nearing the barn at dusk, perhaps  
on a hot August evening, if the bit  
senses slack, your fingers resting  
on his withers, he may break  
burning for fresh oats and water.  
These things you'll understand better  
later. Horses can go crazy  
with a girl clasping the reins.  
Horses are always hungry.

## RATTLER

My older brother and I chased  
garter snakes that sizzled our back yard  
inking an S to the woods or  
snoozing through afternoon heat under  
the WELCOME on the front porch.  
Inspecting run over rattlers  
near the highway  
the tiny blade of his pocket knife  
scrutinized each knob of the poised-up  
tail, angles of surprised jaw  
the eyes popping towards  
the unappeasable Augusta sun.  
When we finally blundered into a live rattler  
I saw fangs jump from startled razor grass  
exploding into his calf. Two bad  
kisses of blood carved down his ankle  
screeching our brown stationwagon away  
gray exhaust chasing out the tailpipe.  
Later, wrapped in his red terrycloth robe  
venom still fogging his veins  
he raised the right leg  
of his ducks-in-flight pajamas  
to show me. The V of his fingers  
straddled the puckered bite  
rubbing as if to erase the wet teeth  
of the diamondback. I lay awake  
that night, seeing the wound lobed  
on the ceiling, sniffing out  
the white shiver of my skin  
like a knowing that would someday split  
the grass, lunge into one grip of four wicked  
arms and spit me back, stumbling alone  
in my own blood, doomed and changed.



## BULLHEAD

I gripped the dark body  
powerful, heard the hook  
awkward in his guts  
a thick stab of whiskers  
stinging the smooth  
skin of evening air.  
Black fish  
eel dream bashing  
blind the shallow waters  
of sleep all summer  
tail beating dock  
each night for breath  
sucking the wet light of stars.  
I snapped open my pocket knife  
with a potent click  
I sawed that line  
clean below  
the sinker till you  
plopped into the huge  
fist of lake.  
Speaking a thin plume  
of blood, you swaggered  
near surface, then twisted  
deep into water the color  
of your death, reflecting  
my face, big as the moon.

## OBSERVING THE BEHEADING OF LADY JANE GREY

After a painting by Paul Delaroche

Blindfolded  
your hands falter  
short of the block  
fumble with damp Thames air  
strange in the distances  
that grow huge without sight.  
A rope of hair twists  
down one shoulder  
the bare throat's glow  
and turn melting into  
the gentle connections of spine.  
Cloak folded aside  
your lungs tire like  
unbelieving sparrows  
beating your ribs for rescue.  
Women in the corner  
buckle with grief  
you listen  
the scent of straw stronger now.  
Your arms like thin  
doomed wings step  
off canvas, anticipate  
forever the simple lean  
into darkness  
the sweep of fingertips  
reading like braille  
my face watching  
the cold shift  
of the headman's feet.

July. Breezes tease the drapes.  
Sunlight warms  
its bright packages across the rug.  
My morning coffee drifts into a wish  
to be where blood scooted  
through our hearts  
with quick, narrow hooves  
in the back yard  
grass in our hands  
flung into the old, blue gift  
of sky, rising  
above my face.

That evening, the last breaths  
of lilac cooled the air.  
I crouched behind its hundred hands  
hiding in a game. The lilacs said  
we have gobbled up all the light  
and the night tasted just like  
tangy soil that foldled  
its dark way out into a rich  
purple foam, fat with a last  
swallow from the empty bowl of sun.  
When I was eight  
I wanted to say  
this, this will never end.

Lately, in dark morning mirrors  
I notice my face  
half-lit with light from the hall.  
The seriousness surprises me  
the eyes set deeper than before.  
Fingers gliding down my cheek  
I remember the twitch of curtains  
the huge air of my bedroom  
at dusk, the scary black cracks  
of closet doors that I believed leaked  
into the whole house while I slept.

I watch my coffee smoke into  
dust-spangled air.  
Relaxing on the carpet,  
the sun stretches across blue fibers  
and dozes in the slow grain  
of what has lived  
opening a box wrapped up in light  
I examine a laze of milky air  
powdering from a window.  
I'm growing old this morning  
we all are, realizing what sharpens  
with age, startling at such

strange, radiant gifts, when  
for the first time, fingering  
through gray miniscule  
coals of our lives,  
we see exactly what we're breathing.

## FAMILY PLOT, NORWAY IOWA

Beneath horses and the sound of horses,  
 in October, Iowa prairie walks  
 past our lives  
 into horizons of broken corn  
 stalks and sky.

In the first cold smolder of dawn,  
 we brush back the red sleep of leaves,  
 fingers reading hard-cut  
 hundred year old words.  
 Christine's stone forehead  
 barely juts above the soil  
 her boys grew up to break,  
 spit out, slap from dark overalls  
 at evening on the porch.

Erik, Hjalmer, shhhh, clear your eyes,  
sleep a dream  
of your father in morning light.  
When you weep  
it's like the break-up of hard winter,  
hard, hard winter.

Huddled like wheat sheaves,  
 we imagine their eyes, hushed  
 shut decades ago, bulbs  
 that will split blind in spring.  
 Their thumbs and fingers  
 sift a cup of good soil,  
 hunger to plow fertile ground.  
 Our breath beats air with fists  
 that blue and blue and vanish.  
 The sun rouges our faces,  
 strength enough still  
 to warm the winter barns.  
 Through the steam of trees and fenceposts  
 shadows, sharp as hooves,  
 stretch from our heels.

Listen to Mama,  
the wind flapping in the shutters  
is only talking our names tonight,  
Hougen, Hougen. The only happiness  
in this world is to have cried many times.

SECTION TWO

## THE RAILROAD CHILDREN

They dream the darkness  
dull, coal-heavy, packed on  
the twelve thirty-six their father pilots  
to the stars held between the tracks.  
The glob of headlight rattles by  
their beds, lifting a million  
crossties all night slowly  
as if a gift. Breathing  
its own shadow  
the engine leaves a sad  
voice whistling the porch  
like a man in tired, gray clothes  
they'll recognize come sun-rise.  
The children rock  
on those terrible, unliberated shoulders  
a quarter mile of unknown cargo chugging  
the thick metal of their sleep.  
In steamy train light, they follow  
their father's huge, white eye  
rising past a far off town  
one moon measuring  
the sad distances from waking to waking.

## FLAGMAN, NORTHEAST MONTANA

Quarter mile from jackhammers  
jamming agitated iron and wind  
in the old highway  
your sign seesaws in  
unequal gusts  
out to slug everything this morning.  
Your options are clear:  
SLOW, STOP--warnings, that's it  
with ten bucks an hour for bad arches  
and all the boredom you can stand.  
In the minutes between cars  
you can look straight into Canada  
Saskatchewan lining the north horizon  
the spine of other lives.  
At this distance, it resembles  
something heaped, pressed  
tarred into a look of permanance.  
Today, the wind rattles your clothes  
battering the spaces between  
shirt and skin until it's  
a concussion to think anymore.  
You learn the hard grasp  
and teeter of the warning pole  
wait the next car's  
deceleration into your life  
study your choices  
readable from a long way off.



## STRANDED IN HARLEM ON GOOD FRIDAY

For Mary

In a twenty mile radius of nothing,  
your Olds quits, bucks,  
quits, pitching  
into the crackling gravel of Harlem, Montana.  
I heave the hood  
and a nervous incense shakes up the flatlands.  
The engine you try  
moans with 128,000 miles  
worth of grime  
until we're only left  
the large nothing sound of air and us  
not knowing what to do.  
We bluster in the door  
of Wally's Cafe off the two lane  
where Doreen, the only waitress,  
eyes the Eastern in me  
with a careful, Hereford-like regard.  
In boots and a tooled belt declaring MARY,  
you take charge, ask for a phone,  
get wedged a larger slice of pie.  
Mustering conversation,  
we re-stack pink packets of Sweet'N Low,  
chat with our waitress  
about Wallyburgers versus the special.  
It is hard work waiting and hoping  
on a voice two counties away.  
I watch the dirt-bruised Olds out the window,  
thinking maybe this day  
will only seem like three.  
Kicking my rickety chair  
in reverse, teetering  
old wood cracking back to the wall,  
I see how I live  
balanced on two legs and blind faith.

## IN AIR THE COLOR OF GUNS

My two friends crowd into the only  
phone booth in Hysham, Montana  
thick glass warping the motion  
of their arms digging for quarters.  
In last light I feel  
my Minnesota plates growing  
larger, my fingers hook the wheel  
waiting. Everything's closed except  
a few tight-lipped houses fading  
around parlor lamps and two windowless  
bars at street's end signaling me  
with neon elbows. Pulp mill cowboys  
in pick-ups dog the boulevard.  
The one in the thirty year old truck  
swings by again, throned  
high in that bubbled forehead, growling  
the swelled snout of his Dodge past me.

Parked beside the only hotel  
advertised, padlocked years ago  
I am drawn to the dark glass of stores  
sinister with empty dresses and hardware.  
Air tightens to the color of guns  
and my clothes stiffen like nettle  
against skin as if they no longer  
recognize my body. My friends  
clatter back in, the man  
cruises on a third pass and slows,  
his eyes two crows clutching  
the phone wires. Through the steel door  
I can feel the itchy tap of his snake  
skin boots. Our tires grind out  
from the curb, spitting back  
gravel, those heels thumping  
dusted rubber, crushing out day  
like a last cigarette, the bird's  
black-necked sound cracking  
come, come, come.

## HOME FOR CALVING

For Kristin, Opheim, Montana

You quit the university  
 for March wind banging barn wood  
 causing a bad ruckus  
 that seems louder at 4 A.M.  
 and at this hour is not unlike  
 the clatter of cafeteria trays  
 in the mad exit for 1:00 classes.  
 In the lurch of a bare bulb  
 shadows seesaw up the walls  
 your own dark image  
 covering the downed yearling  
 in trouble with her first.  
 Arm oozed in to the shoulder  
 your cheek pressures the brown hide  
 twitching against your face  
 instinct teaching hands the brute  
 geometry of calf pulling.  
 It's worn muscle  
 alone that catches the slick  
 palm-small hooves lugging out  
 the new bull, bloody mucous  
 mucking past elbows, cow shit  
 ground into your Wranglers.  
 For no good reason, you want  
 to remember Machiavelli  
 and you try to think things to yourself  
 in French. The calf, your only grade  
 unfolds on the barn floor, shakes  
 his head, ignorant of everything except  
 tongue nudging the sprawled A  
 of his legs, the offer of a warm belly  
 and a dawn that dries him.  
 Out and across the yard  
 all you can recall is ou est  
le metro and ou est la toilette.  
 Chill sun cracks  
 beautiful over horizon, acres  
 of light sparking frosted wheat stubble  
 like a thousand candles. Joints aching  
 as if you'd been run hard and put away wet  
 you clomp up the porch steps  
 knowing damn well where the john is.  
 A last lick of west wind blows  
 clean away tired barn smells  
 tests muscle and tendon  
 the upright crust of your body.

## SUB-ZERO RUN

My skin is the thickness  
of red sweatshirts  
in a threadbare jacket of trees.  
Each aspen admires me.  
I'm the only pliable thing for miles,  
my blood a traveling circus advertised  
with my gray megaphones of breath.  
My feet crack quiet,  
crunching ornery snow  
like a language I invented.  
The jealous pond pretends not to notice,  
the water edge lipped  
like a thick-rimmed goblet  
of dark wine sworn  
to a trembling ~~se~~crecy beneath ice.  
My warm shoes, gumbo of smells,  
chase this winter  
dreaming of muddy, unknotted earth.  
Every branch marvels at my ruckus,  
their old woman fingers cup over the path,  
crave the quick flame of my passing.

"MUSCLES". HOUGEN COMES OUT OF SOFTBALL RETIREMENT

Years ago, I was so lovely  
at second, diving for the fly in the ninth  
kneecaps pounding packed infield in a hard  
tumble, raising a pregnant glove above  
my grimed-out body. A play so solid, you could  
display it on a coffee table in your head  
for days. My left hand is again an elephant  
ear of old leather, a second set of hot dog  
bun fingers shined dark and smooth in spots from  
a thousand line drives to right snagged  
on the bounce or plucked like an overdue apple  
from flight. These days, it's difficult to cash in  
my body for trophies. The nights are long  
hot baths and "Liniment" Hougen  
smells more and more like my true name.  
With my knees two small sloshing buckets  
of pain, I stalk the second base line, spit  
for effect, crouch down with palms against  
patella and wait the play at second  
that's still second nature. Left foot  
on the bag, left arm stretching  
for the grass-streaked splendor of the ball  
swacked to left, I brace for it  
lean every bone towards the catch  
the chance for one thick  
leather hand to reach into that much beauty.

## NINETY-FIVE DEGREE RUN

"They saw that the fire  
had not harmed their bodies,  
nor was a hair of their  
heads singed..." Daniel 3:27

As if Nebuchadnezzar raged again  
in the boiled soup of my blood  
my clothes do a damp, flimsy smolder over skin  
past grass sucked to straw  
and the pious jitter of mantis.  
The day is a furnace heated  
seven times normal  
and I run the miles unburned  
Shadrach in blue shorts  
oven-fried air in aspens limped down  
in worship of their own shade.  
The hope boned in my legs  
is strong as Meschach's  
making my heart a greasy-hot engine  
that could burn anyone's tampering fingers.  
The pond drinks itself green  
with a wide, unquenched mouth  
the edge hemmed with cattails  
waving a weak banner of surrender.  
The hot traffic of my shadow chars  
a cadence down this path  
about to brighten into flame.  
Pounding the heat, my shoes  
carry me fireproof through the world  
the coals of each hill, lost  
in the motion of prayer.

AFTER TWENTY YEARS, THE STATE FAIR  
FINALLY UNDERSTOOD AS A MASOCHISTIC EXPERIENCE

It is not a moral thing to be gorging your third basket of batter-drenched, deep fried cheese curds at the Minnesota State Fair in the late August of your life. But it took twenty jam-packed minutes of breathing humid second hand air for your turn to come, watching half dozen sweaty teenagers hoist out mounds of the spiked and spitting curds, nearly alive in five hundred degree oil. So you sit alone on the curb outside the Food Building surrounded by a hundred thousand people dressed like Jamaican jungles and love how those golden cracklers almost match the beautiful, non-Norwegian brown of your skin. You want it to always be this way: the crisp fritters ascended to lard-glossed lips, the lovely cheese oozing out just for you. Each one funnels down through thin shoots of capillaries and sets up housekeeping in major arteries but you don't care, you really don't. We all live for a moment in one good piece of shade, feet planted in a littered gutter when one hundred thousand people are as unimportant as confetti and basket number three is piled up and all yours. Maybe you'll never leave this curb, this calm eye of state fair storm where life is a hot, limitless chunk of potential. And even with the final batch already reupholstering your aorta, stomach vying for the green of your shirt, go on, chew another nugget! Swallow the last little heart stopper, realizing how you'll feel by the time the Midway lights flick on, knowing by then all about the bass drum band marching through your gut, your new definition of regret.

## WHY THE YOUNG GIRL DREAMS OF HORSES

At meadow edge, fetlocks dressed  
in jonquil and shooting star, he shakes the proud  
trumpet of his head and gallops  
the girl to the other side of her life.  
The black mane cracking with wind  
is a ribbon he offers the girl  
shining between clutched fingers. His shoulder  
muscles rumble up bone like dark  
fists in a new rhythm that percussions  
her shins hard against packed ribs.  
The girl's cheek burrows against the stallion's  
neck, listening to the strum of wrist-thick  
tendons, his pulse like a mallet  
in her ear, pounding her into  
a music she's never before heard. In the sun,  
his moist muzzle gleams and his eyes  
are two dark water ponds she'll drink from  
someday. But for now, it is enough the warm  
voice of the wind in her mouth, her hair snapping  
back like a banner from her neck. Soon,  
with knees still wobbling in time to the ride  
she will ease down from the saddle, the smell  
of leather wound around her hand, and her feet  
will dance in one unsteady moment upon  
earth now singing the endless flute of her body.



## DRIVE TO FLORENCE, JUST FOR PIE

For Dave

Twenty miles and three brawls  
with Dave's old Volvo that shimmies  
down the Bitterroot till it kicks up  
gravel shoulder, skidding us  
to the door of Glen's Cafe flanking 93.  
Mrs. Glen plates up a piece each  
adds cold vanilla to nuzzle  
our wide wedges of heaven.  
I'm not Montana  
but I decipher the lingo  
of this crust and slow teasing ooze  
hot enough to warm your vertebrae  
a week or three.  
I dig away at this cherry miracle  
gooey plasma, sweet guest of my lips  
while Dave forks through a melee  
of mincemeat, room enough  
for two more slabs of the Promised Land.  
Our moist forks cluster stray crumbs  
until stars start to shoo us home  
in our yolk yellow transport  
where I, one pie-happy Minnesotan  
scoot a little closer to this Missoula man  
his face kindled in a long savor of moon  
riding the fine memory and last slice glow  
of sunset rhubarb, darkeyed sweet with raisin.

SOUPMAKING WITH THE MAN  
WHO DOES THE SHY TUNA

For David

Full October moons of carrot,  
celery's weak crescents dumped  
in the orbit of chicken steam  
and here I am,  
your unromantic rose  
working the stove,  
balancing out everything  
in a gray bloom of broth.  
A sting still half-moons  
my left index finger knife mistook  
for onion, shut up  
to a buzz saw grin.  
You carve down wheat bread,  
sweet, careful slices padding counter,  
I fish bay leaf  
out of this simple gold sky.  
A cut on my hand,  
a bruise on yours,  
look at us David,  
two-stepping linoleum to the tunes  
of sage and basil.  
The old, welcome place  
of your smile opens,  
it means contentment, yes,  
the quiet simmer warm  
in our stomachs all night.

## AT CAROLYN'S

Mad at your landlord about the chill,  
you flip the oven-dial  
to four-fifty and open it,  
electric coils thrilling to orange.  
I've lived too long lately  
in the weary cold of the world  
and I want to winter in the aroma  
of gray wool socks steaming  
in your kitchen, do you mind?  
We scoot our chairs closer,  
my red hands rooted around a mug  
of smoking Cinammon Rose.  
Heat burrows till my kneecaps  
glow like candles. We ease  
shut our eyes, laughing with a warmth  
we can't borrow from any stove.  
A good fire walks our marrow, steps  
down our bones until it's frictioned  
in the twitch of thawed-out toes.  
Talking together, I nearly believe  
the core of the world is a molten  
million degrees right now.  
Canyon wind wallops on the door  
like an old, impatient man.  
Sitting in the mouth of your oven,  
heat coaxes blood back to our fingers,  
shivers our faces  
with a soundless roar,  
dazzling the hairs on our skin until  
perhaps like small animals  
we will age a winter  
and rouse amazed in new bodies.

## BEBOP DOWN TO THE CAR WASH BOOGIE

Yeah, Mary, early April and seventy cloudless perfecta-mundo degrees in your 69 Olds 98 you haven't so much as spit on since October, cruising down to the All American Auto Wash like it was Mecca on a Friday afternoon with Dan Seals singing I'm not after your body baby, I just want you to dance with me so sincere you about kiss the radio. You are the biggest dancing fool I know, Mary, doing the Lindy down to the All American Auto Wash with crooning Dan and me in mirror shades playing a wicked air guitar passenger-side. What else can we do? This cowboy wants to bop with you baby all night long I want to bebop with you baby till the break of dawn.

Bumping down Brooks we screech up in the Auto Wash driveway by the high powered (yeow!) vacuum for the simple subtraction of paths of crumbs and smushed boxes we've stomped on all winter or lost beneath the seat: Better Cheddars, Nilla Wafers, Cracker Jack, Cap'N Crunch, Ding Dong wrappers and three dozen Diet Pepsi cans. Like those German kids who left a clever trail we've driven our way back from zero to the car wash line. Radio up another notch, sunning on the hood legs crossed, the white bone of our ankles wagging to so much music. Mary, this day adds clear up to infinity. Believe me, the numbers inside don't end, they never, never end we could spend our lives trying to count this high.

ATTENTION: ATTENDANT HAS ALL SALVAGE RIGHTS

For Dave

The concussion of the pick-up over no  
road at all jolts in time to your C&W  
on the A.M. wailing up the hill  
to the B.F.I. landfill, flatbed loaded with  
junk, garbage, whatever wreckage  
we've made of our lives so far.  
Near noon, putrid mountains  
sizzle to a gumbo no crow for ten miles  
can resist. An old man with a rotted  
melon grin folds your check in half  
jams it in his shirt pocket and waves  
us to a fresh heap. Tailgate down  
the truck backs through a sharp flurry  
of horseflies with large, green-metal  
bodies and we shove out  
the cardboard boxes and 30 gallon bags.  
Upright on the grooved metal, we listen  
to our debris swish in a slow rolling  
decline, watching how sun can spangle  
expanses of trash like fields of our worst  
selves scraps of love lift to light.  
Jarring down the hill, we abide the rubble  
always in the back yard of our nature  
the sewage of a thousand people's lives  
choking the cab, stinking louder  
than the radio. We glance gack  
as a Caterpillar levels the mound  
scaring up a hundred junk yard  
birds, a black bouquet thrown up  
and over our heads catching Mickey Gilley's  
first smooth percussions of "Stand By Me."

## KAFKA IN A LATE MARCH SNOWFALL

I clack a frost-furred package of chicken  
in the sink to thaw, one hunched-up  
shoulder wedging the phone to my face  
consoling you because you cannot  
understand Kafka this quarter. Out the window  
patches of smoke inhaled by the sky  
breath back a little more snow.  
Yes, we're always given more cold  
than we ever ask for, but Kafka  
was crazy, I say, and is best read in  
the middle of June with all the lights on.  
It's hard, tulip greens tucked against the house  
chilling to a painful leather, the sad plod  
of cars through exhaust-colored muck.  
The only thing defrosting today is dinner.  
Still, even this slush will sink, page-white  
into a gumbo of earth that will suck  
our shoes and dry holding our joyful  
steps home. When spring is only  
a calender photo, seek the smaller  
metamorphoses, perhaps in a snow  
dripping down the gray forehead  
of an afternoon when Kafka strolls through  
your life. Perhaps alone in a warm kitchen  
sliding fingers down a plastic-coated  
bundle of chicken, glad for how it is wet  
shining and melts with a hundred slivers of ice.

## THE RAIN OF LEAVING

Believe me when I tell you  
I drowned last night  
in the rain of your leaving.  
Sitting on the curb today,  
waiting for a bus in a downpour,  
I smell your beard  
in the dark flaps of leaves  
deep as orchids around my head.  
The cold drizzle  
of your name beads my lips,  
eases to my chin before  
the blind burst to ground.

This water belongs to me now.  
It will trickle down my shoulders  
and slip into my lungs forever.  
The air, weighted hard with November,  
perfumes itself with the exhaust  
of late busses, the ghost-breath  
of those that never arrive.  
Listen to me. My rain-creased face  
is the map to a cold country.  
But look love  
how in my pocket  
I have saved the first  
terrible bloom of your smile.

COUNTING THE PORCH STEPS HOME  
(For Grandmother Williams, 1890-1984)

38

From 87 on, she'd call me  
to thread her needles  
spray of light from the skinny  
brass floor lamp no longer enough.  
In the creak of parlor boards  
and restless curl of her tarnished  
pin-colored hair, I speared  
those eyes, bobbling them  
on a string, invisible as air  
until grabbed by a sliver of light.  
Her thick fingers sat  
disobedient in her lap, disgusted  
with a stubborn snake  
of thread, wetted  
aimed, 10, 11 times.

The clear I.V. bottle drips  
into a transparent tube dripping  
a thin, clean rope of something  
that will not help into  
the tender crook of her elbow.  
A stick of fluorescent glare  
above the bed crashes into  
every corner. Bruised  
blue veins of her hands  
trip over bones thin  
as sparrow feet.  
Face, fingers never let on  
half her brain  
has bled to death already.

On the gray porch  
we would strip  
down the luxurious hair and  
husk of sweet corn, pale  
in our hands as large, bubbled  
needlepoint. The porch air tasted  
of drying timothy and shuckings  
I plucked the few sticky strands  
woven between kernels.  
Sewing she could never finish  
lay in the hall closet  
folded neat in a blue basket.

I count her breaths  
carefully as if I could  
string enough together for her  
to wear and walk back to me  
on the downbeat.

(no stanza break)



My nostrils filter out  
nurses and urine until her life  
fills with one ragged sack  
of air never repeated.  
Sinking above vein-colored lips  
the scent of bread trembling  
in the distance, she threads  
the narrow gate  
and her fingers stretch like  
lean summer grass in  
this poem that desires to close  
with me hidden under the front stoop  
breathing the cool slats of sun  
counting her porch steps home  
but instead will stay with me  
at least one moment in  
the acid light of that room  
helping me to keep my lips  
pressed to the last warmth of her cheek.

## WORDS FOR UNCLE DAVID AT HIS FUNERAL

This afternoon, you're tanned  
as though you'd clipped hedges in the backyard  
all morning, and decided, strangely  
to nap dressed up  
perhaps bored  
by this room, the snooze  
of mahogany walls, Sunday bests  
embalmed with grief and relatives.  
I feel like a skirted statue  
young enough to be unsure  
of etiquette, sticking an inch  
from my mother's elbow.  
Mourners speak in whispers  
to temper this air  
loud with the uncertainty you advertise  
that will fill their sleep later.  
But what you and I have grasped  
is bigger than cemetery-gray angel wings  
fanning down doubt for an hour.  
Forgive us for living unaccustomed to it:  
the torn heart healed permanent  
in blue, inexhaustible rooms  
the waltz of your large hands happier  
than our whole bodies know how to be.  
David, I can run my fingers smooth  
across the thick-glossed oak.  
I can bear  
the stupored half-expectation  
your dark suit  
will inhale momentarily  
one hand lazily scratch the other.  
I know how I'll sleep tonight.

## LETTER TO KATE

For My Grandmother

It's ten years and raining,  
the morning paper gray-damps the table,  
the dry spot under the oak in back  
dwindles, the bark delicious and pungent  
as your old oak furniture,  
its huge, lemon polish  
hinting for hours in my nostrils.  
After three days of rain  
crackling the roof,  
wet fingertips stroking the panes,  
I come to the day you died,  
buried in well-shellacked oak  
like an untouchable ice.  
In rain that never stops  
I finish breakfast,  
a last gulp of coffee and rise.  
The oak that will bury me  
deepens in this weather.  
I walk to the kitchen,  
glide my hand over the cool counter,  
knowing it still grows,  
each branch crooked upward, reaching,  
it still grows.

## THE SECRET HILLS

Two hours out of Great Falls, Montana, the bus  
lugs up speed, grinds down into third  
for Roger's Pass and with the last  
of our egg salad sandwiches gone, we lean back  
into conversation, the stink of diesel breathing  
in our stomachs. The window darkens into a bad  
looking glass, a rush of sooty hills evaporating  
into rows of ghostly faces. I want to say something  
but often friends are only strangers carrying a secret  
the other can't live without. The pane  
etches our cheeks into warped stone pricked  
by the far off stars of homes and stable yards.  
Perhaps to be human means we can't see  
the hills held by windows, because  
it is always nearing midnight and our eyes  
are unable to penetrate the dim portraits  
windows hide behind. Like us, their loveliest thought  
peaks under a fragile sky alone. The secret  
hills inside every mirror lure us, disguised  
with out hair and our noses, the finest glass  
grafted with real silver and the most precise  
skin of mercury, so beautiful and specific  
we believe there are mountains shining  
in back of it. Leaning into a pearl-white  
rub of sky, we keep watching, needing to glimpse  
the shy country within the dark cores  
of our eyes, so that without knowing why  
we will think of ourselves as vast and amazing  
landscapes. I would be happy to give you  
just one small mirror for all the false  
reflections, one true looking glass, clean amid  
the darkened images rumbling in the long aisle of night.

## DESCENDING FLIGHT

For My Parents

The 737 rides  
the long mane of these clouds  
like a fearless girl  
fist full of tough hair  
nuzzling terrible air.  
My head backed against  
the plaid cushion  
I am the one  
your poet-daughter in this storm  
for whom you wished different things  
trying to come home.  
Coffee unsteadies  
in a plastic cup  
the sound of wind in my ears  
like cadenced muscle  
wrestling over bone  
until the snowy glow of Minneapolis  
cracks into view, a second sky.  
I know what girl wild  
with the scent of horse owns this field  
gallops the shadows by instinct.  
My suitcase loaded with warm clothes  
a few poems dangle  
in expectation for the incredible plunge  
into small, scattered beads  
of light, syllables  
I could jewel together  
for you to wear and be proud.  
You wait beneath my feet  
uncertain in the large lobby  
a private galaxy  
where an embrace that takes a long time  
will pack my ear over your hearts  
and the poem I write  
ends there after we say  
yes and love and yes.