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Senior Writing Project : Eng 492
(Spring 88)

Joyce Jana-Aji

Becky Thatcher

I was led by the hand,
guided into pain, gingerly,
finding my way out of the cave,
birthday cake and candles gone,
Injun Joe dead in some dark crevice.
Tom swore he knew the way,
hands tied behind his back.
I went on faith.

Now I can no longer see
the next place my feet will fall.
I shuffle and slide,
sensing the amphibian smoothness
of the elbows, breasts and sloping hips
of this underground body.

Clammy sweat cools my tears,
transforms my hair to blonde stalactites.
It dives from my forehead
like the ticking drops
marking the shallow faces
of unfathomable pools.

A fissure sighs
over my shoulders, breathing
through the pores of my homemade shawl.
Following Tom's echo,
I grope for the heat of his hand.
I brush against a cool corridor
that winds like an intestine.
I shudder, pull myself close
and touch nothing.

Blind like the bats,
like the eyeless fish,
I scurry in the dark
like the rats, the spiders,
like all the nameless noises.
I am reduced
to the sound and the rhythms
of my breath and my heartbeat,
but I fear nothing,
the place where all walls end.

Suburban Ascetic

I light incense with a white candle,
I place the needle on the record
and lock my bedroom door.
Jasmine smoke and Vivaldi pirouette
under the canopied bed.
Crickets and streetlamps outside
my window seem to gurgle
like underwater speech.

I untie my wet bandanna
and squirm out of my Nike's,
stretching with feline sureness
before a full-length mirror.
My image is almost art.
I pull the clinging half-shirt
over the childish pout of my nipples
and over my head. My shoulder blades
fan like a cobra's hood.

I strip flesh like layers of clothes,
I worship the blunt security of bones
and the sharp angles of my waist.
My bitten nails skim the outline
of each rib, they test the taut muscles
of the thigh, looking for
what can't bleed or decay, for something
beyond the soft transiency or curves.

My hands slide down to touch
the spoon of my stomach,
I lie motionless on the floor
and cup my hands over my hipbones
(protruding like tusks)
caressing them lovingly,
holding them the way a mother would
a breast, to offer milk.

To My Mother

I want the last glimpse of you to be of veined hands
clasped together in embalment, of lilies and irises
strung across satin pillows, of stone joy
woven around your eyes and lips.
I pray you have suffered only from a happy life.

Like the light pressure of a kiss, your presence will fade.
Cinnamon, roses and cloves, the scents of your hands
will hover like guardian angels in the kitchen,
your voice will come in dreams and I will wake
tangled in my gown, my mouth still forming words.

After the funeral, I will sleep in your bed,
and try to harden the scattered and vague images of you.
I'll sit before the mirrored dressing table
with the reverence of a concert pianist
and let my fingers swarm through sweet flannel,
cotton, strings of pearls and cedar chips.
I will spread out my angry letters, pictures of your lover
and suicide poems on my legs like a blanket.

After a Documentary

This morning I dreamed
Mother Theresa
was my ancestor,
leaving me her legacy
of Calcutta in pictures.
But she was robed
in the older bones
of Augusta Telschow at 96.
Varicose veins-
a crown of white braids-
I cried in her lap,
my great-grandmother.
She blessed me,
she stroked forgiveness
throughmy hair
with an arthritic claw.
I felt Catholic again,
confessing to a dying saint,
wisdom shaking me
like Parkinson's.

Preta

"like a broom, among brooms, in a broom closet"

what I've wanted and resisted all my days,
to be thin as a stick, as a long meatless bone,
so will my body be when I die.
I will be reborn as a hungry ghost,
not a goddess, not a demon, not a rock,
only to be dragged through the 10,000 realms
of ancient texts, only to starve.

My senses numb, my mind throbbing old images,
all the dead in my family welcome me and wave me off
toward a light. I am absorbed and suffocated with peace and heat
until it finally diffuses to a desert: yellow sand, yellow sun,
yellow rocks and orange wind. I run my hands along my sallow body,
skim my fingers over my ribs like a harp. Hunger bubbles
like boiling water in teakettle. I walk and walk
on a trail left by nomads, I walk and collapse,
digging my fists in my gut as though I battled
rattlesnake tapeworms. I fill my mouth
with sparkling grains of mirages.

I black out, the desert subsides and my eyes adjust
to blues and greens, to ferns and fruit trees,
to red berries and brown loaves of bread.
I see bowls of honey under dripping beehives,
a long table spread and a solemn circle of graves.
The air is sensuous, dizzying. I approach the table
without rustling a blade of grass (I am so light)
to cradle a lush pear in my hands. The first bite
is so sweet, I nearly faint. The thick juices
soak my breasts and warmth floods my arms and legs.
It evaporates like cotton candy. I fall
through darkness like hail

and bounce on a trampoline to the valley below
of deep greens, vivid blues, of baobabs and giant slabs
of meat, turned on a spit by baboons. I am overwhelmed
with grandeur and desire. Food peels off the clouds.
I bounce again and land in the gentle spray of a waterfall.
I see no net, no trampoline, but only my stomach,
swelled like a pregnancy of rhino quadruplets.
My skin is stretched to a thin rubber. Starving and swelling
more, my belly cramps and flutters like bellows stoking
a fire. I grab a grape the size of a softball, and try
to cram it in, but nothing will fit. I have a spider's mouth
and I can almost lick the purple skin.

I remember the litany of my childhood:
I want, I want, I want..

Poverty

This morning I sit in a lounge with Quakers,
listening for a still, small voice
to respond to my prayers, but I only see
the familiar beast of my childhood,
Push me-Pull me. His voice is a silly grin.

I think of my ancestors, long buried
near their Iowa farm, of their simple faith
in sunsets and corn, in the tawny colors
of the prairie. I remember the Bibles
and prayer beads they left. God must have been
tangible, useful, like rope or buckets.
In the suburbs, I read of mystics,
analyze hexagrams, correspond
with the sangha and a priestess.

Last year I saw a monk, sitting in full lotus.
His scalp gleamed, his monotone proclaimed:

"Form is emptiness and emptiness is form."

"There is no ignorance and no end of ignorance."

"There is nothing to be attained."

Last year I saw a Lazarus who had emerged
from the smashed front end of a Buick.
He was tucked in a fetal position, nursed
by the aluminum bars of his bed.
He was mute, but his eyes were hard,
shrouding questions I couldn't see.
My gaze simply rolled away.

At my first communion, the sisters
lined the sweet-faced girls under the windows
which spanned the altar like the wings
of an angel. Stained glass Virgin Marys
and pelicans. We kneeled, folded our hands
and recited the lesson of

"The Luminous Staggering Bird"
who pierces her breast until blood pours
and her starving nestlings feed. Motherhood
and self-sacrifice catholicized.

At the nursing home, when sunlight drools
through the seams in the drapes,
the image hovers over me again, though
not in a veil, white tights and dotted swiss skirts,
but in a uniform, tying senile grandfathers
to bed, emptying catheters into urinals,
spooning puree off a whiskered woman's chin.
I feel the beak pluck out the heart.

I'm not a pelican, but a bare tree,
anchored in an endless flat field,
drenched and quavering in a storm,
fearful of light flashing and numb to my roots.
I forget how to fabricate spring.

Still, I remember the story
of the volunteer, back from Nicaragua.
Dusk fanned that first night over the bleak road.
The sky unfolded its body, revealing the colors
of its ribs. The guns hushed, the villagers hushed,
and the mountains, straddling the horizon,
were again serene. I remember her saying
that she sensed how the gallop of being is relentless,
how its control never wanders to small hands,
and how she suddenly had the urge to laugh
and walk onto the front lines.

Quebec Sesshin

I swing my legs over the birch fence and look down.
 The land seems to tumble from the summit.
 My eyes trace the rivulets of forests and farms
 until they blur into blue-green.
 A monk runs by, sandals clacking on the gravel path,
 his robe flowing out behind him like black wings.
 I imagine my body with feathers and gills, swimming
 through a sky that smells of mushrooms.
 Dusk opens slowly. It fans a curtain of mist
 hemmed with thunder.

I follow the nuns to the dojo.
 Loons, gongs and voices pulse the air.
 Our hair is pulled back tightly, our kimonos
 barely cover our feet. We bow as we enter,
 as we take places under scrolls of calligraphy.
 In a single motion, we descend on zafus
 with lotus legs. The final bell hums,
 ebbing away gradually. I stretch my spine.
 We sit like the stone Bodhisattvas I've seen
 on temple postcards from Kyoto, but without
 their elongated ears, their serene smiles.

The oldest monk drones sutras in Japanese, then says:

"With the back erect like a tree trunk,
 The sky is driven upward with the head,
 The knees are grounded in the earth."

Blood pools in my legs; they are numb
 like the phantom limbs of an amputee.
 My breath is cool and unhampered.
 I can expect nothing but the whims of bones
 and aching joints, the echoes of thoughts
 against my skull, maybe rain of the roof.
 I wait in this placid room, with my hands
 cupped in my lap, cradling an egg of air.

Barcelona

I only recall waking in another train station,
dark and empty as any cathedral. A draft seeps in
from the tunnels, and I hear the dwindling thread
of a whistle. I untangle my legs from my nest of bags,
grateful for the pain of the locker key, ground
in the palm of my hand. I can still smell my sweaty sleep,
the dampness of alleys and sewers.

Another whistle and the waiting room bursts.
Feet, fumes of cigars, fish soup and beer,
leering conductors, veiled women, bearded blacks
and suitcases niagara over the hall. Dialects,
a hundred species of song, flutter above
like a fine spray, like the transparent wings of bees.

I rise, carried by the crowd to the stairs,
and follow them to an oily shore. I lie on a clean bench,
looking sideways at the concrete beach, where transients
bob like buoys, as if the gray waves heaving against the port
heaved against them; they tread through air.
Fog lights make white fish bellies into sea-stars,
the yellowish glow beautifies the drunks
sleeping on the docks with the gulls.

On the Ramblas, the wind wanders through me,
chopping my skirt like a loosened sail,
my hair into delirious flight.
Other drifters toss handfuls of glances;
my legs and face singe with brilliant sparks.
Whispers clink on the pavement like pirated doubloons.

Late Summer

An early margin of shade falls through the crack
between the gray-slatted porch and the trailer.
Light ripples around ivy and rusted bikes
like a mass of flickering wings.
Heat and dust quaver in the air.
I think of nomads who believe their sand-crusted eyes
and stagger toward an oasis of palms and coconuts.
On my forearm, a caterpillar prickles,
it strums the hairs like an inaudible harp.
I swing the hammock till it creaks.

Too much daydreaming.

I listen for your voice, muffled by the niagara
of bathwater: a jumble of splashing words.

Love can be the hovering of gnats in limp blossoms;
freedom, a pile of abandoned shoes. I trust
the whirl of the fan, the smell of cucumber and cheese,
the frogs, the reek of honeysuckle.

Later we'll sit with our legs entwined, nursing
a glass of beer, we'll walk to the field
where cows nuzzle our hands, we'll lie on the lawn
watching cats attack the few fallen leaves.
I'll make barley coffee for its steamed perfume,
we'll spoon off the flecks of cream while we wait
to hear crickets sing. Our words will melt to gestures
and we'll talk through the shadows of our hands.

Spoon Woman

(after Giacometti)

"My race is characterized by a hollow,
a sloping curve, a cupping gesture of the hands.

She seemed to be waiting before that vast white wall
in the gallery, faceless, pockmarked with hammers,
her beaten metal body like some crude tool.
She stared mutely over the dada, the cubist
and the abstract with the dignity of a llama
or a lion, and her blunt halo of solitude shone
like the dark bones of an old angel. At the age
before breasts, she was a sacred premonition
before whom I felt terribly naked and wanted
to kneel, muttering some poetry I had learned
like an incantation. My fingers traced
her hipbones, the ripples of her spine. My head
nestled in her concave stomach.

Now sometimes when my husband looms over me,
gripping my hips like a helm, or when his eyes
lap the corners of my skin, I remember her
and feel my bones turn metallic and dark.
I've carried her all along. I've yearned for
my face to become a cube, my body the handle
of a long ladle, my life submerged by birth.

Grace

You were conceived between bales of hay, under the star
of absolutes. Born during a solar eclipse,
your eyes seethe with uncanny light.

I remember you as an embryo, the cramps, how my blood
nearly drowned you during the last minute caesarean.
You have always been angry with me.

After your second baptism, after you rose again
from the clear water, with the preacher's hand
guiding you to the abstract life of the spirit,
you denounced me, the contamination of your uterine birth,
quoting: He who does not hate his mother, cannot
follow me. I become the shadow of original sin.

I have little to offer you, not even a name
for my faith. I cannot carry a Bible,
I cannot save anyone. I have watched
the patient roll of a cow's haunches,
its slow tongue lapping up green.

I have spent hours kneading dung
around the roots of rosebushes,
days listening to the qualms of snow.
Grace is heavy and dumb, a blind old woman
who waddles from her shelter after rain
and scoops up wet soil in her tanned
wrinkled hands, as though it were manna and honey.
This has nothing to do with the way you feel.

A Trinity of Cronos

The Hag of the Dribbles ~~has~~^{the} stones fall from her lap
as she rises. Mountain ranges bead upon flat water.
A curling silver hair falls between moon, hooks like yarn
on needley rock and melts, spilling like a river of lava
down the slopes. She weeps heavy black tears
on the new islands and watches jungles grow. She spits,
and the land becomes inhabited. Wearily, she curses herself
and falls asleep.

The Hag of the Bowls squats over the portals of temples
with her knees spread wide. In skeletal stone
with her blackened face and protruding ribs, she's Caillech,
who withers away nearly skinless, who frames her holy yoni
with her hands. Her carved genitals are shaped like horseshoes.
When peasant enter to worship, they bow their heads
and touch her twice: one for the Hag who feeds and comforts,
once for Caillech who makes the temple stones bleed
when she devours all her human children.

The Hag of the Iron Wood does laundry at night,
rubbing out stains with stars from the Milky Way
until her laundry shines like the robes of angels.
When she hears incantations from the tribes,
who call and call from graveyards, she lumbers
to the crescent shed and unleashes the Moon-Dogs.
They scramble over tree-tops like puppies,
drag the soul like a stick and drop it at her feet.
She stoops and sighs, shakes it out like a cloth
and folds it neatly back in the afterworld.

A Prayer to the Patron Saint of Drowning

Let me collapse like a wave
Into the pool of my own sleepiness.

Let my hair float like swamped ferns,
Let me drink in cool, salty currents

Through my eyes, ears, nose, mouth and fingers
Till the pressure of silence explodes,

For I have been drained and battered from within,
Each cell a transparent throbbing,

Each asking how a soul rips from a body,
If famine is something besides personal.

Let me be able to give up swimming,
Quit fluttering arms and flailing feet

Till my bloated belly rises to the surface--
Silvery, still, gleaming the reflection

Of the night, of the moon,
Patted gently by white caps, swirling.