Confessions

Lowell Jaeger
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I once hung my son
by the straps of his overalls
on a utility hook
nailed into the garage wall.
He laughed at his father’s mischief,
and I dashed for the house
to fetch the instamatic,
so I might snap
his scrapbook smile.
Somewhere that print still records
how the straps, as he struggled there,
must have snugged the bib
up under his chin.
Still, I stepped back to focus
on mirth and madness suspended
above and below his grin
where half his face flushed
blood-rush crimson,
the other half grayed, hushed blue.

I once shoplifted
a tin of Vienna sausages.
I crouched in the aisle
as if to study the syllables
of preservatives, tore off the lid,
pulled out a weiner and sucked it
down. I cruised the produce,
pocketed a nectarine, popped
seedless grapes into the hopper
fast as my choppers would chew.
A man in a bloody white apron
intercepted me at the checkout
after he’d sniffed out my trail
of banana peel, cellophane
candy wrappers, pistachio shells,
and an exhausted bottle
of chocolate moo.

I’ve cheated on exams,
made love to fold-outs,
and once I walked my paper route
backwards in a snowstorm after dark,
so I could steal down a particular alley
where through her gauze curtains
a lady I've never forgotten
lounged with her nightgown
undone.

I have overcharged
neighbors and friends. Once
my tiniest daughter bounded in the back door
beaming, her fist full of wadded
five dollar bill. She'd unearthed it
on the playground

and I swapped her
that five-spot for a fifty cent piece,
shiny enough to mingle with a few pennies
until her plastic purse jingled with joy.
Maybe too young to know the disguises
of change, but she told her brother
about a proud bird on one side of her coin,
and on the other side, a man's face
turned away.

And I've neglected birthdays
of people who remember mine.
First week of December last year
an old friend mailed to me a shirt and tie.
I wore the shirt twice, decided I didn't like it,
wrapped it for my brother
and laid it under the tree on Christmas eve.
Without the tie.

So many excuses
I have concocted to get by.
I call in sick when I'm not.
I've grabbed credit
for happy accidents
I had no hand in;
pointed fingers to pin the innocent
with crimes unmistakably mine.
I've been so desperate not to look a fool.
Once instead of facing the fast balls,
I leaned back of home plate
and swung to hit
the catcher's arm.
I took a free base.
He wore a bruise I had to look at
for weeks in the halls of school.
I've thrown sticks at stray dogs.
I've ignored the cat
scratching to come inside.
Even in the rain.
I've sat for idle hours
in front of the tv, and not two feet away
the philodendrons for lack of a glass of water
have gasped
and expired.
More than once I have awakened
to my love, crying
her confessions beside me,
and I have feigned the lifeless sleep
of an ancient stone.

Lord, I have failed
to learn from grievous error.
I have repeated
gossip. I have invented
gossip. I have held hands
in a circle of friends
to rejoice over the misfortunes of strangers.
I have pushed over tombstones.
I have danced the devil's jig.
Once, when I was barely old enough
to walk on my own
balanced on the ties and cinders
behind an abandoned garage
-- I counted sixteen windows --
and needed only four handfuls of stones
to break every one.

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