

## Chaos In Nine Parts

Linda McCauley Freeman

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Linda McCauley Freeman

*Chaos In Nine Parts*

I

The ironing board has been open  
weeks now and the winter clothes  
on the armchair never made it  
to the box in the attic though  
it's August. My childhood bear  
propped on the windowsill  
doesn't blink, remembers.  
Adulthood didn't take chaos  
from me, only added bounced  
checks, lost keys, and a nagging  
desire for order. The Lamb's Ears  
in the yard, so soft and small  
when we planted, sprouted  
like Jack's beanstalk after  
a week of rain. We keep saying  
we should cut them, pull weeds,  
mow the lawn. Yesterday, I yanked  
moldy shoes and jackets from the hall  
closet: Ski pants for someday,  
instructions for a heater we no longer  
own, a plastic bag with smoke detectors  
bought when we moved in, and paper  
bags full of words.

II

On my way to the farm, down a dirt  
road, I turn the corner and drive  
into sun. My hand flies to my face,  
shields my eyes. The visor is broken,  
pulled from its yoke by my husband  
angry that it wouldn't stay up. I drive  
the whole way, hovering hand over face,  
fielding the sun.

## III

I can tell by the stance of your body,  
the stiff set of your jaw, the way  
your right foot juts slightly forward  
as if to push me away—  
I don't measure up to the image  
your mother carefully packed  
inside you like a starched white shirt.

## IV

Laundry I asked you to do  
still in the bedroom  
it's been weeks and I can't  
do more so you left me  
with laundry never put away  
so everything gets mixed  
with what's dirty.

## V

You look for the lost lure, your favorite,  
in the fishing-line nest the mice made.

Complain about what you are missing  
as if it were my fault.

I decide to help. Untangle the lines.  
But your words keep tying the line  
around my neck, tightening, tightening...

## VI

There is just my small intake of breath.  
Words slide out of you in rivers,  
slime then mud. There is a seed  
caught in my throat but I can't  
hack it out. It has grown bigger  
than you and almost as old.

## VII

You tell me  
I have oil on my chin  
in that tone I recognize  
when I have gone too far,  
done something that shows  
not the wife you chose  
but another, ill-bred,  
unloved.

## VIII

I cannot bless you  
any more than I can  
curse you even here  
under my breath when  
all my evil thoughts of you  
have stacked themselves  
into a wall still a house  
of cards to blow down  
turn my curses to kisses  
or they just blow back  
to me leeches sucking  
away no fortress  
no shadow no shield  
I open myself again  
and again with stupid  
hope not amnesia  
but knowledge the fruit  
you bear I bite again  
spit out the bitter  
swallow the sweet.

## IX

In the moss-turned reprieve between  
mud and water, the deer bolt  
at the clump of your stained footsteps  
bringing in the frozen sausages.