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If We Are Honest

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IF WE ARE HONEST

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of English

By

Lisa L. Anthony

December 2019

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IF WE ARE HONEST

English

Missouri State University, December 2019

Master of Arts

Lisa L. Anthony

ABSTRACT

If We Are Honest is a collection of narrative poetry in which I explore the conflicts, struggles, growth, and transitions involved in many facets of life. Some poems deal with the relationship between a parent and a child. Others deal with the difficulties of marriage and divorce. Family history and experiences are the basis of many poems as well, specifically a series based on the life of my grandmother. Ultimately, most of the poems in this collection examine what it is to struggle but to persevere, to continue growing and changing, and to never quit the work that lies ahead.

KEYWORDS: poetry, narrative poetry, family, transitions, children, conflict, separation, family history

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A Master's Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts, English

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my family, without whom the life written on these pages would not have focus or purpose, and to my dearest friend Aimee Hays, who already knew each of these poems before they appeared in print.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 1
Works Cited	Page 12
Poems	Page 13
Observance	Page 13
May 11, 1948	Page 14
May 13, 1948	Page 15
June 27, 1948	Page 16
July 13, 1948	Page 17
August 29, 1948	Page 18
September 17, 1948	Page 19
October 22, 1948	Page 20
Quiet Spaces	Page 21
The Making of a Man	Page 22
Doorway	Page 23
Brave New World	Page 24
Branches In Winter	Page 25
Words For My Children	Page 26
If We Are Honest	Page 27
Rebuilt	Page 28
This Morning I Fix My Tea	Page 29
Home	Page 30
Mourning	Page 31
The Circle	Page 32
Control	Page 33
Impasse	Page 34
The Loneliness of Rain Drove Her Inside	Page 35
The Surrounding	Page 36
And Again	Page 37
Transitive Property	Page 38
Silent Form	Page 39
Grief Had Come For Us This Time	Page 40
Where Is the Applause For the Mundane?	Page 41
Generations of Work Have Brought You to This	Page 42
What Is Lost	Page 43
Watching It Go	Page 44

INTRODUCTION

Through writing the poems that make up this collection, my style of writing began to reveal itself. I am a narrative poet of straightforward purpose and common speech. Being elusive in my work does not interest me. I am more prone to narrate and build an external situation -- a simple event, an unnoticed glance, an environmental surround -- in such a way as to convey the subtleties of an internal situation. I typically focus on a character, sometimes named or specific, sometimes unnamed or general, and either have this character narrate from a first person perspective or have a third person omniscient narrator focalize this character. The dramatic situation of the poem is usually evident or can at least be confidently inferred. All of these elements found within my poetry fulfill the defined criteria of narrative poetry: setting, plot, character, conflict, and a narrative arc, as opposed to lyric poetry which focuses on the emotional, personal, interior thought of a speaker but does not serve the purpose of providing the construct of a story or character for the reader.

I will admit, however, that because of the clear narrative nature of my work, I have felt lesser. My work cannot be as good as those around me whose writing seems very mysterious, extremely elusive, notably highbrow, and therefore, just...better. All of this feeling came from the fact that I didn't understand the meaning, purpose, or message to be found within their lyrical string of disconnected images or words. This instinctive feeling of inferiority was compounded upon reading essays by Kevin Clark and Tony Hoagland which reiterated that, indeed, the narrative poem, and therefore the narrative poet, are viewed as secondary to the superior, more intellectual, more sophisticated, *less boring* lyric poets and their work. True, Clark and Hoagland were writing in support of narrative poets and the narrative form, but they acknowledged recent

opinion and criticism that cast the narrative poem in a negative aspect.

Clark opens his essay “Time, Story, and Lyric in Contemporary Poetry” by conceding that “even the best contemporary critics tend to devalue narrative poetry in favor of the lyric” (Clark 168). He spent most of his time in this essay, however, detailing the ways in which the narrative poetry form is misunderstood and misidentified. He asserted that the “bias against narrative verse...is usually founded on flawed assumptions” (Clark 168). Clark went on to explain that in contemporary poetry, the two seemingly conflicting forms of lyric and narrative poetry “are not oppositional” (Clark 170). More and more often, the two forms are intertwined. He discusses that “just as lyric poems depend on narrative outline no matter how slight, narrative poems require lyric interludes no matter how brief” (Clark 170). Further illuminating the dependent relationship of the forms, he discussed that “narrative poets realize that pure lyricism is virtually impossible, that a chronicling of external events is usually what primes the reader for the transition to reflection -- creates, that is, the lyric moment” (Clark 171). In my own writing, though I am primarily a narrative poet, I do see the intertwining of the narrative and lyric forms of which Clark speaks.

In his article “Fear of Narrative and The Skittery Poem of Our Moment,” Hoagland asserted many of the same ideas as Clark when he discussed that there is a “widespread mistrust of narrative forms and, in fact, a pervasive sense of the inadequacy or exhaustion of all modes other than the associative” (Hoagland 508). Hoagland went further to speculate on why this perception exists. He wondered whether narrative poetry “has been tainted by its over-use in thousands of confessional poems” (Hoagland 511). Looking outward at the influence of society, he surmised that “many persons think that ours is simply not a narrative age; that contemporary experience is too multitracked, too visual, too manifold and simultaneous to be confined to the

linearity of narrative” (Hoagland 511). The most important reason Hoagland presented for why the narrative form falls under scrutiny is that “the new resistance to conventions of order represents a boredom with, and generalized suspicion of, straightforwardness and orchestration. Systematic development and continuity are considered simplistic, claustrophobic, even unimaginative. In the contemporary arena of the moment, charisma belongs to the erratic and subversive” (Hoagland 512). What if, however, not every poet is “erratic and subversive”? Is there room in the current landscape of poetry for writing that takes on a completely different temperament?

This is where I come in as a writer. As I said earlier, my work is narrative, straightforward, linear, perhaps even simple -- all the things that are considered traditional and perhaps boring. But I would defend my work and that of other narrative poets. The chaos of our world is in need of the narrative track. Stories need to be told and heard to reach a more deeply felt compassion and shared perspective. As in the type of writing I typically create, I think that the small details in life still need to be noticed and explored as a way to understand the larger events. Elusiveness will only lead to greater misunderstanding.

A great deal of my writing centers around my family. I am a single parent with four children, so I do a lot of juggling. Juggling with activities. Juggling with time. Juggling with emotions. Juggling with communication. Honestly, sometimes none of these are successfully juggled and something -- or everything -- drops. Nonetheless, my writing continues to turn back to my family. My oldest son is grown with two sons of his own, and I have a son and a daughter in middle school and high school, still living at home. It is the son I just moved away to college, however, who I believe brought about a lot of the poetry in this collection. Maybe it wasn't him as a person specifically (though sometimes it was), but perhaps it was the experience of watching

him though his senior year of high school and the beginning of his freshman year of college that was the impetus for much of my thought. So many endings and beginnings happened during this time period. Now I know how physically, mentally, and emotionally difficult it is to transition from a crushing list of “lasts” into a flood of “firsts.” The echo of this experience is what I am seeing in multiple places throughout my work -- transitions, the movement of lives from one phase to another, the physical opening of doorways and then walking through those doorways toward transformation.

It isn't only my children that I write about, however. I have looked to the work of Natasha Trethewey as a model for writing about both universally historical and personally historical details because a good portion of this collection centers around my family history and background, focusing specifically on my grandmothers. Both sides of my family spent generations farming. Therefore, frequently in my writing, I reflect this work by showing the connection of a character to nature -- coming into contact with the ground, plants, and water. The work of poet Mary Oliver has been influential in the way I discuss these elements of nature in my writing. Along with this connection with the earth, I repeatedly show the struggle of work. I show its endlessness and exhaustiveness. However, I also show the importance of work. I believe this is what was instilled by my family -- perseverance and determination achieved through hard work.

This determination is displayed in the segment of poems about my maternal grandmother. I knew a little of my family's background and history but nothing concrete. So when the thought planted itself in my mind to write about my grandma, I started digging. I easily found the death certificate of her husband, the grandfather I knew nothing about, and the father my mother didn't remember. I found that, indeed, he did commit suicide. To add to the pain for his family, he

ended his life in a beer tavern with strychnine, creating what must have been a horrendous death. I did not focus, however, on him, his reasons, or his life. I focused on my grandma. I loved her. She died when I was ten years old, so my memories of her are episodic and far away, but now as an adult and a mother, I think I understand who she was. I have tried to show, with the type of inner strength and determination my grandmother had, how much one person can bear under devastating circumstances.

In the poem titled “May 11, 1948,” I begin to show the story of my grandmother learning of her husband’s death. The poem begins when “She opened the thin door and light from the dusty/ yard disturbed the shaded darkness of the room.” This action marks a moment in this collection when the theme of doorways and transitions is exemplified. This poem ends with the same doorway motif:

He turned and walked away in silence and left her.
With a baby on her hip,
a baby in the cradle,
and a stair-step group of children
from her knees to waist to her shoulders,
she was standing in the doorway of nothing.

Subsequent poems in this series include the day of the funeral when my grandmother wrestles the internal conflicts with her faith, family and community members, and her own feelings toward her late husband. In the final stanza, as she is led to the altar to pray, these conflicts culminate: “Knees on the wood plank floor,/ casket yards before her,/ her stare remains steadfast,/ her chin unbowed, unpraying./ You bastard. You bastard. You bastard.”

Further in the progression of this series, I imagine my grandmother’s life in the weeks and months following her husband’s death. For the most part, I place her in the outdoors working on her small farm. In these poems, I represent the hopelessness of her economic situation and the insurmountable amount of work she faces alone. However, I also show her bowing under the

pressure of grief in private moments:

She turns her face skyward,
eyes closed. Slowly she lowers herself,
kneeling, then leans her body forward,
laying the palms of both hands
on the dry earth before her.

And she turns her head downward,
the force of her silent howl bending
her body to the ground.

This series of poems, dealing with the private, painful history of a family, is similar to Natasha Trethewey's poem "Shooting Wild." Natasha Trethewey is a narrative poet who often uses traditional form with detectable rhyme and meter. Another element typical in her poetry, however, is her use of history. She writes about the history of the South in general, often focusing on Mississippi. She also writes about specific historical events and people as she does in her collection *Native Guard*. Although she often writes about socially, politically, or personally charged subjects, Trethewey balances the emotional content of her writing with the rigidity of a received form.

Native Guard contains a great deal of factual, historical content. Trethewey includes poems related to the culture and history of the region as in "Southern Crescent." She also crafts a crown of sonnets under the title "Native Guard" in which she details experiences of black soldiers fighting during the Civil War. More personally, however, Trethewey writes a great deal about the history of her own family. She was born to a white father and a black mother in the South in the 1960s, and she writes about the racism encountered by her family. She also focuses on a traumatic event in her life -- the murder of her mother. Following her parents' divorce, Trethewey's mother remarried. Trethewey recounts the abuse of this marriage, the murder of her mother at her stepfather's hands, and her subsequent life without her mother. In the poem

“Shooting Wild,” Trethewey looks back on signs of her mother’s abuse. However, she tempers the trauma and emotion of this memory by containing the story through her use of form and language. I understand this technique because I use it in my writing, as well. I often have characters face situations or work through thoughts or emotions by reflecting their process in stark, simple diction and by using lineation, white space, and silence in the poem to restrain or repress the dramatic situation. In “Shooting Wild,” Trethewey adheres strictly to the sonnet format, using ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme, three quatrains, and a couplet. The only element that is not consistent is meter. The ending couplet holds iambic pentameter, but most other lines do not contain consistent meter.

In terms of content, “Shooting Wild,” is made up of Trethewey’s childhood observation of physical gestures made by her mother or by the absence of sound from her mother. She opens the poem by explaining, “At the theater I learn shooting wild,/ a movie term that means filming a scene/ without sound” (Trethewey 174). She then uses this set-up of a soundless movie scene to examine moments of her life with her mother. She remembers watching her mother, noting that “At first her gestures were hard to understand” (Trethewey 174). Then, even as a child, she realized the shift when she recounts, “Then one morning, the imprint of his hand// dark on her face” (Trethewey 174). After this, she discerns, “I learned to watch her more” (Trethewey 174). She then noticed details such as “the way her grip tightened on a fork” (Trethewey 174).

It is when Trethewey discusses the absence of sound from her mother that even more powerful moments emerge from her memory. She recalls “being a child/ watching my mother, how quiet she’d been” (Trethewey 174). She realizes that her mother had been made “soundless in a house made silent by fear” (Trethewey 174). Trethewey also marks her mother’s “hush when her stepfather was near” (Trethewey 174). Most notable, however, in this poem about the

absence of sound, is the moment when Trethewey speaks of the absence of her mother's voice from her life. She writes, "I can't recall her voice since she's been dead:/ no sound of her, no words she might have said" (Trethewey 174).

The manner in which Trethewey uses language and restraint to create distance from her subject when writing about memory and personal history is similar to the manner in which I use language in my writing. Though much of her writing deals with personal events, Trethewey draws on the history of the South to contextualize her experience and emphasize its broader relevance. The examination of this history, therefore, remains within the scope of Trethewey's creative lens, specifically areas of racial, social, and cultural history to Trethewey has a personal connection as a person of mixed race living in the South.

Like Trethewey, I use my poetry to write about family history. Other poems in this collection are more immediately personal to me. One series includes poems about raising my children. In this grouping I explore the overall struggle of being a parent -- the doubt, guilt, frustration, and pride all wrapped into one experience. In the poem entitled "Doorway," another poem continuing the motif of doorways and transformations, I create a scene in which a parent and child argue, and in which the child storms out the door, leaving the parent standing alone. The parent reflects, "I am left with/ anger and silence and shame./ But mostly guilt./ Because I am your mother." Another poem from this segment titled "The Making of a Man" at first reflects the fear of having a child who is ready to leave home but ends with the words,

Now I can only
open the door
and stand aside,
knowing that he is already
better than I was before him.

This ending shows the pride of parenthood, and again reflects the motif of the doorway.

An additional segment of poems includes my own experiences as an adult moving through struggle, loss, or grief. The poem entitled “If We Are Honest” follows the internal narration of a character bringing a relationship to an end. The character is rooted in nature and encounters the rough gravel and underbrush of a creek bed, trees, and finally harsh wind on an open lake throughout the metaphorical journey of this poem. As the character reaches the end of this journey through the meditation that the natural surround has brought, a realization about the relationship is met:

When it is over,
I ease my shoulders and rest
and look around and understand
that if we are honest,
we know I don't want you here.
And if you had been listening,
you would already be gone.

This poem, along with others in this segment reflect a pattern in my work of internal contemplation followed by a moment of realization, decision, or action.

The pattern used in my writing of moving through images of nature to arrive at or reflect mental or emotional clarity is similar to much of the poetry of Mary Oliver. In her poem “In Blackwater Woods,” Oliver shares with the reader a recurrent location in her work. She moves through images of the natural surrounding by directly addressing the reader to

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars
of light. (Oliver 389)

Oliver then walks the reader through sensory details and images of nature such as cattails and ponds. She then connects what she observes in nature to spirituality and what she has learned throughout her life. She finally ends by relating her own realization:

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal
to hold it
Against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when it comes time to let it
go,
to let it go. (Oliver 389)

Much of Oliver's writings invites the reader to take action, to be active and involved in her own life and to interact with the world around her. Her use of spare diction and short, direct lines that are similar in style to the diction, syntax, and lineation I use in my writing, demonstrate that Oliver places a great deal of trust in the power of simple, earnest language and images. This is what draws me most to Oliver's work -- its rootedness in and connectedness to nature and the tone created by the simple direct speech.

There are many poets who drew me to poetry. The wry and clever humor of Billy Collins cannot be matched. The manner in which Jane Kenyon uses sound and imagery of nature to provide a comfort in grief seems effortless. The attitude with which Louise Gluck seems to raise her fist in the air when writing about marriage and divorce provides a model for building tone through constraint. There are two poets, however, to whom I consistently return. Mary Oliver, whose work is rich in the observance of nature but spare in diction, and Natasha Trethewey, with her reflection on history and memory, have been instrumental in the formation of my poetry. Creating this collection has been an introspective exercise in personal understanding. Much of the exciting poetry in the literary world today is reflective of issues in our society. Racism. Sexual identity. Women's rights. Mental health. Cultural identity. But that is not what is happening in my work. My writing is personal and quiet. It does not wave flags or create explosions. Instead, it finds a small stone and turns it over. Whatever is hidden underneath will

probably never be spoken about, but it needs to be understood. So in looking at pieces of my family's history or at my current reality with my own children, I have looked closely at these small moments in order to understand more. Yes, there is a need for parades, for demonstrations, for activism. But there is also a need for quiet, personal understanding. This is what my writing has been -- simple, clear, straightforward narrative of common life and the complexity it involves. So while it may not be shocking or inciting, this type of narrative poetry is still important in our society where personal introspection and understanding seem to have disappeared into the crowd of mass identity.

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POEMS

Observance

The slow waves
begin to increase,
rocking the kayaks
softly at first, then roughly
banging them on the bank.
A downturn of wind
bursts onto the water's surface
and I see the circular outflow
of ripples before I feel
the gust through the trees.

When you don't spend
all your days there,
it is difficult
to determine
which side
the storm will hit
in the once-quiet cove.

And as I rush to gather
inner tubes and tennis shoes
before the wind and rain take them,
I see the wizened woman
at the next camp
standing still,
hands on hips,
head upturned,
watching the water and the sky.
And I know I've been doing it all wrong.

May 11, 1948

She opened the thin door and dusty light
disturbed the darkness of the room.
Only family and like-family
ever came to the doorway
and didn't need an invitation to enter.
The knocking was an alarm sent up.

A young police officer from town
looked at the paper in his hand
rather than at her sunken face.

Mrs. Reid?

Yes.

Wife of Edgar Reid?

Yes. But I ain't seen him for two days now.

The boy officer shuffled his papers and his feet.

That's just it, ma'am.

The boy huffed and cleared his throat.

We found him dead, you see. Up on Commercial Street. Helen's Beer Tavern.

He got aholt of some strychnine. Ended hisself right there. Ma'am.

She stood looking out before her, not at the boy but past him.

Here are the papers to collect his body, ma'am.

He paused, then reached down to her side and placed
the papers in her unmoving hand.

He turned and walked away in silence and left her.

With a baby on her hip,

a baby in the cradle,

and a stair-step group of children

from her knees to her waist to her shoulders,

she was standing in the doorway of nothing.

May 13, 1948

The children line the pew to her right and left clinging
to her hollow self. The older ones, buttoned up
and slicked down, hold the younger on their laps,
shushing and bouncing to the singing
and the waving of funeral fans.

*Do Lord, oh do Lord,
Oh do remember me.*

She looks straight ahead, unwavering, cradling the baby,
using it as a shield against the congregation,
willing their attention away from her
with the set of her jaw
and her silence.

*Do Lord, oh do Lord,
Oh do remember me.
Look away beyond the blue.*

Voices rise around her
and the swishing fans increase.
Knees are patted in rhythm,
amens are lifted,
mourners press in for her redemption.

*I took Jesus as my Savior,
You take Him, too.*

Someone takes the baby from her,
another two loop their arms into hers
and walk her to the altar.

*I took Jesus as my Savior,
You take Him, too.
Look away beyond the blue.*

Knees on the wood plank floor,
casket yards before her,
her stare remains steadfast,
her chin unbowed, unpraying.
You bastard. You bastard. You bastard.

June 27, 1948

From where she works in the lower garden,
she can watch them up around the house.
A dusty yard on a dirt road
with barefoot children packing the earth
and tracking it onto the smooth wooden plank floors
and then back out again. They never stop.

She stops for a moment, resting in her work.
She stands, cools herself,
lets the barely stirring breeze dry her sweat.
One hand rests on the upright hoe,
the other on her hip. She tries to balance
the weight of eight children against
what is left of herself.

She turns her face skyward,
eyes closed. Slowly she lowers herself,
kneeling, then leans her body forward,
laying the palms of both hands
flat on the dry earth before her.

And she turns her head downward,
the force of her silent howl bending
her body to the ground.

July 13, 1948

She moved with care
through tendrils
of plants. Each dead
leaf crunched dryly
between rough fingers.
Calluses thick,
moving from garden to thimble to child,
but here delicate,
deliberately pruning,
mindful to not harm the living with the dead.

Picking stem by stem grew
tedious and her patience wore
on her, as did the sun, as did her mind,
and she began stripping entire branches
at a time, pinching the stalk at its base
and dragging her fingers to the end,
taking everything in between.

She stood up at the end of a row,
straightened her knotted back,
wiped stinging sweat from tear-bleared eyes.
She surveyed what she had left behind.

Nothing. Nothing remained.

She turned then, and stooped
to the next row ahead of her.

August 29, 1948

She follows the path
to the creek,
bottles of milk cradled
close to her.

The children have shoveled out a pool,
a bowl in the gravel
at the creek's edge,
and this is where she nestles
the milk, chilling it better
than the iceless icebox.

The clear creek water ripples
circles over her hands and up
her arms. She holds there
as long as she can.

She looks up toward the house.
No one is stirring.
So she steps in.
The clear current parts
around her legs and her feet sink
softly into the sand and gravel.
No voices come from the house,
So she wades in further.

She leans her head back and
takes in a deep breath
and lets her arms hang.
The house is quiet.
She sits down
then lays back.
Her housedress clings to her body,
her hair flows over her face.
And she floats.

September 17, 1948

She holds the brown paper bag
in her hands and pulls it close.
It is soft and has held many things
before coming to her hands.
Today it carries flower bulbs.
Flags and lilies.
For her flower garden, the neighbor lady says.
There hasn't been a flower garden here since -
well, there never has been.

Her eyes remain on the bag.
She can't meet her mama's
face or the neighbor lady's
who came with her.
Not while she holds
their things. Again.
Sometimes they bring
bottles of milk for the children
and flour for biscuits
and scraps of material for the girls' dresses.
And they need those things.
And she can't buy those things.
But the bulbs today in this brown bag
won't do them any good.
But they need them, too.

After they stand in the shade of the oaks
and talk about
their neighbors
and the weather
and the preacher
and pies,
her neighbor lady turns and walks toward the road.
Then her mama leans in to her,
*You stop it now. Soon as
you can, you'll do just as good
for someone else.*
She rests her rough hand on her daughter's arm
and presses the brown bag further into her.

October 22, 1948

Each day
as they walk out of her yard
and into the world,
she goes over the list
in her mind.

Are they clean?

Shirt collars pressed and hair slicked flat.
Dresses hemmed and clean.
Hair curled the night before
with a barrett to pull it back,
one for each of the girls,
shared pairs between them.

Are they fed?

A pot of oatmeal divided out this morning
made from the box that always sits
atop the icebox.
Lunch wrapped in papers.
crackers in one package,
cornbread in another.
They can share.
And they can drink water from the
pump out back of the school.

Are they warm?

It's not yet cold.
They don't notice
there's no wood stacked
on the porch or down
below the shed.
But it won't be long.

Inside these small acres
Live her world entire.

As they turn the curve in the road
and she can no longer
see the upturned bottoms of their feet
and can't hear their chattering secrets,
she returns to her work.

Quiet Spaces

The solitude found in simply
slipping into the cavernous
darkness of my yard
after night has fallen is helpful.
I lean my head back and
swallow the cool depth
of autumn's briskness,
and it is calming, bringing
the needed drunkenness of quiet.
Chaos dissipates
as the lingering smell of
leaves recently burned
drifts to me. An upsurge of
wind releases this afternoon's
rain from the leaves above me,
and every knot of worry is rinsed.
When finally I feel replenished,
I turn to start inside.
But I take a moment longer
and look inside my home.
It is alight with busyness,
and as soon as I open the door,
my solitude,
my quietness
will be gone.
So I take a step backward
out of the house light's reach,
and let myself be consumed
for just a moment more.

The Making of a Man

It is an impossible thing,
releasing a child into the world.

He isn't ready. How could he be?
But that must be the point -
That it isn't a child that is being sent.
It is a man.

And who am I, this mother,
this woman, to judge
the measure of a man,
even if I'm the one who made him.

He looks invincible, standing there
on the edge of his life,
a tiny voice
mewling into the wild
with eighteen years
breathing bravery into his mind.

So what is to be done?
My time is over and
my arms have stretched
for as long as they can.

I have pulled back the shades
and have opened wide the windows
to let light and air into his world.
I have pushed back the furniture
and given him space
to test and grow without breaking.
Now I can only
open the door
and stand aside,
knowing that he is already
better than I was before him.

Doorway

You slammed the door hard enough
to rattle the house around me. And then
you were actually gone. And I am left with
anger and silence and shame.
But mostly guilt.
Because I am your mother.

I pushed you into the world and I
have seen your face nearly every day since.
The thin line of life between us is being stretched
tight. But you are still tethered to me.
Walk back through the door. Right now.

Help me hang back up the picture frames
that fell within your storm.
See that this is not what I intended.
But this is where we are.

Brave New World

I drive away and leave you unpacked
into a new world, and I know this marks
the point that windows far distant
from mine will be claiming your light.
I created you.
But you are also your own creation.
Who I am and what I've done
will not help you live
a life of your own.

You are about to walk down sidewalks
and step through new doorways
into rooms of people I have never seen.
But this is not my loss.

As the sea of the world takes you in
and tries to swallow you,
do not fall under as I did
and let fear hold down
the self I wish I was.

Branches In Winter

I know you are disappointed.
I know there are things that
are hard to admit to yourself,
much less to others.
But truth will sink slowly
into your mind,
your heart,
your bones.
Branches in winter are unaware
of just how much weight
they can manage.
Ice clings heavy,
and snow layers thick.
But steadfastly, each branch
finds its way to the thaw
and then to another spring.
And with each day, you will do the same.

Words For My Children

I'm teaching them the best I can to be
good people. But I am at a loss.
I've lost the answer - what is good and right
and true in this world. It was written by
my own hand, but that scrap of paper was
misplaced and grabbed up by harsh new winds.

So every day I start rebuilding words.
Rebuilding my rules of how to be the one
good person in the room. But now I know
that what I say to them are not the words
I needed when I was their age. And know
the stories they will need tonight will not
sustain them through the darkness until dawn.
And will not have enough light for tomorrow.

If We Are Honest

I have waded through the shallows,
and the lush, murmuring depths,
and the dry gravel patches
of this creek bed
for years of my life.
And typically I would tire
and turn back by now.
But this day I started early,
and the light of day
still has much to give.
So I keep going.
And I push forward until
the underbrush clears and the trees open
to the lake where long before
I left a single kayak tied.
I take the time to untangle
the frayed rope before I paddle
into the open lake on my own.
I see the downturn of wind
that threatens my balance
before I feel it, as it hits the water
in the cove before me, sending out violent
circles of waves, throwing me from side
to side for a time. When it is over,
I ease my shoulders and rest
and look around and understand
that if we are honest,
we know I don't want you here.
And if you had been listening,
you would already be gone.

Rebuilt

I don't want to regain anything you took
from me. Because it stopped being mine.
You siphoned away
the years of my youth
and diverted the path
I had planned.

Oh this day. This life.

This one is finally mine.
This one cannot be taken
or turned in a direction
that is not my own.

Oh this day. This life.

This time my shoulders are heavy,
but my eyes are open.
I have cleaned all the rooms of my house
and have thrown out everything
I could not carry in a new direction.
All the pieces of life I was holding
tightly in my hands, fearing that if I slipped,
they would be lost.
And now I know
I only need to hold
my own truth.

This Morning I Fix My Tea

This morning I fix my tea
in just the same way
we prepared
it that cold morning
we spent wrapped
against the fog
and mist of England.
We looked down
from our window
onto the wet cobblestone
street that had chilled us.
The selfishness
of the contented sighs
and comfortable silences
of an experience
that was only
for us made us
full and happy.

So standing here
with the staleness
of a dark morning,
back at my own
sink full of dishes
I did not dirty,
I pour the milk
into the steaming
water just right,
and bring you back to me again.

Home

There is a language within these walls.
Moments when the house
speaks to us and for us.
Sitting in my stillness, I know where
each child moves by the creaking
of the floor above me.

As I listen again
to the house settling into silence
and see the light ebb and flow
across the watery
blueness of the walls,
I realize that I will never own
a home which doesn't hold ailments
of its own, that doesn't moan
with the increased passing
of its years.

But these walls,
breathing in and out, still have life.
This paint has changed
color upon color. Old floors,
heavy with the tread
of half a century past
were torn away and revived
with new life by my own hands.
I have touched, mended, labored over
all corners of this world that encloses us.
But the creaking will not be fixed.
It has been at home here
far longer than me.

Mourning

The hard-packed gravel of their farmyard
gave unsure footing at best.
And I believe my mind had ingrained
every inch of that expanse. I had walked
it with them time and again, morning and night.
In front of the new milk barn, the gravel was
always loose, and a step too quickly taken
was bound to slide away.
But across the yard, down the slope,
the doorway of the calf barn was soft and green,
often muddy. That doorway only took in the
filtered light of morning,
not the baking afternoon sun.

As I sat between chores in this grassy patch
of the yard with the farm cats
clamoring for my attention, my grandfather
found me on his way to the older barn.
He sat down the buckets
he carried, heavy with feed.

Early in the morning hours, he had
lost his brother, closer than a twin.
He stood for a moment, looking down the
row of wooden fence. I peered up, shielding
my eyes against the sun, waiting.

*I'm sorry I didn't get the horses
up for you. I'm sorry I can't take
you riding. Because, well, Ray.*

He set his jaw tightly and pressed his
lips together. Then he picked up the
buckets at either side of his legs,
set his feet solidly in the gravel,
and walked away to
the day of work ahead.

The Circle

Her steps are slow and unsteady
now, and you walk behind her, unseen,
hands out to catch her. Just
in case. You ease her onto the seat
and settle her in for the day. You use
your hands to smooth her thinning hair
and pull her woolen hat over her ears.

I see her look up into your face and
for one moment lay her own hands over yours.
And I wonder if this unashamed
tenderness that you pour onto her
came to you by surprise. Did you
expect to so easily love your mother
in the way she once loved you?

Finally, you pull up her collar and fasten
the top button of her coat. And you tuck around
her the blanket she made herself
to hold back the draft we all feel.

Control

The damp air she breathed
that day was welcomed
after the brittle, dryness of winter.
And the work she undertook,
the exertion, the satisfaction
of completion was needed and enjoyed.

She moved around the expanse of yard
with determined, solitary patience,
raking row upon row of fallen leaves.
The dark, pungent smell of the underside
of their dampness and the earth clinging
to them was heady and rich.

When she had patterned
the leaves into even rows,
straight lines in some spaces,
dotted piles in others, and great looping
curves where the perimeter required,
she finally lit the fire.

Smoke began to rise
and drift into the neighborhood.
The steady, even burn and crackle
crept from row to row, alive
and growing slowly as it fed
upon itself.

In a turn, however, her even rows
no longer mattered.
One quick jump of wind connected
the pattern of the yard entire
and her careful preparation
left her surrounded in fear.

Impasse

The slope of the ground we stood on
was growing slick with mud.
He pushed up his hat bill and scratched
his forehead at the hairline.

I just don't see it. No need for it.

His cap remained tilted upward.
He sighed and spat a thick stream of tobacco juice.

*No ma'am. You'd just as soon build
you a house around these steps
before you should move them away.*

I laughed sharply but through his quietness,
I sensed his sincerity.
His work-worn hands settled on his hips, waiting.

I looked down at the steps.
Hand-picked. Hand-placed.
Rounded and worn by a hundred years
of tread. And now bearing my own muddy tracks.

I climb the height of them again,
look down across the valley and back at him.
And cross my arms.

The Loneliness of Rain Drove Her Inside

She elbows open the inner door,
and the screen bangs shut
behind her. She leaves her work boots
on the rug, straightened, dirt contained.

She crosses to the sink and washes
the dried, post-harvest mud
from her hands. Out the window,
dimly now, she can still see
the empty field shorn clean, down
to the coarse brown stalks and stubble,
up to the stand of skinned-bark, bare trees.

Behind her, throughout the house,
the silence of her chosen solitude
falls in upon itself.
No happy welcome awaits her,
but it is unwarranted. So she sets
to building a small fire
that will warm her against
the night's cold.

The Surrounding

Our feet can't touch the bottom
when we swim into the middle,
and we can't see what's there in the mud
below us. But it's better not to know.
We tread water, swirling pieces of leaves,
weeds, debris from the riverbank.
The trees on either side lean together,
closing darkness around us more quickly
than the rest of the world can see.
The air around us is heavy and as warm
as the water. I slip my head below
the surface, and stay.
The green of this world cannot last.
But still, as my head breaks from one darkness
into another, I gasp for life, breathing in
the kingdom of God within my midst.

And Again

The Dear Lord that my mother knows is not the same as mine.
Hers is quiet and reserved and forgiveness remains unnecessary.

But mine has been starved lean and worn down by my need.
I know my prayers have been the last straw at the exhausted

end of His eternally long days. He must tilt the holiness of His eyes
heavenward and sigh heavily every time my own life leaves me

with disappointment so bitter it carves me from the inside
out and leaves me raw and hollow. Because He realizes at that point,

once again, I have forgotten every blessed word
He said. So He rubs His wounded brow,

and begins my creation all over again.

Transitive Property

Each of us looked around the room.
Eyes shadowed by furrowed foreheads,
not meeting burdened glances,
but focused downward,
taking in the work ahead.
My brother asked,
Do you all want any of these things?
No one spoke. To answer
would be greedy, too possessive
of items not our own.
I surveyed the stacks of
her treasures, opened
box lids and closet doors.
And it felt wrong doing this
without her here.
But I realized as I ran my hands
across layers of quilting fabrics
that I could let go of these
scraps of material. And of everything.
Because they weren't mine to love
at their beginnings.
So my step toward the door
seemed to mark my decision.
But then I turned.
I'll take it all with me.
And I took the first box into my hands.

Silent Form

It was never an accident,
walking by their pictures.
They hung in the hallway waiting
for me to ask
about their lives. But I never
allowed the questions to come.
And I never broke my stride as I walked by,
only absorbing what the corner of my eye
could soak in.

The flowers in the picture's background were lovely.
And I see now that I make the same squint
with the smile of my eyes.
One father. One sister. Half a family.
But what kinship is created from the lives I never knew?

Even if I had asked for stories,
I still would not know the sound of their voices.
While I could see it there,
captured in silent form,
I wouldn't know the noise
of her chatter as she pulled
her wagon behind her, bumping
along down the sidewalk, one wheel
trailing an entangled piece of yarn from a day of play
that had come before.

And I would have no memory
of what he had said to
my infant self, crouched there
next to me in the yard,
blue cigarette smoke drifting above his head.

Grief Had Come For Us This Time

Had we thought about it, we
would have known that it would
find us eventually.
Because it does.
Because it will.

But it was different now that it was here
with us. Personal.
Still, we wouldn't grant
it any of the rights it walked
in with. Wouldn't look it in the eye
and let out our open-throated wails.

Instead we would think about what we needed
from the store rather than let tears
mist into our eyes or drip
shamelessly down our faces.
So we continued to look out the window
or bite the insides of our mouths
or read the papers in our hands.

Each of us was paralyzed
by our own hidden grief
unable to wrap our arms around each other and
hold one another.
We were only able to feed silently within the pain
and feel it solely for ourselves.

Where Is the Applause For the Mundane?

Where is my plaque? My framed certificate?
*You fixed your furnace again,
Saving your family hundreds of dollars.
Everyone lives in comfort because of you.*

Or perhaps the words
*You catered to hundreds of people today.
No one thanked you. Actually, you failed.
Curious to see how you will multiply
The fish and loaves tomorrow and improve your work.*

Pulling in to my parking spot today,
I imagine there will be a crafted metal sign
posted in anticipation of my arrival that will read,
*Thank you for the unnoticed miracles
You are about to perform. You're late.*

Water into wine is now the expectation.
Hands all around me are outstretched,
grabbing on to the exhausted shreds of my depleted soul.

Generations of Work Have Brought You to This

You don't complain against the cold,
the rain, the snow you can't move
through, or the mud that comes after.
You take thermoses of coffee to warm
yourself against the winter and gallon jugs
of frozen water to help drag your drained,
wrung-out, limp-collared body through
summer's indiscriminate heat. You spend
your days moving cattle, lumbering beasts
who have never known urgency, from
one field to another, keeping them warm,
keeping them cooled, keeping them fed,
keeping them. Your hands are rough,
your body is torn and broken. Your bank
account will never be full. But you think
you are the lucky one. Because when you
step out of your rusted farm truck, and place
your feet solidly and soil that is your own,
you are paid in full
with mornings like this.

Look around --
the sun is finally here and is doing its best to warm you.
The grass under your feet is emerging at last into its greenness.
And the gentle beast you have kept alive rubs against your hands
the thick, curled coat of winter hair in nuzzled thankfulness.

What Is Lost

My uselessness is evident
as I watch her sit at the window
with the evening's approach. She waits
for him, not remembering that years ago
she buried his body and mourned his loss.

*Where do you think he could be, she asks,
and forgetting her question and my answer,
in a few minutes she asks again.*

Her present world falls unrecognized
around her as her anxiousness grows.
He should have finished choring by now.

What a robbery,
that this storehouse
of memory,
of experience,
of life
could be pulled from the grasp of her mind
before she could turn around and cry, Wait.

Darkness enters through her window
and conversation falls away,
leaving only her questions.
Has something bad happened, and you're not telling me?
For one brief moment her eyes look clear,
and I give her a different answer
than a few minutes before.

Watching It Go

She slowly drank in the river air
in one extended gulp.
Hands on hips, she looked
out across its width, then upstream left
and downstream right.
In her exhale, she decided,
Guess we'd better build that fire, don't you think?

As she gathered and arranged
dry handfuls of sticks,
she looked at the stone wall,
the flower borders, the swings.
*They made that little park for Stanley's boy, you know.
The one who died. Caught up in a rope in the barn.
It was an accident, though. Happened right in front of them.
Nothing they could do. That rope was so thick, so strong.
Couldn't untie it, couldn't cut it in time.
And he was just right there with them. But gone.*

She continued collecting in quiet thoughtfulness now,
searching the riverbanks, picking over
waterlogged branches. She ventured
onto higher ground for dry tinder and lifted
out two joined handfuls of leaves and sticks.

But with a sudden quickness, she dropped
the pile back to the ground.
Out of the bundle rustled a snake,
dry-scaled, thick, and brown.
As it fell to the ground with a heavy thud,
a cloud of dust plumed upward.
The slithering body moved toward the edge of the river,
and she tilted her head to the side, watching it go.
As quietly as the snake, the river, the rope, she judged,
He didn't hurt me none. So I've got no need to hurt him.
And she looked downward to continue her work.