

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA  
Edmond, Oklahoma  
Dr. Joe Jackson College of Graduate Studies

**Homecoming**

A THESIS

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

By

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Edmond, Oklahoma

2017

**Homecoming**

**A THESIS**

**APPROVED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

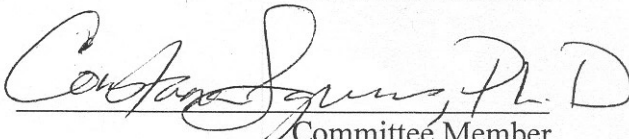
**2017**

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The poems featured in *Homecoming* are narrative, and are written in free verse, prose and lyrical form. This anthology of poems was inspired by Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, Sonya Sones, and Ted Kooser.

The objective of this project is to introduce readers to a town with a distinct landscape. The descriptive language and voice explore nature and its effect on a young girl as she relates to situations with family, society, nature and other elements. It was also important to communicate a universal theme of nature personified, providing a safe haven for any one, for any reason.

A major conceptual challenge was to let the poems come together in a way that is not forced by preconceived notions of what I think should be the focus or core. Some of the poems were written a few years ago, and after many revisions, it was satisfying to find the heart of the poem after stripping away the excess.

Strategies employed: I re-arranged my office to be more conducive to creative thoughts. Much research was conducted on technical/or non-technical names of plants, insects, locations, and other things, as authenticity was very important and key to the process.

The significance of the poems in *Homecoming* relates to familial dysfunction caused by mental illness. It is important to note dark, relational predicaments is not the only motif employed to communicate and create thoughts and ideas. When combined with nature; orange native stones, wild goldenrods growing in tractor wheels; hedgerows of Bois d' arcs, knee deep in blackberries, there is always hope tucked inside giving the audience a sense of optimism.

The contribution to the field is that within the thought provoking themes of home, there is a dual purpose; readers will look at mental illness in a different light. Poetry is one of the greatest communicators to make that happen.

*Homecoming*

For My Father

*Along the winding path, a swallow rings  
from the damp wooden  
siding of the chicken coups.  
Pasture breeze blows warbles and skittish calves.*



## Hawk Peak Ranch

I rocked rock crumbs  
in the pocket of an evergreen  
jacket. Inside corner seam  
held a dollhouse landslide;  
tan toy rock hiking path tokens  
taken from Pawnee Bill's Museum;  
portions of Miss May's ground  
for slow afternoon walks away from the mansion-  
cradled between my fingers.  
At the top of Bill's lookout  
tower, son William fell like a fledgling  
pushed from the brim,  
like when I was ten, almost tripped  
into frightened May's sod house earth  
floor, black bull whip snake sweeping  
dirt ate a bird egg whole.  
Later that year, the same snake I  
swore, chased a baby rabbit  
*Eeeing* down the middle of the road  
as I ran to the mailbox. Scissor-tails  
tapped my head, dusty hands prayed  
in my pockets.

## Black Bear Street

It was raining plastic  
and nylon.  
My wet Halloween costume  
stuck to my legs. Thin, translucent mask of a woman  
filled with running slobber--  
rubber band burned my ear, pinched my neck,  
but I didn't care. Wearing borrowed  
Cinderella heels, size too small,  
I clip-clopped my way up  
to Mrs. Reimer's—*every light in the house*  
*is on*--mansion in our mist.  
Three stories, if you counted the dark attic windows—  
empty black sockets, a face without eyes.  
I liked to ring the doorbell, pretend  
I was wearing the moonlight's pearls.  
When I leaned, it was stealing  
to glimpse the winding staircase--  
Halloween dream of movie stars, another world  
that wasn't mine.

## **Self Portrait: Covered in Amnion Sac**

I carried the newborn calf at dusk,  
its mother butting me with her wet nose  
and scratchy cry, there would be frost by morning.  
Urgency strapped the calf's legs to my arms,  
bumped me in the bottom every few steps,  
stayed my eyes toward the leaning barn, broken  
slatted corral, spreading low, vigilant prayer.

My father named the cow Guernsey-  
He named everything on the farm.  
Midnight for cats, Arkey, his best bird dog,  
and Queenie buried among pasture rocks.

I don't remember reaching the barn,  
I just see my father, his  
"let me tell you something" eyes,  
when he looked at the calf, another

liability. "Get the grain or she won't milk"  
chill in the air, frost on the bony fences  
with not enough life to hold 13 heads,  
now this one.

I wanted the neighbor's life  
with wild goldenrods growing  
in tractor wheels, needing nothing.

## Er Sprach Deutsch

Valentine's day in Pawnee,  
Oklahoma, cedar  
trees with too much sap,  
churches, schools, and rich houses  
made from brownish-red fossil rock,  
construction paper cut  
pink and red perfect  
hearts and art room scissors too dull,  
when I tried to cut a half  
into a whole, my lines crooked  
lop-sided, Mr. Hart  
the art teacher's heart unfolded  
had perfect cleavage,  
more perfect  
than mine. He drew lines  
without thinking, looking  
whipped his switch against  
the air, *whoosh* lifted my brown hair  
standing behind my metal  
chair I kept my neck lowered  
when he leaned close and whispered,  
*Dein Herz ist kein Herz!*  
Uneven failure for Mother.

## Suicide Hills

In our town hills  
were suicidal, threatening to jump like waterfalls.  
Down was the public library,  
Saturday's destination, departure,  
racing, zig-zagging, handlebars  
tangled in a ditch,  
steep climb all the way back up,  
past the Maltsberger mansion  
monstrous pillars; limbs of stone,  
silver-railed balcony boasting wickedness,  
people in white sweaters charcoaling  
hamburgers, placing them on trays.  
Down the road, we lived on a dead farm pretending to be farmers.

1800s birthed and born, five animal dwellings, an orchard,  
desolate now.  
Kids woke up every Saturday  
saying prayers, at the top, diving down.  
Hills blacktop paved smooth as putty,  
last two gravel, gravel the size of apricots and peaches  
with razor shaped edges.

## **Inception of Melancholy**

From Oklahoma in our pale Buick  
we rode beside moss trees to the broken  
side of New Orleans where it rained  
every day, even when the sun was shining.  
The sky was meaningless.

We visited cemeteries with graves on top  
of the ground, in lopsided rows.  
Hurricane Betsy blew out every window in every  
building. The broken, olive-brown elementary school held  
me tight. I was afraid of lunch, afraid of recess.

We checked in at the First Christian Church,  
didn't find anyone there. Unpacked  
at a yellowish duplex half a home,  
put boxes on half a bed, became half a girl--  
weekend site seer of Jackson Square, where  
every open door spilled naked dancing  
ladies, and rain soaked the moonless night.

## **Standing On the Cliff of Ten Acres**

Before bronze covers the ground  
like erratic severed congregations  
of oak, elm, and mulberry frowns

in fence spokes, pinched against

pink's dipping sun--  
before time traps idle yellow and  
dabs of reds so red the massacre  
complete, paprika unspools  
September.

## Farmhouse

Every time I smell wet plaster, it is 1964.  
My father is coaxing a huddled group to scrape  
five layers of century old flowered wallpaper  
from a wall in a farmhouse he bought the night before.  
He is energetic and hurried. The sun has already gone  
down and the lanterns are too close. Flames may burn  
the paper tails and feather-like hangings, abandoned  
plucks left by others before we got here.  
He shouts, "Scrape, peel, don't rip!"  
I'm six and wonder why my hands have to be so old  
in this place I don't know, with an upstairs  
I've never seen.  
It is winter. The summer frogs and crickets  
have gone underground. My breath is a white cloud  
that breathes but does not speak. I do not know  
rubbery legs will stretch and push across gray ponds edged  
with crowds of canary grass. I do not know their skin will begin  
to crack from the sun's heat, but they will fly and dive,  
become a darker, softer green. I do not know they will be my friends  
when the wallpaper is long burned, and the freezing water  
will no longer seep through my gloves as I pick and peel  
the paper like a peach, as he bends over a bucket washing  
green cabbage roses from his fingertips.



## Pawnee, Oklahoma, 1967

May poles  
    Black jack trees  
        Rabbits in cages  
            Dad and black socks  
                Pigtails, ponytails  
                    The cellar roof slide  
                        Composition shingles  
                            Asphalt fiberglass  
                                Like sandpaper  
                                    Slow growth of moss  
  Chickens on the sidewalk  
  Cages out back  
  Picnic tables  
  Puppies in washcloth diapers  
  Baby dolls I tell you  
Every four months  
    A whole new set of eight baby dolls  
        Bandages around my legs  
            All summer long  
                Every summer  
                    Because of the chiggers  
                        I couldn't stay away from grass  
                            Flopping and rolling  
                                In the Green  
                                    From dawn until dusk  
Scorching dusty fields  
    Burned to orange  
        These colors  
            My skin

## Annette

Burning with fever  
I tried to sit  
up  
on the cracked, plastic sofa  
to sip the orange bean  
soup she'd placed  
next to my head, but heaviness  
pushed me  
down  
air was heat, mixed vapors,  
natural gas rising  
angels from the radiator  
next  
to the sloped window,  
my lumpish eyes blind  
to her bending, pulling water  
up  
from the well.

## Bob Hilbert

Lived across the road  
In striped overalls, freshly ironed shirt  
Fishing poles  
Trapeze man walking the burning ridge  
Of our shake roofed burning down house  
Thought we were still inside,  
Our hero,  
Bait and tackle  
Fresh shave  
Where'd he go, during the day  
Don't know  
Maybe fished  
We played with his kids Michael, Rosette...in the mud  
Patches around his leaning shack  
German shepherds  
Bred  
One white with blue eyes, a snow wolf  
For protection  
One day we unlocked the grayest shed  
Stuffed and damp  
Every color spilled;  
Compacted flamboyant clothing  
All kinds, for women, children  
Where did they come from,  
Good Will? No good will in Pawnee  
Well in some parts, like Mrs. Gilliland, baked  
Wedding cakes with pearls on top, loved  
Everybody  
But the first Christian Church  
Pious pews  
Didn't like Bob when Daddy talked  
Him into coming to church with us  
Little ladies with netting on pinched, bowl hats,  
hissed and moaned  
"we can't worship with *that* sitting next to us!"  
Mama cried, never went to back,  
Bob wasn't sad, he saw this every day.  
Daddy tried to go back, talk sense and love  
1966, decade of Civil Rights rebellions  
Daddy wanted Bob to rebel  
But he just smiled and took care of his dogs  
The riots we saw on TV were far away,  
Not in Pawnee, where they should be.

## Medicinal, Grass Dance

Every year our relatives came to the Pawnee  
Pow Wow, weekend of 4<sup>th</sup> of July.  
Aunts loaded two station wagons full of kids  
drove to the football stadium,  
snapped Polaroids of the Pawnee Reservation,  
teepees, campfires, leather and costumes;  
burning sunset colors for tribal families.  
The only time we dressed anywhere near  
that colorful was Halloween.  
Foreign land, Black Bear Stadium  
became sovereign.

A huge circle formed on the field,  
swirling mass of bird feather reds, blues,  
neon oranges, royal indigo beading  
shaking mass of voices, bodies, bells ringing,  
jingling tomahawks, waste bands danced  
to the beat of drummers. Women wore eagle plumes,  
braided buckskin dresses, moccasins.  
Such beauty didn't belong in our dusty town.

I sat next to my aunt, a widow in black

still pretty, drove a powder blue mustang.  
Didn't smile, usually, but that night  
under stadium lights, pounding drums stretched  
her eyes to sky and stars, over the PA,  
*come, partake in the dance*  
she jumped, flew like a bird, leaving her sandals,  
barefoot on the fifty yard line, beaded women draped  
the long fringed ceremonial shawl, she bowed and bent,  
lifted her arms to a cantaloupe moon.

## Morning Chores

Along the winding path, a swallow  
rings from the damp wooden  
siding of the chicken coups.  
Pasture breeze blows warbles and skittish calves,  
leaving patties everywhere   purple blots the underbrush  
swaying with smashed yellow dandelions   unrestrained  
along the milking stalls, it's like this every year  
tracking the colors of spring, pretending I'm rabbit  
brush as orange as trumpet vines.

## **Bicycle**

In March you'd see them  
Pulled from backyard sheds  
Chains dragging, tires flat  
Spread out on driveways

Our legs pushed hard  
Faster than station wagons  
Freedom was the wind on our faces

Pedaling past the Municipal  
Hospital, round new green-  
Laced lawns as scissor tails

Chopped at the sky  
Harping their feisty language  
Stopping only to catch our breath  
Or call, "hurry up, come on!"

As the sun stampeded  
The elms: blacktop, tired pumps  
Aired like sad patients.

## **You Be the Children, I'll be the Mothers**

Pioneer women tangled buns  
like bird nests, holding hands,  
black metal grip.

“We will find the thieves!

Circle our wagons, there is  
blood at the bottom of this  
muddy, meadow road!”

I swore.

Skinny little sister, so thin  
Aunts said she had worms,  
looked at me like I was the seventeen  
foot bronze statue of *The Pioneer Woman*  
at the museum in Ponca City.

I shoved us off the top driveway slope,  
of steep sandstone mixed with dirt,  
we rode the spine,  
in our freckled prairie schooner,  
“Hold on for your life!”

Steering with one scraped knee bent  
against the rusted wagon, we flew  
across gravel, midday heat burning  
her bloody parted hair  
like a flame.

## Pilgrimage

Saturdays, *Flying O* red wagon  
Courthouse twenty-two steps  
Cannon  
Pawnee Trading Post  
Ten cents for turtles  
Turquoise picture windows  
Piggly Wiggly's  
Two cents for pop bottles, enough  
For cherry-ice at Rexall Drug tripped  
Down, up graveled suicide  
Hills, searching for friends  
Austin Banning's greenhouse  
Filled  
Sprouts of crossbred plants,  
Experiments  
Blew up one day  
So I waited  
For the smell of Sulphur  
To blow away  
Before I saw him again  
Trudged exploded, slanted sidewalks,  
Fence lined hedges I couldn't stick  
My hand through, the Poors' shallow ditch  
Held a litter of puppies  
Eyes still new,  
Wagon train pulled them home to washrag diapers,  
Safety pins on dolls with bonnets blue  
Trimmed in white, hair stiff with Dippity-Doo



## **Rabbits Speak**

I heard their voices  
when I was ten,  
under the sap and swing of  
evergreens,  
ears opened  
my eyes swiveled,  
there it was  
clear as sun—  
rabbit running down the middle  
of the road, eeeking, eeeking,  
hurtful as blood.  
I slipped out of the shade,  
saw the snake standing on its silver  
haunches without remorse,  
sliding here, then there,  
gaining on the gray rabbit  
quick as a car racing by,  
then gone.  
The cries faded somewhere  
out of sight,  
and I still wonder why  
I allowed such a death.

*We were ginger and orange native stones;  
quiet, still, like the dead aren't really sleeping,  
when my father climbed out of patrol cars,  
Pontiacs, and dented pickups, ticket debris  
blowing behind him.*

## Self-Portrait with My Dress on Fire

We could see the fire  
from twenty miles away.

Minutes before in Stillwater,  
the only nearby town with a sewing  
department upstairs,  
we had been searching  
for Easter dress fabric when my aunt came,  
led us out of the store.  
We drove back to our town  
silently, sitting erect  
in the back seat,  
as if sitting straight  
would make the fire  
go out.

I imagined  
flames darkening  
brass cornet, my sister's silver flute,  
the red cedar chest  
with my baby hair taped  
in pages of a book.

I got out of the car  
remembering the night:  
burning trash in the barrel,  
back shed,  
dumping uneaten food,  
paper, glass bottles  
never completely burned,  
other waste  
clung and stuck  
the rusted metal drum,  
feeling somehow like a slayer,  
I struck the match.

## Displacement in Turquoise

My father came home just like I knew he would one day, told us we were moving to Stillwater. I'd just started the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, didn't even have my period yet. "I got a job as campus police sergeant. We're moving on Monday." Seeing how it was Friday, my mind exploded, my pulsating heart splat red right there in our smelly kitchen with the basement door open just enough to let the mildewed, standing water waft up the steps, mingle with Mom's spitting bacon. "The house," *Here it comes, the house, another one that was going to be shiny and new and* "The house is nice with a fireplace and four bedrooms. It has two stories with a long staircase." I looked up from all the blood on the floor, "A real staircase?" "Yeah, honey, a real one." He couldn't be trusted.

## Permanence

Years later, I would read  
Austin Banning-Engineer died  
in his home, on such and such  
date at age fifty. Fifty!

He had such grandiose plans.  
The green house in his backyard  
full of plants, chemical experiments,  
how to grow a better cucumber,  
careful placement of insects on particle boards;  
his *Monet*, he would say.

Austin wore button up short sleeve shirts  
tucked in with a belt and penny loafers—  
the heart of perfection.  
He would never have to move,  
his parents were never home--professionals somewhere.  
Now that was permanence.

## Ghosts

The basement was always flooded.  
One time my father rented  
a clunky whirring machine  
with a long hose, worked  
for hours setting that thing up.  
“This’ll do it” he boasted.  
The only catch was it would take  
a month, (he wasn’t patient  
enough with gadgets) Surprise!  
Still always smelly! It was so putrid  
I wanted to nail the door shut,  
have a burial, burn it down.

I was always trying to fix  
the deadbeats. Painted rooms  
yellow, asked Mama  
if she would make a new quilt  
for the metal beds from grandmothers  
who’d died. She always hoarded  
fabric odds and ends, turned them  
into something decent.  
That room glowed after yellow paint,  
quilts with bonnets and tulips.  
Shiniest place in the house--  
even the ghosts would agree.

## 515 South Cleveland Street

Dreamed all night about yellow  
paint and white curtains,  
open windows to cover  
smells of flooded basement.  
Painted a scrounged rod iron headboard  
two layers of silver.

Don't know where I got the paint  
we seemed to always have  
in utility rooms, at the bottom  
of cellar stairs--painted and painted,  
slung flat sheets over roman shades.

Invited neighborhood up the alley  
for a tour. They all said I should  
be a decorator or something,  
I sure knew how to make a room  
look new.

The whack of Mama's slap  
on Grandma's face pushed  
our eyes to the cloudy carpet,  
"Leave! You don't belong here, Valla!"  
mama clacked. Dad was quiet.

We stared at uneaten chili on  
the kitchen table which was really  
a door without a knob  
Dad painted blue-green,  
left a hole for a cup holder,  
but all the glasses fell through.

## Valla's Roadside Diner

My father in one of his manic  
moods said, "We're going to buy  
that run down café at Bill's corner,  
renovate in the dark for so many months  
and name it after grandma."  
Grandma went along with it  
because she'd worked at the Waldorf Astoria,  
driven rivets in Waco during WWII  
when there weren't any men left.

I turned nine on opening day,  
wondered how many people would come,  
run through the door, smell hamburgers  
unwrap straws, enjoy new plates,  
white coffee cups, but the gut inside  
my mind worried, the one inside like when I was baptized  
and didn't remember exactly all  
the reasons why I was under water.

The booths were sure enough red  
like blood, we would be saved from poverty  
even though there were vegetables  
in the garden, only problem  
was the worms eating holes in the leaves;  
monarchs I half-heartedly slung in the wind

at sunset, a truck driver spilled  
his coins on the counter,  
only he didn't count because grandma knew him,  
his quarters' plunk too small: if they were fish  
you'd throw them back into the empty highway.



## **Valla Dacus in Pawnee Municipal Hospital after Remodeling Three Bedrooms**

One summer they swarmed the house and sheds,  
covered the surrounding fields for three months  
with thirsty crops waiting for harvest,

carnage in every nest box, broken legs  
antennae invading the faded teal bedroom chair  
that needed my grandmother's hands to upholster

tears with her missing index finger  
severed on industrial machines sewing  
canvas during the war, no one ever knew why  
or where it went, like how the ungraceful, copper bodies

crackled when we stepped on them,  
pausing a second for guilty memorials,  
pushed in the corner of a chalky grave.

## **Witch with a White Hat Watering Trees**

I couldn't stop coughing  
In the middle of the night,  
So you fed me whiskey with honey  
Pinched my nose,  
Held my breath: down you go  
Stainless steel tablespoon  
Shining at me.  
I dreamed of washing dishes  
That were shoes,  
On the rack in your room.  
Circular motions, I cleaned  
The air, looked up,  
As if you were there,  
Your black patrol boots  
I shined in the night,  
In my dream  
Couldn't stop Shining.  
Awoke on my side, heavy  
Chest hurting like a bee sting.

## Envelopes at Midnight

The hotel was really an apartment; we felt suspicious. Our father didn't speak in his usual night voice telling stories about stars, children playing on planets, moons. Bologna and Jiffy Pop popcorn scared us. We used dishwashing soap for shampoo. Our hair wasn't soft and Mother was quiet. *Mutual of Omaha, Checotah, OK*; sister's perfect penmanship. My father let me count one hundred dollar bills under the light of a makeshift dining table, with a crate and hassock for chairs. The unfamiliarity, kept us awake.

## After You Were an Arthur Murray Dance Instructor

He was a different man  
every day  
we kept our heads down  
until the atmosphere in the living room  
changed  
his mind sometimes, danced,  
waltzing us  
to television music.  
Fury poured  
with five O'clock news  
he blared, he knew, *he knew* what to do  
so we hid, bent down upstairs  
against yellow bed  
skirts  
or the window seat  
padded pink, blue  
curtains  
          blew  
              better days  
                  between  
our knees tight against our chests  
*tha—thump* let us know we didn't die.

## Father's T.V. Tray

### *Tet Offensive*

We were purple sandstone and fossil wood,  
quiet, still, like the dead aren't *really* sleeping,  
when my father climbed out of patrol cars,  
Pontiacs, and dented pickups, ticket debris  
blowing behind him.

Evenings, we might run across wooden floors  
waxed every Saturday, laughing, pretending  
to be sky hawks or dragonflies.

Or, we could be waist deep in marshes, like  
visitors in jungles somebody needed to save.  
Sometimes we scattered like rabbits through the blackjacks,  
  
depending on the war.

## Inception of Unfinished Business

I didn't see the hitchhiker's  
face because I didn't look.  
Just saw my dad's squinting  
eyes in the rear view mirror stare,  
looking at the road, then back again  
at the sweaty body next to me  
silent as summer heat.  
Mama murmuring, cleaning out her purse,  
passed us Juicy Fruit gum.  
We scooted closer together  
in the backseat, matching red  
shorts and blue sailboat tops  
formed a perfect firing line row,  
so slumped. I didn't hear his  
breath or voice, maybe he wasn't  
there. I just kept looking at dad  
in the mirror.  
"There were two prisoners  
escaped from El Reno last night,  
you look like em," he said.  
"I want you to know I have a gun  
in the glove box."  
We pressed our thighs closer together  
our hands crossed soft in our laps like folded napkins.  
Car rides to banks, nearby small towns,  
and trips to smelly Ponca City, oil refineries  
all a part of unfinished minnow farms,  
new ponds waiting for more water  
that never came.

## **Dogs Laying in the Pasture**

I used to hug my house  
in back by the collar,  
stretching my arms  
as far as the broken back screen door,  
my nose pressed against  
rough cedar that smelled like mint,  
the sun held my back. I ran to the shed

lost that day,  
cracked boards dying,  
paint peeling, more bareness  
than I wanted to feel.  
Yellow chicks circled beside heated  
lamps, trusting yellow feathers,  
the only shining thing  
between me and the sun.

I ran down the cellar steps  
damp pits, priming pumps,  
bare feet stood  
shallow dark pool, hurried,  
looking over my shoulder  
the dusty webs clinging to mama's  
fruit jars, the dark watching.

Guilt was a yellow make-shift door  
I couldn't shut. Rafters were skies  
with a million tufts'  
placid journey to God.  
Forgiveness wouldn't come.

## Boogie-woogie

I was thinkin of summertime, *June*  
then spinnin went I into stress---  
she might as wella tole me she was goin to the moon  
my mind was so obliged to obsess,

she was gonna slither like a snake  
away again, my whimpers became gobbledegook  
when she roared, "Eat your cake!"  
"you want a lickin! *I* heard the *ASTORIA* is a beaut,

like *GARBO!*"  
"I gotta train ticket for the 'four *O*'clock, so play  
and be thankin the *lord* you're not a hobo,  
tramp, or somethin. I tell ya, one day,

just like those high falutin dolls in the *BIG APPLE*, I'll be wearin *rhinestone*."  
And twirlin round, dress flyin, she filled the room with toilet water cologne.



## **Eating Grapes off the Wallpaper**

Trouble in California, too many drugs, John needed a new location, with blackjacks and terse dead apple trees. Our cousin from California was blood, wouldn't make a difference. Daddy said he was like the sons he never had. So like a premonition, John came with the summer. He came, bulldozed around our house, looking at himself in mirrors, especially the one on my vanity made out of plywood and whitewashed paint. Handsome like James Dean, but scary eyes like slits. We liked him, but we didn't. Wooden pipes, cigarettes, and magazines with naked ladies burned next to his bed. Daddy went away for a week.

One night, John took some cash from Mama's purse, jumped in our car that wasn't a race car, told us to get in, and we did. He drove fast, hollered with the windows rolled down, laughed and said how our town was "Dullsville," how we were just farm girls, even though our farm didn't work.

We held on in the back seat, as he kept on screaming in California, "You ankle biters better cool your chops." We told him to stop but our voices were soft like dusty yellow butterflies. I looked at the speedometer, 92 miles per hour going down all three Suicide Hills, we screeched into the parking lot at Douglas Country Store where every Saturday I asked the butcher if he had any scraps to feed the strays I hid in deserted cattle barns. Some would stay, but most were wild, would run through the chickens and keep running.

## Before We Lived in the Gray House with Asphalt Siding

Black burning ruffled plume.

Oxford gray covering blue whirled  
Sis's billowing curtains leaping  
trying to escape the upstairs window,  
*but flames hold gingham like a baby.*

And somewhere along ten acres, rabbits coughed,  
turtles sneezed,  
lizards and horned toads whipped  
underground, and across ten acres.

Locusts ricocheted, calves coiled,  
moored on wet hay,  
warbles retreated,  
golden dandelion faces pouted,  
pestered garden sprouted father's half constructed wind mill;  
frozen vanes, dry well, *blessed be,*

close by the back shed's wobbly  
door simply charred,  
I could still try to build a home on Saturdays,  
sweep the workbench with strange  
tools surrendered decades before  
I forgot to shut the rickety door  
and chicks died.  
I fell asleep against the trunk of a blackjack oak,

watching cinders fly.

## **Prairie Road Canopy**

Trees were sky,  
my father stumbled  
carrying cluttered sticks  
we used for kindling  
from the dirt well below.  
We'd loaded the truck, my pellet  
gun, shot a crooked line  
of beer cans off the rusted  
metal edges.

My father's breath,  
the only thing that didn't seem frozen,  
blew silver clouds  
against the background  
of black bark.  
The wetness  
from his last drink  
hung like frost on his mustache  
contorting his lips  
as if to kiss,  
but spitting gold pellets instead  
into the loading chamber  
of my Daisy BB gun.

His hands would shake sometimes,  
so I would cock the hammer,  
hold the barrel steady.  
Sundown flashed  
causing him to squint sitting  
against the slanted rails,  
our boots slung over the edge.

Dusk became darkness draping itself  
over his bobbing head,  
the heaviness of leaving  
pulled him near the edge  
dark-eyed juncos hopped low.  
the truck, like a patient nurse, appeared  
through foragers and underbrush.

I wrestled the grinding stick shift, my father,  
tossing my BB gun in the creek bed.

## Chipping Cement from Burnt Bricks

It was once a house,  
save a black Japanese coffee  
table with blue-green inlaid stones  
firemen had placed under our tree  
house, ropes from our swings  
swayed, winds blew, cedars sang,  
*We don't like to see you so sad,*  
*in turquoise.*

## Everything That Mattered

I kept your blue pillow case with the smell of your hair,  
oily and thick, wondered how long it had been  
since you'd changed the sheets, how long  
before your legs and suspenders tipped down  
in sad motion stuffing the tight entryway  
of a tiny apartment, disheveled kitchen with mismatched pots  
and two hundred dollars in a jar inside the refrigerator,  
a disappointed clock stopped at some point  
when books leaning on bricks and boards  
were everything that mattered,  
and plastic sacks held too many white cotton socks;  
(you'd forgotten that you bought a pair week after week),  
breathing containers that allowed you to inhale  
the musty plot of your dark living room as even now  
you dwell in a box on the top shelf of my pantry, a man divided  
into so many compartments.

*I could bolt myself to sleep,  
Sink into the slum  
Of black or keep moving.*

**Crash on Blackburn Bridge  
Christmas, 1965**

In the front seat of our 1957 blue station wagon  
I am six with the smallest doll tucked between my legs,  
my sisters' babies were taller, talking,

my father's curse, "You'll never be happy,"  
I swallowed like yellow penicillin that didn't cure  
the pus-filled sores that always closed my throat.

People fall away like a sister.

The stars were diamonds, breaking apart,  
shower of bright villages falling on my head  
against the blackness of childhood.

## **'74 Dissolving in My Hands Like An Eclipse**

Worms, shotgun cartridges  
crawling across the cement floor,  
golden capped rolling heads.  
I told you about the dream,  
you laughed like your flickering  
sunglasses. Porch chimes tanged  
under the neighbor's eaves, sun lit  
blue grass rode your feet.  
Earth was exploding with night crawlers,  
with beetle-back bands of color.  
I used to pinch worms in half  
for bait at Blackwell Lake,  
you weren't there.



## Self Portrait Searching for Spare Change

It's spring and my father  
is stomping around the screened-in porch  
looking for pliers and axes,  
like a nervous salesman, whole world on his head,  
tiny pins for clogged air guns  
rings for compressor hoses.  
Roofing season again,  
time to climb on top of houses  
in the March wind he hates so much,  
asphalt shingles slapping  
him in the face on sunny days,  
days he thought would be nice  
but never are.

I'm looking for a decent spiral notebook  
on the dining room table,  
pretending not to see his sweat,  
trying to find a few clean pages for English class.  
I'm rifling around for coins on the Philco  
radio playing "I think I love you, so what am I so afraid of?"  
If I'm lucky,  
I'll find 50 cents,  
just enough for a plate of fries at  
the Sirloin Stockade.  
Oily fries that make my face break out,  
my thighs rub together,  
and I'll hate March too.

**A Photograph: Lying on a Cot, Reading a Book  
Dog Asleep Underneath**

March, the month of your birth  
mother spilled water,  
poured you in the firmament,

oceans upside down,  
astronomy is a salty sky; your commandment  
I plant with your plow,

visit ponds you dug just deep enough  
for wandering seeds  
green foam; praying beach

to lay a head. now I lay me down,  
now I pass the nails to your giant hands,  
fingernails like tortoise shells,

where the moon laughed at your  
half-built planks and boards, minnow  
farm, finish the farm,

but grandiosity evaporates and  
pastures know purity's intent,  
only the one windmill

cooperated, circled in the breezes  
blew the gray water downstream  
surgically slit and stabbed

twenty acres wringing itself dry.  
Spell-bound, I tread the oceans  
tossing in your eyes, the undertow

of ideas, baptized, I watched you swim  
in salvation then turn and run; in a photograph  
to a cot in Guam.

## **Climbing Through the Window**

The second year after we moved I lost my key,  
climbing wild rose bush branches, speared my thigh  
my knee bumped an asbestos slate tile,  
clapping sound shaped it like a harp maybe without a stool,  
woodchuck banter swayed eight pecan trees, and

I fell inside with a broken view of, “first house  
on the corner next to the green Park Drive street sign  
with perfect metal siding.” Entire family turned that shack  
into a pink satin sheet. I hoped its spirit might float  
down the cratered asphalt, clench the broken pane  
tracing shadows on my face, track my daydreams,  
quiet heckling squirrels scratching inside the walls.

## **My Sister's Head Was the Moon**

My sister could smile and feel sad  
when the forgotten parts, dying bus  
dumped in the backyard  
faced her upstairs window.  
Boards and shingles  
rotting in their strangled  
state, broken and abandoned,  
stood like a monument;  
a place to think.  
She admired that great sadness in me.  
So I would sit, with twisted  
covers on my bed, listening  
to anything slow  
on my yellow Sears stereo.  
And my sister would smile,  
feel sad,  
say she had a headache,  
her head was falling off;  
hit the floor like rolling marble.

## **Patted the Window, Brushed it Clean**

We used to move  
more than anyone,  
so I learned  
how to try a house on,  
like a coat I had to purchase  
whether or not it fit—  
we could get some thread  
blot the spots  
breathe cedar  
wrinkled splinters  
porch cement, silk lining  
that cooled the uncertainty  
of addresses.  
The attic a musty hat  
blew the dust off,  
picked the paint from window frames  
buttoned the doors,  
locked myself in.

## Park Drive

We were always moving somewhere that was broken. The house on Park Drive was like a horned toad. If you looked at it a certain way, it wasn't dull and sandy, but sort of friendly, with green eyes and rose thorns on its back. It had a big yard with a creek and cattails even though the shrubs were messy and arched to the ground. The garage had a wooden balcony with peeling paint and black tar for the surface, lying in the sun was sticky...made us smell like gasoline. Sometimes our new friends would say we had a nice house until they looked closer, if they spent the night and saw how every room had little white ceramic gas heaters on the wall that didn't warm us at all. There was an accident once when Patti backed into one in the kitchen and her robe caught fire. The kitchen cabinets always needing new paint, would need more paint. They were never the same when mama chose avocado.

We'd lived on a lot of streets, Black Bear Street with the fossil rock pillars on the porch pretending to be majestic, and before that we lived on High Street where our dog that looked like Lassie went rabid so we locked her in the tool closet until the authorities came, just like Old Yeller. One time we moved to Abilene in the summer for two months because they had a storm. Daddy took a crew of men with holes in t-shirts smeared with black grease, cigarettes they called "smokes" in pockets, to roof houses. They stayed in a separate apartment but mama cooked them dinner every night. One had a girlfriend with a halter top that showed the sides of her breasts. This time, we had to leave Black Bear Street because daddy got a job at the university as a security guard.

He couldn't work as a roofer anymore because of his asthma. Besides, the basement flooded and was almost to the top of the steps near the bumping washing machine we couldn't catch. The house on Park Drive wasn't ours. We paid rent to the people down the street with the red porch and yard pinwheels. Before we saw the house, daddy caught us whispering about where we were going to move next, how ugly it might be. He barged through the door and said it was a nice place with gold doorbell chimes hanging on the wall right next to an entryway with a closet just for coats.

It had stairs and a couple of chandeliers, not like undressed light bulbs or stairs that lead to attics and basements. We'd have more than one bathroom so daddy wouldn't have to go outside when there was a line. Daddy said it would be the best house we ever had because of the eight pecan trees growing in the backyard, even though later we had to call the police because people with gunny sacks stole them off the ground. Mama hadn't seen it yet but she baked a lemon meringue pie anyway on the table made out of an old door daddy painted turquoise. Sometimes I walk to the creek at the end of the yard behind wild Joe-pye weeds and pretend I live somewhere else. But it only helps for a little while.

## Patti

we had a little sister  
and one day when she was four  
marching mad circles  
    in our old house we were ashamed of because  
    the man's house full of velvet was next door  
with a white curtain rod in her tight mouth  
pretending it was a trumpet,

she ran into the wall and rammed  
the sharp edge of that curtain rod down her throat,  
and my sister and I thought God was going to take her  
so we doubled over in the backseat of the car,

"Lord, please don't take our little sister today, she didn't know!"  
clasping hands, looking down, reverent and all  
until my mother walked out of the Municipal Hospital  
told us, "Patti can't talk for a couple of days and  
will have a sore throat for a while."

We took a long deep breath.

Think about calling her now, about her flying around Poland,  
Texas, the Taj Mahal,  
when we bend over the tub bathing my mother's  
deflated breasts and pencil eraser mole at two o'clock.  
    But she's still humming,  
    tooting her horn just like she always  
    did, do, does, marching a path  
    to get away from all of us.

1975

Winter was a desert,  
a lolling gold mine  
deceitful drunk,  
Uncle Jack drunk,  
11:00p.m. swagger  
down Lowry street,  
blind walk home,  
after visits,  
so long ago.

Night was sky,  
knew me.  
Blue was a pickup  
on snow and ice,  
headlights, spotlight  
for his wandering back.  
You were a voice,  
“Get the keys, take him home,”  
always just past the Stillwater  
Santa Fe Railroad tracks,  
where a train once came close  
as a mirror, passenger side,  
you were the driver singing,  
*Do you know the way to San Jose,*  
asked if it scared me, my answer  
blurs of hedge, bridge ledge,  
driveway slide, and  
winter was a drunk who needed a ride.



## **Sleep is three metal beds**

in a backyard like the three  
bears, first the coiled  
springs, then the dead  
mattresses, relief  
from summer's hurt  
the house's misbehavior,  
and God showing off ten acres  
of night.  
Not this frenzied  
right, wrong, brilliance.

## **We Were Town**

I speak of self determination  
where we splintered into groups,  
roamed Blue Hawk Peak graveyards  
of the Holy Corn, electrified sacred

bundles. How we searched for bones in grasslands,  
bleached shadows of future desperation. We could've  
foreseen all those babies being abandoned and scattered,

invisible burials. But never on the cusp, Dick Tracey Headquarters  
reduced us to a loud colored sign on the bricks of the  
Piggly Wiggly, where the flavor was cherry,  
constant plop of cherries.

So we stuffed our bras, and tried to forget  
the man exposing himself on the banks of  
Black Bear Creek and the sticky floored matinees.

And I told you we'd have a house some day,  
with a gate, in Italy, where the vineyards unroll  
their purple eyes while we used blue chalk for make-up, looked up  
to the night sky; the big dipper pours nothing.

Already to Lela, Oklahoma, we said *out of breath*,  
hadn't even reached any kind of ocean yet,  
what will we tell ourselves  
when there is Auschwitz

on the tracks

of every highway.

## Big Dipper Springlake Park, 1968

Embedded in Black Walnut trees,  
the wooden serpentine of its pinnacle  
poked at the sky in 1971. Before  
it was torn down, rusty blue rails  
for long lines leaned against a century of winds.  
The parking lot scarred with cracks  
tracked purple Bull Thistles peeking through  
the bent fence where wild eyes would wait  
for the last click before the big drop.  
It was the *must go to* place in summer.  
That amusement mania has scattered forever  
across the red hills, fallen down the Grand Canyon,  
washed to the Pacific, where wild rides last for only so long,  
white-foamed waves at the shore, come and gone.

## **Waiting for snow**

There is a drought  
dust on the boxes  
with hooks and bulbs  
pressed in paper a year ago

when there was an inch  
that melted the next day.  
You, eager with snow boots  
used only for infrequent  
mountain visits to Carson City,  
gaze through the window like  
a child.

I say the snow will come  
snow will come,  
just like birthdays reassure  
it's not a casual thing,  
the snow

falls through time,  
remembers  
windows wait all over the world,  
trusting eyes become frost and ice  
weighing the lines.

## Eyelet Dress

Tried not to breathe in my long, blue-green gingham homemade dress I'd worn to the wedding earlier in the day. He walked past the doorway, then took two steps back and slipped in the room. It was Aunt Jewel's guest bedroom, but all of her sewing scraps, discarded boxes with patterns and other contraptions tossed against the walls made it feel like I was underground. Toppled. He was heavy, so the bed sank low, the springs squeaked but not loud enough for anyone to hear. I was a corpse, awake, lying on the bed next to me. Began to caress my hair, said, "Pretty Lisa, pretty, pretty Lisa." As if repeating my name might dissolve me into a cool gray puddle, I wouldn't be afraid of his big belly pushing against the curve of my backside. Breathing was strained, like sand was in my throat. I was sixteen, always trying to lose fifteen, twenty pounds, smile all the time like the cheerleaders. I wanted some of that giddiness. Maybe if my legs were firm like theirs, I wouldn't hide in my room when everyone else was at pep rallies, football games, and parties where no one asked them why they weren't smiling. I'd held my stomach in all day because my dress was too tight. So tired. After it was over, family spread across town in other bedrooms. I chose this one.

## Self-Portrait as Annie Wilkes

Remember the times  
as a child, mother  
tried to give you soup,  
when you were sick,  
your favorite soup, but  
too weak, stomach dips  
like stomachs in backseats  
of cars speeding over steep hills,  
fall back against the pillow  
sweat soaking your gown.  
That's how it feels  
to be sick  
from head to toe  
with something---what is it?  
you didn't ask for---  
or,  
you let your mind surrender  
to,  
Everywhere you look  
you see things you once loved,  
but there's a bug inside  
nothing can kill.

## Second Exit past El Reno

The flashlight in my face  
asked me for my registration,  
license, as passing cars filed by  
flooding the front seat with grief.  
Headlights like rows of eyes without pupils.  
filling me with shame as I sat slanted,  
sloped in a ditch not wide enough  
to hold my fear and gray Honda  
bought with some pride the day  
after the divorce.  
The Judge's chamber had been small  
with too large of a desk,  
plaques, books and a box  
of Kleenex he passed like a bowl of peas  
when my eyes like wounds poured  
out wet thickness, dropping  
eight years of trying.

## Homecoming

The chalky roads stretch among  
the blackjacks, their fall cobalt skies  
burdened with the weight of barn swallows.

Climbing the hills outside city limits,  
farmers toss hay up to the rafters  
a spit for each bale, wiping their foreheads  
with red kerchiefs, stuffing antique bottles in their pockets.

If you're from California you search for Redwoods  
amongst the cedar trees bleeding sap  
on this early June day, the breeze knotting  
your hair, buffalo staring from every grassland.

Beyond a hedgerow of Bois d'arcs,  
knee deep in blackberries and devilish scissor tails  
a combine shuts down, its cab  
curls up for a sun bath.

I know that. I want to tip over my engine,  
let crickets carve a hole in my threshing drum  
become a useless object in the underbrush  
buzzing with warbles, drifting with pollen

put my arm around some little old woman,  
braid her hair as cars drive by like safaris,  
like I've dreamed of safaris and jumping on the back  
of a blue wildebeest. But I keep driving with my hand cupped  
in the wind, cradling the sunset like a dying bird.



*I pray love has been on its feet  
delivering, gathering, bathing  
every dead skin cell, all the red  
dirt drones stifling, be well.*

### **Psalm 13:1**

My father died face down,  
broken nose resting in a pool  
of his Braum's Ice Cream Store milk.

On the night stand,  
his Tom Clancy Book pages lay  
prostrate, 162-163.

The following two Saturdays,  
it sold in a box marked, "All paperbacks  
25 cents."

## After my Father was a Highway Patrolman

My Father was a roofer

With his two brothers and a few great uncles

Uncle Pat, the middle brother, whose foot

Was chopped off in a

motorcycle accident

When he was sixteen, complained he didn't get

Enough pay for the week.

Soon, lamps were falling over, blood on the floor

Mama calling Uncle Jim on the phone

Tripping and punching into the screened

porch;

Like a corny western,

They rolled him like a rug into the street

And we ran upstairs, watched from the tarred roof

Hatchets and Mama's fried chicken she'd packed for the road

Trip

slung all over the asphalt,

Neighborhood dogs came to eat

Daddy stopped everything when he flipped Uncle Pat to the ground

Using Judo he learned in

Guam.

## **In the Orchard**

Far from the town scents, along  
a path stained with old dented  
pails and rusty coiled mattress  
springs, white buds grew. Newness impressed her,  
like blue changes color to birth the rain.  
She felt the sky watching as she tasted,  
waiting for the sweetness.  
But summer is slippery like gossip, sipping  
long here, sipping long there. Wild pinkish  
yellow stews, the Maypop vine's orange wanes  
to chaff. Oh, sweet for a while, if taken in time.  
If taken under the shade, back pressed against bark,  
lean branches tilted, wild apricot bobbling in the breeze.

## Music Row

Motherhood, the filago  
next to the dripping air conditioner,

such a wooly wet stain, you said.  
So you pretend I'm just the mountains,

a state, a drought finally over even though  
blue childhood pools

when you sweat, wince, and grieve. I will.  
My mouth, cotton rose Cudweed, a lamb's

*baa*, explains nothing, you said.  
Don't tell you how to live, on laundry room floors,

in grime, behind city smoke drench—  
quells the prodding of my fingers counting 63

stitches on your head where they sewed your brain,  
patched your skull, like I carefully cut your baby hair.

And at some point, pictures of blood on my delivery sleeve  
became too graphic, pushing them farther under the bed

like a lost shoe.

## **Franklin, Tennessee**

Franklin is Elizabethtown,  
deliberate leisure lines the walks.  
I know this town in the dream I didn't dream,  
a Civil War marker on every corner,  
inside of me.  
Cloverland, my favorite street,  
has rock mountains with green vines  
clinging as close as paint, leaping like flames.  
Linen, burlap, old building  
aromas romance me,  
downtown, Merridie's molasses cookies  
slow me,  
and the shops are whispers.

## **Elegy for Bend, Oregon**

Sisters mountains,  
where the sky is crisp  
down to its ankles.  
We stopped to see  
how much a small place  
would cost  
Us--  
I don't know why we did that,  
when all I wanted was to get away  
from beautiful.

## Night Life

At dusk, when Hermit Thrushes fall from roosts,  
a world they could do without, you walk  
beside the Willamette River in a blue jacket,  
river bed narrow and stuffed, rocks don't move,  
I'm always looking back but it means nothing.  
Outside what used to be a movie theater is a  
poster advertising, *Fleudian Slips November 11th*,  
Pink Floyd impersonators you took me to see last  
year. Every night you do something like that, take me  
to utility poles with posters stuck on creosote, trees snap  
and shudder because I can't make up my mind, stored  
boxes marked with masking tape make me stumble  
over water hoses, lawn equipment, and silver rain.



## **Flying over Montana**

So many spare moments in the air, and evening  
became a tunnel. She turned the overhead  
light on and looked through the cloudy glass,  
saw her shoulders among the silver stars  
bowing beside them like a lengthy prayer of metal and satellites.  
Blackness out there, night in the plane—like the woods are dark  
with hibernating bears.  
She became old—her eyes watched for the lavatory to become  
vacant in front, near the cockpit door.  
Instead she pulled out a journal; reflection her constant  
demeanor. All was shadows, except for her tiny lamp.  
She was alone—just her, the journal, and the spotlight  
on top her head like a crown.

## Still Life: Two Types of Rain

Rain drops in Oklahoma pelt  
with a mission, alive and heavy  
like oil with fat personalities.  
Not like Portland's lazy drops,  
sad gooey carcasses  
crying like a drippy faucet,  
outside of Powell's Bookstore,  
always getting books wet,  
no one carrying umbrellas.  
They don't spin like tiny tornadoes  
or spiraling needles, not tart  
like the strength of lemons.  
Portland's rain is as bland as squash,  
a soup, a cream, thicker than fog.  
It is likely the world was a deep well  
tipped on its head when the sky  
over Oregon was created, miscalculation,  
awkward dripping popsicle.  
Drops falling in Oklahoma are crazed, rip  
the red dust of summer, bathe  
the belly of sunset orange,  
courageous kamikazes.

## Psalm for Letting Go

I pray love has been on its feet  
delivering, gathering, bathing  
every dead skin cell, all the red  
dirt drones stifling, *be well*.

I pray love has pruned the spiritless  
words grappling to pin your legs down,  
keep your hands from drumming  
the rhythm that moved our days.

I pretend you're okay. Alive  
and well, with blues like lakes  
grays, greens, and chocolate browns,  
colors I surrendered, when you waved

goodbye from a gas station pump,  
pulling a trailer packed with cymbals  
clashing, singing, *Mother let go*.

## Winter Hellebores

She opens the door  
hears the traffic's  
gunning engines,  
clank of the closing  
gates just to feel  
alive  
for a little while,  
rotate, circulate  
somewhat, each time  
she stands up,  
dizzy and faint  
living is pale,  
an anemic strain.  
She takes a bath  
to wake up,  
Wake up!  
Life is movement,  
only that.

## Still Life with Front Porch; Moths

The cement sits blushed by the sunrise  
                                simmering its steps,  
                                morning glories hang  
                    from the corner edge,  
                                as if they can't remember  
            the frost of fall or shade of winter.  
A blue jay plunders an empty birdfeeder  
                                like the homeless man;  
            his useless paper bags,  
                                whistling there is no food,  
                    nor water, or nectar—  
                                the tragedy of concrete cracking.

The first step has pulled away from its foundation,  
            all visiting moths and salesmen should  
turn  
                                toward the street a block down,  
                    not be anxious about undergrowth  
            as time cools everything,  
                                one autumn at a time.

## Central Line from Lowry Street

Like the wind blowing through a tunnel when she was mad she could sound like the trains stopping too near the yellow roofed depot that dropped like a frozen sunset at the end of the block. For comfort, my small, dimpled hands carried pink bush flowers from the side yard to her linoleum counter where she ran water down the neck of an antique vase placed in the center of her Mimi's wooden table.

Red radishes, cucumbers, and onions smothered in vinegar was lunch. When she told me to eat, she complained, "These cucumbers are pithy." My stomach couldn't get full. "We had ta pick the corn and taters ever night. *Sometimes* Mimi had a ham hock in the beans." I was afraid of her childhood.

I was who she was if the crumbs were picked from the floor, I didn't smack my lips when I ate, if I stood still when she took straight pins from between her teeth, hemming anything too long cutting everything straggly, hoarding scraps. In black patent leather shoes and powder pilfered from her silver music box blotted on my face, I made believe on her wooden planked porch, trusting the creaking chains holding a loveseat swing, taking me anywhere new, puffy pink branches patted my head as I flew.

She was softer sometimes than the street she lived on. She would holler love words when in the alley broken glass mixed with dirt cut my feet, she tapped my head like an offering plate lined with green felt, her fingers the soft sound the coin makes when it drops. In the night she squeezed smooth smelly ointment, covering my chigger eaten legs with orange iodine---a miracle.

For comfort, she let me choose one pastel colored housecoat and nightgown hanging on the bathroom door hook, changing her mind, changing mine.

## Sky Prophets

you spread your lotions  
across thinking skin sorry that it's Saturday again.  
There's no one to entertain your mind. Or that's  
what it tells you;  
what you've known since seventeen,  
that perfect cheerleaders still have gum  
in their mouth, (you can smell it on  
the high school reunion invitation)  
that you swerved in hallways, rolled against brick walls,  
couldn't get too close, brush the swinging pleats of blue and gold.  
So you go home and write dark songs on any kind of paper,  
smoke your sleeping grandmother's Raleigh cigarettes  
behind the house hidden in limbs near the creek,  
watch floating twigs, then feel guilty for stealing your coolness,  
go back inside and entertain the thought  
that you might like to have sun bleached hair  
shorter legs so you can fly in the air  
land like a bird on the arm of swaggering  
guys who had all the room in the world,  
next to the Senior Pictures display case.

Now it's 35 years later only it's sidewalks  
eating just enough to keep yourself alive,  
not taking your vitamins, same as smoking only worse.  
And you can't wait for night,  
for cells to stop moving the universe,  
say, *time's up*.

## **Burdick Street**

My head and body fell  
yelling, *Grandma*,  
couldn't catch me though  
I knew  
last thing I saw  
was the blue  
sky and hairnet  
with the black dot  
in the middle of her forehead  
from the top of a three foot high  
red brick porch,  
mint leaves and clover  
my only friends  
looking down at me  
my four year old body  
blew like a soft cannon



## **Still Receiving My Father's Mail**

I fracture spines reading,  
tearing utility bills  
Reader's Digest on the way  
back to a brown apartment,  
pancake leaves tag along  
as I walk to the mailbox.  
Overnight, battalions of wind  
discard faceless autumn,  
great-tailed grackles spread north.

## **Annette: Vigil**

She swept a simple living room  
one couch, two kitchen chairs  
bumpy, cracked linoleum,  
breeze-sallied screen door  
floated its hinge, washed her  
children's clothes bent  
with tub and board, pump and  
water, she sang hymns  
with closed lips, a Cinderella hum  
hair pulled back in too tight of a bun  
ironing bunches of clothes for 10 cents,  
shirts and blouses,  
"Oh get Annette!"  
Lost her husband to a curve 30 miles from town  
removed from the road by hate,  
body bloated because no one found him.  
She told me at the funeral,  
"What a pretty complexion you have."  
"Oh yes!" they all sang;  
Optimism,  
and I felt beautiful  
from beautiful.

## Wading

Go down a scourged brown road, mostly just a path,  
to Deep Red Creek.

Blood-shot water with thick reeds as high  
as my neck, wrap around edges like fringe  
under the bridge made of wood and orange  
steel.

I felt powerful in Shady Cave, smell of wet with a hint of dead  
fish, only flavor for breathing. I waited  
for the current to move, still nothing really ever went anywhere,  
just frogs leaping from a tadpole life—black to green.

I wanted to turn a different color too, maybe yellow-cherry.

My shoes hurt my feet because they were full of feet  
and rusty water.

Dragon flies floated with dull gray wings,  
not like the fish from Black Bear Creek full of blended shades of swimming  
aqua—just the right colors I'd needed a year and a half ago but couldn't find  
in my crayon box with sixty-four colors.

## Intraspecific Predation

Around the pond, scouting water  
As in visions of prophecy,  
A girl lies down on the unimportant  
Shore to wile away minnows, Backskaters,  
Salamander, and Sticklebacks,  
Mayflies dance on the surface  
Die the same day.  
Her stained green knees  
Cool in soggy soil, brush  
Water beetles sneezing, velveteen  
Cattails, pregnant pockets  
Swimming  
thick  
black  
Hatch  
Silent tadpoles  
In this narrow grave  
Her father dug  
With a flimsy shovel.  
Feel the chaff  
Wringing the soil—  
Run little frogs and dragon flies,  
Move away, until it's time  
to come home.

## **Past the Willamette River**

I watch cattle, idle stones,  
spackle grass in pasture homes, stares thrown  
towards the road while I drive.  
I look through my window like it's not there,  
on a sunny day, I concentrate,  
on chewing cud and Coburg Hills  
accidentally driven to downtown fields,  
grocery carts trudge to picnic table huts,  
dumpster pantries, railroad truck  
back streets, Eugene throws  
itself at me

## **Clouds of Breath Cool Pastoral Beds**

I roam around being bitten. My hands slap every midge  
and bee, the blackest, the yellow,  
I must protest.

I hear the belly, the whinnying nether.  
It is the hum, the disdain I run with.  
I know its dance.

I pluck myself out.  
Surely the seeds will float with the wind,  
with twines of hair; my twirls of madness.

Peace is a ghost.  
Every second I pander for its understanding.  
Look, there are its paws: it trots away, like a dog.

Count every day I've hidden under houses.  
See? Everyone goes out to look for me until dusk.  
Calling, calling.

Or perhaps the trill-like songs,  
those funerals and weddings I sang, wore blue.  
And this is the veins of it, memory  
plants not a bulb that produces innocence.

The sidewalks are also without grace.  
They abandon my looking down,  
my running and going; stretch me into the hills,  
braiding my best intentions.

I am adorned with arms wrapped around my head.  
Those evening limbs fall asleep, I shake them awake,  
popping every branch, and birds, no crows fly  
and perch on the knob of a post, like a salute.

**On the way to Stone Temple Pilots Concert,  
Les Schwab Amphitheater, Bend, Oregon**  
~For Scott Weiland

Often it's disheartening  
to stare into the night and see only stars  
except those airplane red blinking lights,

or a satellite  
when cirrus clouds roll against autumn hills  
and winds crack the poplar—

we change our focus  
to things on the ground  
signs and rails pointing *this way*.

In those moments, it's drowsy  
to turn down a dirt road and drive,  
choosing not to see time's  
maraschino advertisements,

careful blinking in rear view mirrors  
chanting their *come backs!*  
As if we don't know death.

## Picking Up Your Ashes at OU Medical Center

i.

The years won't be lovers unless  
I get things under the sun and heaven's  
control; sleep, eat, move, mulch.  
But I've spent every last person  
I know and Father is dead.  
I've made my peace with poems,  
on-going restoration like communion.

ii.

And I owe more sweat and Words of apology  
that fell down the ears of family and  
friends. Words trolled to the heart, stitched  
the flapping holes, but it's not a sealed  
promise, so phone calls, cards of, "I really do  
love you," will always need to be sung.

iii.

No, no there it is...look over there, under  
the light with heretical bugs crowning  
my head. I'm in a night gown, "Open up, it's  
me again" standing on your porch with nothing  
but my purse and the wind.

iv.

And I realize I'm homeless every day  
like the woman without a home and a help dog.  
All the dogs I've had died a violent death,  
under mother's 68 Pontiac, farmers shot the looting  
pointers, and ditches received puppies as we screamed.

v.

And father sits in a box the few feet away tonight  
in a shipping urn because I don't know where  
to pour him. He's not from the Pacific Northwest,  
just a town blown down in Oklahoma near Eureka.  
Suppose we could all picnic and swim in the dust clouds.



## **Dream Sermon**

I'm obliged to the days I have left  
To walk the cripple across the marsh,  
Shoo birds begging for food.  
But I'm still asking, when does the sky turn  
Purple? Surely it turns purple  
Somewhere on the planet at some  
Dusk... that's a promise there is a god  
Right? Or is that the rainbow? Good angels  
Will you lay your head here to hear  
What I'm saying? I want to fish for myself.  
Oh receive me, I haven't played my piano  
In two years, and one times three men  
Equals disaster. Not one chance  
Left over in a chest of drawers,  
Are they called that? For me. The wilderness  
Of throwing good blankets in a dog house,  
Perfectly sewn quilts, is dark parks with gunshots,  
Like throwing money down a man hole  
and covering it up with pudding.  
I'll sleep all night if ever I go to DC  
Never went to DC or Vanilla,  
A town in this story I wrote when I was  
Seven, where purple suns scorched all  
The dusk long.

## **Mink Coat**

Death hung on wooden hangers  
in shades of brown.  
There are many fur coats  
in antique malls in Tennessee.  
Today I saw a white mink jacket swung  
across a corner booth, next to kitchenware  
and faded postcards, hooked high  
with a paper tag marked 1495.00.  
This is how vanity floats  
from soul to soul. The darkness  
stands over night like this  
when stars fall.

## **In the Living Room**

Kids don't want Mothers and Fathers  
to grow old.

*Can't you hear me?*  
*What's wrong?*  
*Don't hunch your back.*  
*Don't worry about me.*  
*Why do you worry?*

Accusers

and we hunch some more,  
repeat ourselves,  
take the same stories out  
of some invisible bag

just to explain them  
in different  
glorious ways.

## Muneca Retrospection

After looking at a snapshot I've never seen  
of my six year old self, making a dingy, gray snowman,

I seek to know how flashbacks exist  
or cease so I ask the black night.

Silver stars laugh their usual spurts  
of gab, gibberish and tinker

strings of Christmas lights shedding  
astronomical tears like plastic eyes.

My neck aches looking up for revelation.

A million eternities away in Melancholia universe  
an interpreter has burst across the void

yet it recalls only in Christmas bulbs  
and the bulbs won't tell—

there are the baskets of Polaroid photographs  
of my cousins and our shimmering robes,

of my sisters in fuzzy pink house shoes.

They're dancing to Motown 45s.  
They're blaring like horns in holiday traffic.

Will these photos keep their promise? I cannot  
snatch all of them; they, bob like corks in a lake,

And like this desert in my gut  
I cannot regenerate by flashlight.

I am enshrined in this snow globe  
*of wind me up with glitter weather,*

*wind my head for all to see.*

## The Docks at Yost Lake

They were blue shadows, holding,  
Losing breath under water,  
burning resuscitation,  
oppression of the mind.  
Entities clashing  
without end,  
each declaring

victory  
all of them, some lighting candles,  
sweeping froth from the house--  
others churning ground,  
earthworms digging out.

Put me on a hook,  
flaunt me in the deep  
green, gluey mud,  
let me drown, or,  
allow the glum

of some use.  
Pinch me in two  
in three or four,  
I won't feel a thing.  
I won't feel,  
                    the bob  
or tug  
                    of the string.

## **On the Patio at Voodoo Doughnuts**

They were once fliers  
In the atmosphere  
Blue green black orange  
Air  
Now  
Deceased  
Wings caught in between  
Deck boards  
Crash land on earthly places  
Bumps of curbs  
Drains, anything with a wedge  
Or indent  
So many wise acrobats  
Imploded against the feet  
Of  
To be crushed beneath  
My eyes, my shoes

## **In the Middle of the Night**

Switch the lights off  
watch the swarming city  
devouring the crumb.  
Oceans of blue ceramic tiles,  
sticky legs rumble along  
grouted highways, bumping  
at a speedy pace, single file,  
so many hours, years  
to reach the bread,  
mislead by a tress of hair,  
toiling around the broken shaft  
to fetch, break, stockpile  
safety into the invisible.  
Every few minutes, years,  
the lights turn,  
to catch confused stragglers  
lost, trying to find the group  
or anything missed.  
Tear paper towel after towel,  
wet the ends, swipe scratchy cement--  
believing it shouldn't be painful  
to die blind, in the dark,  
from such love.