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Manuscripts are discussed with the writer’s name masked so that beginning and established writers are read without prejudice.

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Randall R. Freisinger

DANCING SCHOOL

This morning rising from the basement, stomping cold from my shoes, I see gray footprints traced on kitchen tiles from where I have just left off stoking the wood-fueled furnace. Winter mornings my father left such ashy traces when he rose up from tending coal while we boys dozed over cod liver oil and plates of fried corn mush smothered in Karo syrup. So I have followed in his footsteps after all, as if we had been partners all along in one of those dance-by-mail schools where you learn each new sequence from footprints pasted in rhythmic patterns across the floor.

In this my fiftieth year, close as I am to his last dance, I still feel like new wine. An old bottle, perhaps, drunk a bit too soon, before its time.

Once, at a fold in my life when I had reasons to be sad and alone, I stood high up on a balcony in the atrium of a pricey hotel and watched far beneath me graceful couples at a Tea Dance, teachers and students, as I recall, of an Arthur Murray school, exotic flurry of feather, sequin, tuxedoed poses, polished products of self-conscious practice, step by tedious painted step: rhumba, fox trot, bossa nova. It was dreamy, unreal, like that dance scene in Bertolucci’s Last Tango in Paris, the couples so stylish they nearly make you want to forget the violence of butter and sex.
My friends and I dance less often now, but because we have been through it a long time together, some nights—New Year’s Eve perhaps—when need rises in us like hunger’s sacrament we dance, twos or threes or fives or even alone, our bodies like small scrums of prayer, signing what we have won and lost, the ones on this or the other side of the river, our lives more and more returning to that first room where we pressed ourselves shyly by gender against opposing walls, divided by nothing but space, music, dimming light, and tongues tied into knots by desire.

This morning these traces my feet leave say I am still moving, so while my children watch, spoons of cereal stopped mid-air, I move, hot and nimble and raw as my half century will allow, jiving to a new tune, one of late getting a lot of play in my head: great lyrics, a beat you can dance to better if only for knowing the score.

—for Jack Driscoll
Randall R. Freisinger

THE DRINKER

No one could ever explain to him the meaning of enough. Evenings he would come to us down the sidewalk from the city, from the work he hated to love, a bottle in brown paper from Lafferty’s Liquors gripped in one hand, his thumb tucked beneath the fingers of the other as if it were some small final thing to hold onto. Conversations of ice in a glass of bourbon were more familiar now to us than his voice, which he left mostly at the office or saved for fighting late at night with Mother, who long since had moved sex and other silken things out of their room. His talent and art were the drinker’s: He knew how to slip a thin reed deep into the dark secret earth to sip from its coolest pooled spaces, or kneel to suck sweet droplets from a tuber when what would slake his thirst had vanished from its normal singing places. No mortal’s thirst moved him. Only divinity perhaps could fathom such need, could rise for work each morning at five, unencumbered, while what he had made from his breath and blood and seed lay dry and wasted all about him. Only divinity could lie and dissemble, seeing always beyond a world’s immediate pangs and cries of defeat to the millennium when no possible thirst would go unappeased.
For this reason, that July of great drought, record heat, when fish leapt from Missouri’s scalding streams for relief and the city’s stinking airless rooms and alleys betrayed their aged and impoverished dead like a dream of apocalyptic plague, we jabbed his cold body into the parched earth. For this reason, we returned that evening, climbing the tall cemetery fence at dusk to rain whiskey on his grave’s cracked lips, just to say with hearts dehydrated by grief: Father, Father, forgive us.
ON NEW YEAR'S EVE

the man in the wrinkled blue suit and black socks and delicately
striped tie
checks into the Holiday Inn on the left-hand side of Route 101.
He is tired of missing her. He is tired of never having anyone.
The room is born twin—twin beds, twin paintings in plastic
frames,
bedspread, bed ruffle, curtains, all rolled into one muted color.
"You're a case," the man says to himself
passing the reflection in the mirror,
"a thirty-three-year-old case."
Today, you should know, the muffler on his '78 Maverick went.
And Sheeby, the fat girl at the office, asked him back to her place
for Shepard's Pie, "for the New Year," she had said.
This was just before he checked in, alone,
with two six-packs of Coors Light. Two cans already empty,
lined up on the plastic bureau,
like two tin soldiers, shoulders touching.
When I was born you rode your bike up the block and slammed into the tree on Mrs. Carmichael’s front lawn, screaming I had finally come. Each day you raced home from school to feed me and each night you pressed your ear to my chest to see that my heart was beating. You read me *James and the Giant Peach* and *Charlotte’s Web* from the rocking chair beside my bed. When we came in from the woods you checked my hair for ticks, tender fingers scrubbing behind each ear. When I started to bleed and asked if it was devil’s blood you took out that gold-backed book from the basement to show me illustrations of the egg traveling and said one day I’d be able to make babies because of this. It’s different now. You went away. First to college, then to the hospital. They said the chemicals in your brain were unbalanced, they stapled a plastic bracelet around your wrist and said we could visit on Sundays. You played the piano there. You sang *Sweet Caroline* and made necklaces out of macaroni. You made me tin earrings shaped like doves. You built a fantasy life beneath the porch slats; you dug tunnels to China. I told you I wasn’t going to let them hurt you. I lied. I lied and worse, I hurt you. I went on with my life and left you behind, like bread crumbs leading nowhere. One child on the seesaw. I took off, Sister, I didn’t know what to do, because you told me never to forget we are sisters, you taught me the word, what it meant. How you pricked your finger.
with the needle, and then mine, how we pressed our pointers together then, and you kept saying it, over and over: sisters, sisters.
FOUR YEARS IN WATER

You led me on my merry way.
There were balloons, shrimp,
two party hats.

There was a calico cat,
the horse on the merry-go-round
had fur.

You took my hand and we swam
into water,
floated for eight months.
Then you said, "enough."
You wanted to be detached.
You swam back.

All while you smiled from shore
cooking shish kebabs
over the stone-fire
glad to be free of me—
my feet were becoming webbed.
I grew slick skin,
could go under water for days.
I talked to oysters.

At night, when it should have been hardest,
when fear should have gripped me,
when I was supposed to say, "why me?"
when I should have drowned, unnoticed—
Someone invisible held me.

We floated belly-up
above the bellies of dolphins.
We were kissed by fish.
I came back as two, not one, 
while you, my love, had turned to bone. 
All those shish kebabs 
and you still starved. 
Are starving still.
Joseph Hutchison

STANDING BY

This woman who has lost so much—mother love, job, pleasure in her body—kneels by the grave while I stand by in case I am called. Now she is speaking toward the earth healed over by grass. I am moved, but wonder why she speaks. “The one you seek is not here.” I watch intently, standing by, but it’s no help. She is as alone in my looking as I am alone in the shadow of her loss.
Joseph Hutchison

LATE RAIN

Water raveling down a gutter woke me, or the breeze stitching its silvery web across the night window. I didn’t need to glance at half of the bed to know it was empty, but did. How often our divided life seems like a dream! For a moment I lay there, tangled in longing, trying to believe it was.
OLD DOG COMES HOME

The way smells like trash dump, then a mile of winding eucalyptus topping off (so tired) at a pullout steaming off the valley and its thin slow river that slakes a dog's dry tongue unraveling the road. Running home. Whoever thought to let an old dog die incognito, so the kids won't know? Ten miles out of town for a King who couldn't get out the door in time and messed the family room. The kids have not stopped calling and those brittle lungs ache but keep pumping to their call.
WORLDLY PLEASURES

My skin’s summer-burnt,  
body roughened by heat  
threatening to shrink me dry.  
I long for patient hands  
to lift this fever, ministrations  
of cool towels, iced tea  
in tall, slim glasses,  
fingers to massage my neck,  
shoulers, easing the days  
away. Life isn’t easy  
here on the chaise lounge—  
sun glassy and slick  
above me, humid air  
holding me to earth,  
longing for your body  
caught deep within me,  
unsettling as this heat wave.  
I could pretend to feel  
nothing, content to laze  
the whole day through,  
ever letting on to what’s  
beneath my silken caftan.  
Could neglect what my  
muscles say, ignore their  
lingo of tension and acquisition,  
the sparks of sensation  
they re-live whenever  
you make your appearance,  
clothes falling to the floor  
as you stand before me,  
inviting as the blue waters  
I dream of. Crazy  
from the heat, I’m parched  
as those deserts I’ve seen
photos of: shifting sands, 
brutal winds, little vegetation.
Darling, when you return, 
I’ll have tired of this life 
of ease and leisure.
Seeking much more 
than temporary pleasures, 
I’ll be looking for you—
every inch of skin, 
every blessed wrinkle, 
each bone and bruise 
that I can soothe, 
every pore apparent 
to my naked eye, 
knowing hands.

Joseph/Worldly Pleasures
"DANCE FEVER"

There's that couple again, spinning beneath the massive disco ball, competing for cash and prizes worth more than they'd ever seen, more than they'd ever know. That couple, of course, is us, an unlikely pair moving under hot lights, dancing toward the edge of the stage and back again, hoping there's no trap door, no sudden drop from the disco pop and sizzle. Tonight, I'm the girl in trouble, the one you might like better if you slept with her, face void, tamed under make-up for a studio audience. I'm spandex, sparkle, a flash of leg beneath a neon pink skirt, silver lamé top, a hustler, a freak, an endless vibe that knows how to smile for the camera, faking the pleasures of nightlife But no matter how I try,
our dance is always off-beat,
and you’re moving away from me,
through the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s,
leaving behind this bad girl,

this Donna Summer devotee
who could never master the art
of slow dance, shy glide.
You’re moving to your own

rhythm, to the whine of wheels
inside your head that won’t
stop for anyone, a shuffling
two-step you learned

in dancing school, bad luck
streak intact. And when our
minutes on the floor are up,
we’ll pace those small rooms

of our own, cloisters
where there’s only
skin on skin, try
for the passion music

can’t provide, can only
hint at, our fever subsiding
to a pulse, a good beat
that’s easy to dance to.
LORRAINE MILLS, THE WORLD'S LARGEST DISCOUNT FABRIC STORE

Swinging in, we arrive on the vast tarmac, a few cars huddled near the door. She strides inside as I loaf aimlessly the other way to the billowed chain-link fence under dreadlock willows ministering a stream that vanishes beneath the avenue, beneath the warehouses and dead mills bulked against the sky.

How crystal, sliding over slate silt, rocks wearing wigs. Sunlight bounces on scales of chrome, a bike like a pair of wrenched spectacles, shattered and jammed at the culvert. On the bottom, a car battery squats, Pandora’s box, or a tablet from outer space. A pop bottle gasps, trapped by a branch trailing a white plastic bag. Fat end full, a dog-chewed, neon plastic bat wags.

I go into the mill looking for her green hat bobbing above the banked rolls of Brazilian, cockatoo’d cotton, polyester zebra hide, San Diego day-glo, dirt-colored linens and furred upholstery stuff. There she is, fingerling remnants to vanish with, at night, croned above her peddle Singer’s slow jig, from which she will hold to light a new garment, same old earthy color and fit.

Wandering the racks, my weight squeaking the heaved hardwood floor, my face heats... hanging around where women for a hundred years did some singing, some coughing before the tall,
belt-drive jennies burgeoning bolts and bolts of virgin material, laundry baskets at their feet with babies whimpering, hacking, laughing where men loosed tubercular chaws.

Survivors gather in clutches above the bins, stare into the folds, hold colors to the jaundiced light. One by one inspect zippers as if they were foetal vertebrae dangling from hooks. They whisper, mock-quarrel, in tongues, Portugueses, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, Italian nodding, shaking their heads, laughing in miscible grief. My wife turns sideways sliding by, excusing herself.

My eyes ache. It’s the colors, or just the idea of dry goods. I can’t stop yawning. In a wing of the British Museum we stood around until our feet died among the tiny, wrapped royalty in open sarcophagi. I couldn’t stop yawning. She hovered above a glass box where a commoner lay curled on a strew of sand, just as they found her, somewhat covered by a 3000 year old rag. I did avert my eyes...ribbons of vellum spanned the varnished ribs, the pelvis, tipped like a cradle.

Back in our sealed Toyota, her string-tied bundles swollen on the back seat, she sighs, lifting off her hat, re-fixing hairpins. For a moment her hair falls as it did thirty years ago, and a flute concerto on WGBH lifts and its as though we were just starting up again,
somewhere to go, something to do in passing
by the brook beyond the herniated fence
that is still running through limbs, over stones,
through a paint can's lodged, partial smile, still
swizzling a white plastic spoon in slow arabesque
below a raquetball bobbing on the spokes.
Helen Frost

OUR EYES IN THE MIDDLE

The last days with my father like the first
days with my son held us who labored
towards them in tenderness in tenderness.

Deer came to the salt he had set out.
They licked it, looked toward the window
where he sat, looking too. Chicadees and finches ate their seeds.

That first night his hair
smelled of cinnamon. Is this the scent
of the inside of my body?

Two owls came. One in the pinyon pine,
one on the roof. My mother heard its voice,
saw its shadow on the roofline, on the snow.

Would I love my stepson less
than the baby? The birth
gathered us all into a circle.

My sister flew out the day I arrived.
When I left my brother stayed. We saw
bobcat tracks outside the house.

I tried to step out of my dreams
at the first small cry, to let my husband sleep.
I slept during the daytime with the baby.

His hands were warm. They felt strong
even when his strength was almost gone.
His eyes were full of love and jokes and sorrow.
Frost/Our Eyes in the Middle

While I fed him the aurora crossed the sky,
green red silver white curtains shimmering leaving
sky dark above snow.

When he said goodbye he stroked my hair.
His heart was beating, he was breathing. He stroked my hands.
“I probably won’t see you again.”

At first he cried a lot. One book said, “Maybe
they’re just sad to be here.” Then he got interested.
Little fingers tangling in our hair. A smile.
Helen Frost

LAWN MOWER

His voice was in my hair, his legs tight around my waist.
His hands a knot behind my neck, his eyes closed, in my hair. My eyes were open, my ears open wide: Something was coming. Bigger than people. Noisy.

It didn't knock us down.
It turned away. But turned again and, noisy, came towards us.
I kept saying “It's o.k.”
It doesn't knock us down. It turns away. Turns again, keeps on coming towards us.
AGAINST THE ROUTINE

Getting dressed for fourth grade on a morning like so many mornings: first black socks, then navy blue pants, then a white, button-down shirt. . . suddenly, outside my window, from the backyard came the loud crack of gunshot. I ran through the house to the kitchen where my sisters were staring out the back door. There on the back steps my mother stood strong and calm as bronze, still pointing my father’s revolver at the targeted yellow sky. Then he came up behind us, pushing his way through with his startled and sleepy face. She just slowly turned and said, “I don’t know; Matt— I just felt like shooting the gun.”
Toward the end, he painted crows
where there weren’t any crows,
tacking them to the glowering horizon
of a blonde wheat field.
It was only a painting, after all,
anything could have happened in it.
Another scene
and sunlight leaning on the canvas.
A wingless streak
slid from his brush across
the empty cloth, before he lay down his tool
and took the gun to his side,
just where Adam’s rib was taken—
not to his heart, nor his head,
not meaning, really, to put an end to his life,
but to wrestle a little more with it—

The book I have tells me
he was not painting at the end, but only stepped
behind a manure pile and shot himself,
before making his way back to the inn at Auvers
and to his small spare room,
where, 36 hours later, he died.

But when I look again
at the version I like better,
at the screen and the workingman flickering there,
I see that his lips are blackened
from wetting the paintbrush,
as if paint were a food not a poison.
I see oil mixing with blood
and the mouth moving with intention,
as he staggers back to the easel
as if to take up his brush
Wendell/Altman's Van Gogh

(so that I become a little hopeful, momentarily),
but then back into town and into the arms
of history, no crows wheeling overhead.
Julia Wendell

LULLABYE FOR THE SUN

People ask what am I doing—
how am I living my life, what am I up to—
and lately, I haven’t much to say.
Peace is like that,
it is so quiet, so
unflamboyant.
The seasonal depressive knows
the contrast; in his mind,
the earth tilts away from the sun
each fall and winter. Consider
the setting sun
as it kisses the horizon,
it loves what it touches,
yet strays so far afield each day.
At what point does the Earth
know the greatest peace? At 9,
when the coffee’s smoothest and darkest?
At quarter to noon when things are almost
half over? At 3,
when the children traipse home
with dark secret shapes in their pockets?
Or now,
as swallows dip and twirl
carving the present
into the autumn dusk? We know
that within each day
is a lifetime,
that each bright moment contains
code for despair.
But do we know
what the swallows know,
as they dip and twirl,
their wings as busy as a baby’s hands
fluttering at the face,
Wendell/ Lullabye for the Sun

as dim and furtive
as an old man's thoughts.
What will we take with us
that we didn't already bring?
BEFORE THE SNOW

In the distance
Someone reads in whispers
from the book of storms... 

And the night rises up.

All things are still,
like leaning trees.
waiting,
I can hear
almost as if it were nothing
the breath
of a thousand ashy flakes.
And silence
streaks past,

bringing the cold
that lights fires
within us
and bleeds the clouds
of their wintery
voices.
LEFT ONLY WITH NOVEMBER

Leaves, the color of crushed pumpkins, 
crack under the heels of warmer shoes. 
Only the hands of forgotten lovers 
ever get this dry.

The earth must be on that part 
of its circle away from the sun 
that spins season into season 
silent as a landscape 
made from the bones of trees 
and the hard November floor.

This reminds me of the Christmas 
I opened a gift 
and it was mostly tissue paper. 
I wanted to clothe it back 
into its silver wrapping 
so I could once more believe 
in its promise.

I don’t like the gust of my own breath 
being the only reminder of life, 
that startled second each year 
when I see it for the first time, 
or realizing again that 
what I saw in the leaves of October 
weren’t really colors at all.
Francine Witte

HOW GOOD YOU HAVE IT

You just don’t know,
my mother says,
meaning someday
I’ll look back
and laugh,
meaning
I’d have to.

It’s her way of saying
that yes, men are creeps
but it’s nothing personal,
and that it’s okay
to work in an office, where
at 40, I’m still the girl.

It’s fine, she says, to sit
all day with an advanced degree.
It’s tough all around
and the proud don’t eat.
There’s so much time,
your whole life ahead,
which is really
what scares me the most.

You’re young, she tells me,
you’ll heal.
You think I had it made?
Raising you girls, and it’s not
like today. I couldn’t just leave.

In those days,
a woman stayed,
even if he lied,
even, if he—.
Witte/How Good You Have It

I think of all the years
since then, years
that have left me alone,
adult, where even now
neither one of us is laughing.
Francine Witte

WHEN A LOVER LEAVES

it hurts in an old way

like a song
my mother hummed

way back, before
I knew how young

she was, or even
that she had

music.
HOW WE STAND UP

Nora, I couldn’t tell you how to stand up
to a stiff breeze, but I know
pockets of unimaginable force
find a purchase inside us
and draw everything that makes
whatever it is we are
back to those little graveyards
we carry out of the womb. And I know

you must have infernal evenings
when your good blood darkens with radiant metals
and this language you never wanted to speak
leaves its stain on your tongue.
There will be a fitful brawling
between your body and the body inside,
one wanting to bolt upright and howl
every misplaced cell into the air to suffocate
and fall; the other wanting to give in
to its mortal exhaustion
and leave the world to spend itself
on all its curious activities.

Blame it on a universal scapegoat.
All diseases and riots, every fall
either to or from grace. Even when the world fails,
can we crave anything but survival?
Once, I’d have told you all about victory,
word by meticulous word. But tonight,
by this lamp burning its hole
in the dark of my basement,
through which I can see your face
poised under a waterfall of milk,
the best we can hope
is to stand up to our reflexes,
Lavieri/How We Stand Up

to grow old knowing nothing,
and leave the posing of questions to our spines.
MAMMALS AND OTHERWISE

Now that she has taken up
her broken wing residence
in these woods, I cannot imagine
life without this turkey vulture.
I'm trapping mice and leaving them
for her at the tree line.
A little closer every day
until I see her come out
like an old Sicilian widow
in a heavy, black cape full of shoulders;
a calcium limp
and coarse, thin hair on that pate
with its comical furrows.
I can hear the soft clacking
of her hook tipped beak
wordlessly opening and closing.
_Petersen's Guide to North American Birds_
tells me she would appear headless in flight.
She looks me in the eye
before pinning the mouse
to the grass with her scaled knuckles,
tearing it up by quarters
with her hook.
I sit back.
What a good human being I've been,
killing one thing, smiling on behalf of another.
Downwind from the lighthouse at Pemmaquid Point
a boy walks slick obsidian ledgerock
discovering between pauses in the sea’s wrath
a tiny pool clear as a camera lens.
The boy thinks of a mouth studded with ceramic molars
periwinkle, barnacle, silver snail.
At the pool’s bottom shift a pair of starfish.
They tilt against a bedding of rust-colored kelp.
A wave momentarily erases the pool
gradually spreading with a hiss before it retreats.

Rolling back the sleeves of his windbreaker
the boy plucks from cold chaotic foam
one horned and slimey starfish. Treasure.
Balling itself up, dangling
between his thumb and index finger
round and lumpy as a walnut, wet and sharp
its red dot bloated with spit.
The boy is dazzled. This is conquest.
Another wave again erases the pool.
An enchanted boy vows to keep his find forever.
IN THE SIERRAS

In the blond grass
of the meadow
light weaves
over the scarred pebbles
and the blue atoms of lupin
swarming on their stalks.
Here beaver have toiled
all day like monks
along the spine of the river
where ancient fish
purse their lips and drowse
in the shadows
of an outleaning oak.
The last of the sun
cracks on rocks of granite
as dusk bats swim away.
This is how night comes,
with an opossum’s furious eyes,
with fire and the pine needle snap
of the many soft hoofed creatures
mapping the forest floor.
Without sound white spiders crawl
across the unplumbed blackness of sky.
VETERAN'S DAY

Uncle walked home by moonlight, smoked in his chair until morning grazed the lamplight circling his shoulders. Asleep in the thick air of afternoons that cushioned a dog's far off bark, the leaves spiraling down, he wrestled a pillow, moist with dreams. Then the sky would pull its swords from the Venetian blinds and he let evening come over him, lying back, listening.

When the Motorola crackled with news of yesterday's winners, Seabreeze, Atlantic City, Trouble's Boy, his eyes would stir like coals inhaling. And he'd describe in his voice, scarred by nicotine, the photo finish he imagined, the horses' necks straining, ears flicked...
Smith/Veteran's Day

back, dirt clods
exploding, Silver
Pockets, Nike,
Redemption!

Now
in a slate bay
backlit by sunlight
steel strands of rain
are falling. On the hills
above in gardens
of stone, a few flowers
tremble in the grass.
The little the ground
gives the wind will
take. Here is the
angel that lost its
arm. My uncle
never had a chance
to marry. See his
house without windows.
How small his door.
SOMEBODY AT THIS ADDRESS

1
"Somebody at this address has swallowed a lot of pills."

"Is it you?"

"No, not me." Not today. It's Mary, Mary, Mary, my sad and sensible friend.

My sad insensitive friend. She is getting sleepy. She is getting very sleepy and smaller and smaller—

Cops rap at the door. Uniforms swarm up her stairs, luggers and lovers of white machines, of gages, hoses, secret places—

and smaller and smaller. As they swing her away in the hammock, she is so tiny

she has become a flower: one pink blossom off the hollyhock stalk.

Where they convey her is not where she is going.
Scambly Schott/Somebody at this Address

2
Inside this ward of ordinary light, joy is a lamp. Every color has fresh edges.

A woman come back from the dead is whispering hoarsely: everything she says is amusing.

She walks carefully, balancing herself as if she has swallowed a treasure, walking, I think, as I walked after each new baby; and I, even knowing what I know, would serve another twenty years just for these days of mystery, for such another resurrection.
Joyce Odam

MY GHOST STORIES

I have no siblings. I am in their dark.
I am the one with no mirror.

Mother broke the glass.
Mother took it away from me.

She hid it in pockets
of tiny dresses.

*

I cut my hands. I blamed others.
I said others threw glass at me.

She believed me.
We moved to a new country.

Nobody there
knew how dangerous we were.

*

I achieved power.
I became famous for my lies.

I wore dresses with pockets full of glass.
I would not look in mirrors.

Children believed
my ghost stories.
LUNAR ECLIPSE

Stretched back in a lawn chair,
I sat beside my mother rocking
in our gravel driveway, and tried
to follow the line her finger
drew to the stars, but the sky
was too clear, the points
too numerous. Where did the Crab
scuttle away from the Hunter’s

club? What hid the seven faint
stars she called the Maidens?
They were fleeing from lovers
who chased them into the heavens,
and she said when she worked
with her sisters picking cotton
each September break Alabama schools
gave for families to bring in

the crop, her sister Helen told
the story of the Maidens and
their flight from love that left
them as dim stars on the horizon.
The story helped keep them going
as dusk came on and the bolls
left the girls’ hands bloody, so
sore even the hour-long soak

in epsom salts her mother made all
the girls do didn’t really help.
They pulled burrs from each others’
hair, brushed out the buns they
wore in the fields with a comb
of whalebone a great-grandmother
had left in the family, then
the six of them took turns by age
Tribble/Lunar Eclipse

at the mirror and basin, put on
their flannel gowns, and took
their places in the room's two
featherbeds. She asked me what
they'd taught us in school about
eclipses and I told her of Norse
myths, wolves swallowing the sun
and moon—something I'd read in
Bulfinch—but she said she thought
it resembled nothing so violent.
I woke as the last, white sliver
vanished. She was humming a song
I didn't recognize, improvising
her melody around the poor man's
widow's calls from back among
the pines. She leaned up, touched
my arm, said I should go to bed,
but I asked her to let me stay
until the moon reappeared. So
we sat in silence as a point
grew at the edge of the black
disk that had replaced the moon,
but the light wasn't what I'd hoped
for, only slight and yellow.
DRIVING THROUGH HER FATHER WITH THE DESERT

The money’s too low and the time too short.
The woman didn’t stutter her entire life for this.
The evergreens wear hooded vests in the forests of the snow
and that’s more for her than a job. It’s more

than the cages domestic birds arrive in, more
than the time she had no home.
What a life: she is driving through her father with the desert
and a soul who’s inhabited the desert enters her.

Not painful,
not fearful.
Odd like a light
when you don’t need one.
DURATION

A woman — a nun — in rain.
A duration of rain.
She is standing, she is standing.

An umbrella.
A nun.
A woman.

The trees glisten
they are that wet.
Green. And blue. Blue trees.

*

The next time my father speaks to you that way
I’m going to tell him to just fucking cut it out.
He’s an old man and he should shut up anyway.
He used to do it to me, he’s not going to do it to you.

*

Against the wide lawn there’s a single lamp
glistening in the wind—the lamp has a light heart.
This is one of the two lights
which make up the world.

Against the voices there is a timing which is saying no,
there is a town which doesn’t make any sense but
goes on breathing
year after year after year. None of the buildings has any lights,
it doesn’t
seem to matter. No. It doesn’t matter.
Catherine Turnbull

GOING OUT

She told her first psychiatrist she was too sick for words—unable, even, to read the paper. He gave her a book, said Take notes on the first chapter. He said, You’re a smart woman, why didn’t you become a lawyer? Why didn’t you go to Dartmouth?

And in my imagination, she tells him Because Dartmouth didn’t admit women until 1971.

But the truth is she drove home, and put her small head—woman’s brain—into a plastic bag, to see if she could stand to suffocate.

When I called that psychiatrist to tell him my mother got into the car sometimes, after wine, and ran the engine with the garage door closed he asked me, You mean, for the purpose of going out?
Catherine Turnbull

ELECTRICITY

My mother feared most the electricity sent through her brain on the third floor, down she told me, with the real crazies, wheeled into the elevator and out again. She heard her doctor say, Give her some caffeine so she'll get a better jolt. When she woke up she said, They think cooking me is funny.

**

In the hallway, beside the bulletin board (Floor Council Meeting Sunday 3:00 This is Your Chance to Get Involved!) was an alcove for the pay phone, as if the place were a bar. Above it, a sign: Respect our Privacy. Do not say where you are. Only say hello.

Over that phone at night she breathed like someone was up close behind her, all unfriendly, sudden.

She said, Something is wrong with me—No something is wrong with them They won't listen when I tell them
something is wrong
with me.

**

Sitting on her bed,
my mother's feet didn't touch
the floor. But her eyes
were on the floor all the time.

She said, The mirrors here are plastic.
They're up too high for me to use.
They take everything
they think I'll do something with.
It takes me forever to put on my face.

A tall woman came down the corridor.
Not anyone who lived there—she moved fast.
She threw her right hand toward us, said
I'm Mindy The Social Worker
—just like that, no commas anywhere—
and she said my mother's attempt
was a surprise because she had been able
to get out of bed, put on clothes: she'd seemed
safe, because she wasn't getting any worse.

Or any better,
but a woman who can wear her makeup
is doing all we ask.

**

My mother said
I got myself
in trouble yelling.
I called the doctor
a pompous ass.
I told him
First you said
I got sad because
I never got mad.
Now I'm mad
and you tell me
to shut up.
So there's a nurse
in a chair
outside my room
who follows me
everywhere. See?

Anyone who can run a household
can plan a death.
My mother told me well in advance
where to find the letter,
what to take for mine,
and please, make sure the
next wife got nothing of hers.

They sent her home from the hospital
and she used everything they taught her.
How much electricity it takes to lose your memory,
how much it takes to lose your whole mute life.

She put the hair dryers with her in the bath.
And during the seizure,
which hurt but didn't kill her,
she could not unclench her fists.
Catherine Turnbull

OVERLOOKING HEMLOCKS

The first time my mother mentioned killing herself we were all outdoors, on the top of a small mountain we’d climbed before Thanksgiving dinner. There was a green metal railing at the edge of an overlook, and we were leaning against it. We could see the whole broad valley to Lake Champlain. The harrowed fields looked mossy. She said, *I bet you’d die if you jumped off here,* but we’d been up there so many times—and on other mountains, too—talking about how the blurred treeline, seen from above, can look hospitable. My father said, *I think you’d just break a few bones.*

Not then, but now, I see my mother clearly: She is against the railing, her gloved hands on the top rung, her hood up around her head. She’s not looking out at the fields, like we are; she’s looking straight down, at the rocks and at the skinny evergreens. She is thinking, would it be hard to swing up and over, would you feel heavy in the air, how much would the brush scrape... and then I can’t see any more. Even knowing what did and didn’t happen next, I cannot go with her past the first quick snapings of the tallest hemlock’s branches.
Catherine Turnbull

THE INFESTATION

I am killing mice. Three, sometimes four a day in traps I leave under the sink.

Some of them die neatly— Cabinet-muffled snap, broken neck, and when I release them, the stiff, easy fall into the green-lined garbage. But some are caught across the face by the quick wire arm and when their skulls break they bleed, viscous red, sticky, as if I had cut myself here. I look at every mouse I kill. Make sure I see the startled round grey ears, shade-darker whiskers, the sometimes smashed black eyes, for I have kept myself, these last two years, from seeing the death my sad mother wanted. Have kept myself from getting into the bathtub with her, and lying there, under water, while she switched the hair dryers on and dropped them in.

These mice have come into my kitchen because I continue, casually, to take baths, and callously dry my hair; and they will not go away until I give in. Until I face what I cannot imagine, until I have seen it all.
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