Getting It Straight

Laurie Lamon

The University of Montana

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GETTING IT STRAIGHT

by

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B.A., Whitworth College, 1978

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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GETTING IT STRAIGHT
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**The Montana Review**: Night Shift; What You Meant, Passing Each Station

**Cutbank**: Last Gray Scene; Leaving Emelia

**The Seattle Review**: (forthcoming) For My Father
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You write you're learning to detect
slim birds offshore at Coronado. Their heartbeats
catch you crawling after tides, a run of hands
along the edge of clamshells. Hotel gulls
stutter toward loose pickings on the lawn.
From Monterey, three photos of dead seals,
their mouths blown out like sudden
drums, a tire flowering toward the ditch at 95.
Natives bring you jokes of hungry tourists,
a thermos of black coffee. You have relief flown in
like Portland roses. The sun wears half your arm.
"Birds know how to keep in touch, sky
and weather charts remote. Watch out for dogs
in mean weather. It is not easy"—
your advice sent back like postmarks
from the town you threaten to expose.
My best stars point you in the wrong direction,
clots of purple nettle and familiar
landstones. In your private field, sinewed cattle
stride long shadows toward the barn
and evening troughs of needled water. Rain and dogs
mean don't come home. They wheel
dark waves from the sea.

for Phil
For Your New Wife

In one of your movies
a woman plots her story and goes down
beating the air with knives.
Geese cripple the river with stone eggs.
On the lawn, guests collide
with sandwiches bitten to the shape
of startled mouths. They could be your children
the way they point to one another,
the way light travels their clothes
for money and petals of gardenia
they have slipped, unnoticed,
into their pockets.

Far off, a horse drowses
in his yellow stall. A train
crosses the border into Switzerland.
You get out at the wrong station,
this one full of snow
and girls with real hips
the way you dreamed it.
In a window the woman who plays
your new wife arranges her almond hair.
Hands full of citrus wave and wave
from the street. You tell her
the lemon-hearted moon tracked you
to the river until dawn.
Landlocked

It's how you wait
in the red housecoat, sleeves
rolled up past floury elbows
and the bowl of steamed rice. Your tribe
is small at the table, slim hands
passed down to the youngest tossing chicken bones
in the dead ring of his plate. Sabbath.
They bless bad food by tasting air
like teeth. Chowder tilts against lip
and spoon and the window waves back
at your face walking out of it. Saguaro blossoms
unravel the chest of your husband's
newest sweater. You imagine yourself in Miami
with oranges and a bag of cooked rice. For proof,
you point to the rind of your heels. You say,
"I could use a vacation. Be quick about it."

At the beach, sky more gray than family.
A gull rages beneath his wings under water.
Your husband's chest swings open: no one
is astonished by the stone weighed between his ribs,
or that the black and white shutter
refuses to close. The children salute.
You swim backwards predicting tides, the star
thinned back to zero. On the shore
a tin of ricecakes obscures the red sleeve
of your dress. Photos litter the beach
like tattered feathers. In this one, the last,
you've grown lovely in your own discarded clothes.
You could die here famous, someone's lover
or relation in a town that wails six months for rain
and dirt. Both sides of the street
mean no one's home. You never lived here long.
You want something never mentioned on white maps,
a ditch heavy with yellow cats, the room
you slept in dreaming sand, a red convertible
and your mother at the wheel terrifying waves and gulls.
When you woke, not your mother but an iron bed
and downstairs, grinning men in baseball caps
at a counter warm with soup and toast.

That dream was 35 years ago. Now go back
alone. You stay in the same hotel, the window
you lean from tasting dust still overlooks the trainyard
gray with cowering dogs. The river bangs canyon
walls with pale green run-off late in spring.
Downtown, indians avoid the man still writing home
of wolves and the daughter he lost track of
twenty years ago. Outside the Umatilla Drugstore,
a real indian, ten feet tall,
grinds redwood feathers into dust.

Some nights a mountain empties
and you prod misshapen streams to give back shale,
the current shot with traces of fake gold.
If wind revives one good cloud or bird
that never appeared, not even for you, there's no strike here, no way to tell your laughter isn't real
and those stars that flinch a hundred miles away
are home. You remember kind animals,
your family drinking rootbeer on the porch.
If a ghost appears, your father gives him
money and he goes away. Your youngest sister follows. She's whistling war tunes, her voice soft as handfuls of old dimes.
For My Father

Eucalyptus, the sawed rose flaming,
it is dawn and you rise with two hands in the dark
past mirror, basin, your wife's lean voice
rustling the bed like newspaper. Outside
young trees grip rain and begin their own lives.

A bird flares in the shattered glass of your headlight,
sheds claw, beak, indigo wings. Engine ticking,
you pull off the road, the only one up for miles
and going to work. You stare into your hands
and name each scar and nerve because they are yours,
the name given over and over: star, madrona,
the memorized wafer sucked dry between
tongue and grape. You remember waking at four
with your father, his hands bearing milk and light,
the kitchen floor where you knelt to bread and spoon,
the plate of eggs glowing between you.
With soft voices, you'd carry your boots to the porch
where a slaughtered deer stiffened past blood,
the clatter of bones in her throat.

Entering the beanfields, breath became easy as dust
gathering ore between lips, thighs, rows of thistles
burning for Rachel, the woman called heart
after your own. Rachel, named for the dark hair
pinned and falling, the apron smelling of onions,
a garden of cabbage and plum.
Rachel, who slept tasting her fingers like chalk,
her blood heart floating up to the moon,
the ripe thorn chanting oil and dust
through curtains pure as terra cotta.
So early, birds dream warmer sky, dream cottonwood and ash essential gray and the only home for miles. At the foundry gate a man finishes his shift with coffee, bites hard into pocketbread filled with roast beef and slices of cabbage. Telephone lines are down, all night passing messages to the farmhouse where he imagines his wife steeping ginseng in the kitchen. She is listening to *Petrouchka* and the yellow room where her son sleeps softer than cats in a bone-white sleep. The moon climbs over a hen dreaming stacks of dust on the porch.

It is time to go home, so cold you pull your cap down tight the way she made it to fit your ears, the long drive toward a river you never fish. Her hands reeled you in like bottomstone, flashed amethyst for days at your thighs. Now, cold beard, the enamelled birds at your chest call Annie, call Luke, call the porchlamp on where a bottle of milk has frozen and the hen bangs gristled wings against the screendoor. Upstairs you test warm milk with your wrist, so early you must measure each teaspoon by the drop. You watch for a moment
the way your son won't open his eyes.
A rare cry assembles stray light in the hallway.

for Karl
Here when it rains, mountains divide
without our naming them, rain
exact as slate-blue sky, or further west
jittery birds and frail currents woven home
to white pine, seed on the kitchen
table. Today over coffee
I imagine you reeling in the hard winter bones
of your garden. Sour litter of blossoms,
cold squash. All morning
I have worn your bruises like the dust towel
pinned to my sleeve.

By lunchtime the yard is raked
into baskets of leaves. My husband sleeps
in the room I've heaped with lavender clothes,
the beaded dress worn home from a snowy wedding
in March. Kathleen, remember how you polished rice
between your teeth like bits of tusk?
Tossed your coat to a man
you could love if his name were Bobby,
if the lake would let go of your fists
beating his chest like a pair of red shoes?
Nights, you dream father near the wedding cake,
the daughter, stitched and pressed, twirling out
of his arms across a tamarack floor. Now in Seattle,
the axe-edge of a mirror and in it your hands,
the bureau smelling of oil and teak. From the sidewalk
your husband waves handfuls of cress and oleander.
He is wearing a gray squirrel coat. The streetcar
he boards rattles out of the city. Through the window
I watch you pare apples into a yellow bowl.

for Kathleen
In One Of Your Movies A Woman Exits Laughing

Inside, the barometer drops to wind sailing birds like tender fists. You make the car go faster by imagining you're still in France, the great-uncles smoking menthol on the lawn. Your suitcase smells of chocolate and leather gloves the color of your skin. Outside, those trees could be rain the moment they touch ground.

Is it enough, now the blonde hair coiled and pinned, a blue stone ticking at your throat? On your lips the name of a boy pedaling faster and faster for lessons on kissing. That white house on the corner hasn't sold. You want it yourself, the window where you ridiculed your face when Sandy died. Mama counted spoons in the pantry, cried at onions and the way things go to hell at Christmas.

Flowers burn this scene. Tess waves handfuls of azalia from the gravel driveway. Some change, mercurial as hands, keeps you veering toward the mailbox. You want to crash the hedge into a postmark flying off without you. You get out of the car instead. Angry birds repeat the color of your hair. In the trunk your suitcase implicates the man you dress for. Bullets
scrape cloth buttons and the powder burn of someone's mouth against your sleeve.
Stepping off the porch
you're back on Diamond Street
in a red silk dress, the one he carried from Korea
like a loaf of bread under his arm.
Nights you held it up to a lamp, examined the fabric,
noticed the seams were beginning to wear.
You remember a wedding cake sliced to resemble a heart,
yellow tulips fading on the picnic table.
His mother called you brassy
when you rolled back her carpets on Sunday.
There were never enough flowers.

It's different now, this travel backwards
to a window full of yellow light,
the table set with milkglass
where you waited for his axe to swing through the door.
Winters you gathered scenes from the orchard:
a pail of apples dumped in the sink to wash, peel,
boil to the color of rhubarb, the log-jam on Pend Oreille
where Lizzie went down waving tiny hands.
His mother stopped calling the year he left for Alaska.
For months you dragged his name through fields
of beets and snow. Upstairs, we were dark angels
coaxing birds out of coatsleeves,
the shadows torn down by our breathing.

If you call again today I will tell you
this is my house full of bells,
the frozen river we tap with sticks for ice
trundled home to the cellar. Here is my straw coat,
my husband's red cap snared in a drift of bones, boxhedge,
rabbits crumpled with cold in the yard.
Mother, these winds are fractured. That star
crosshatched above the barn rings distance small enough to believe: your hairnet looping a silver doorknob, the glass of water beside your bed.
You need to enter the dream
you never remember right. Not fire
in the barn and three dogs buried
but Callie, bundling her skirt between her knees
to ride the fence like a slow mare.
You'll move the house to the lake's edge
where a couple holds hands
and the boat with yellow sails
flutters a tiny flag. The boy you were
beats waves with a stick from shore.

Under the dark slant of a tree
the dull pronouncement of dust fills your shoes,
dust that never ruined a crop
or smelled like rain through bedroom curtains.
You want to go back with Phillip and Karl
to that night when the dead made a home
of the dark, when you opened your arms
and the moon entered your face.
Cross the street and pretend a faithless town
could warm to the stranger you are. Show them your scars.
Show them your medals and the wallet
stuffed with hundred dollar bills.

You say the moon is a lie.
No dog needed your love because the fire,
the barn, were real. No one scrawled your name
in the air and the only women who loved you
were family. Rides in the car
you'd hunch between sisters and white
clouds of lavender talc. You loved the girl
who wore fox to the Lantern on Saturday nights.
She never smiled. Your flowers
came back cold as the air you burned outside her house. You've seen that movie twice and each time you played yourself badly.

You never went back to the old place or crawled that flight of stairs on your hands and knees. Your hands knew you were never that young. You know this dream goes on like a town filled with hate: Japs, Jews, the daughters who gave what their mothers traded for silence. Find the man who said "Love, like a public whipping" and buy him a drink, then go hungry back to your room. The woman who loves you now rocks in bed to the dim clap of her hands. You tear pieces of luck from the dead drift of her stare.
What You Meant, Passing Each Station

This house full of windows, the river and fields we plough with our hands keep us sisters, mother and daughter. I must learn to speak all over again. A child at the piano gives up her stutter, the tarred shoe. At night she nails the face of her doll to the floor.

In the kitchen you sang ash scraping fat from the table, sang spoon after spoon and the long thin failure of your arms where each child slept and was wakened.

Is this what you meant? Your face crawling up to make a fist at the sun, the split tack of wings, osprey, gulls scraping each wave for spidery fish, the salted rim of their mouths. We end this frail embrace abruptly, a crash of scenery though our faces, the memorized lines, remain whole.

As if our train had entered a snowy station, you get out, a woman learning to pull herself across thin ice. Borders we cross follow like the map smuggled under our coats.

In the open you tell me again what is mine until our voices collapse and I am left
shifting my weight from one cold foot to the other.
It could happen this way. If I look back

already another woman has taken your place.
She could be my sister: lemon hair, tiny porcelain hands

that wave and wave. This is the night we pass through,
stone sky, the pearl dislodged from our throats.
Last Gray Scene

Didn't the sky take all of it, the man
you'd slash your skirts for, night after night,
the room eating bowls of dust in a house
no bird needing a home would enter?
Someone was always leaving: father, husband,
the daughter with auburn hair
who'd brush until the last pin flared
like a match striking the wall.
In the papers, a woman confessed to stoning
the face of her child, the child
found beating her doll with newspaper.
For a moment it's true, the year a train slapped the life
out of stone. You helped your husband board,
measured your life by the straight cloth
of his back. You watched until his face dissolved
like soap and the tracks thinned to water.
At night, slamming a window with two hands, you stayed on,
suddenly afraid to crawl the long corridor back
from window to bed. Dinners felt the cold
heart of an empty chair scrape the floor,
the _amen_ lifting fork to mouth.

Now a bird takes the empty house on its back
and you bless house, bird, the mattress dumped in the yard
refusing to burn. You rummage the porch
for a pirate's dream of yellow brass,
gold sent home to a woman's sunburned face.
Ancestors gave you this and you give it back,
the scrub of rhododendron where, twenty-five years ago,
a bloodied cat stumbled into your arms.
You give back the husband wiping his hands
in the kitchen, the great-aunt pitching
fruit trees and trunks of linen from a real train
in Custer, Wyoming. You give the horse traded for blankets and food, the leaf-mould scraped from his hooves with an iron spoon. Behind you a field coughs milkweed, stonecrop. Cattle drift toward a river pounded with snails and the river's boom where you warm yourself in the foreign breath of animals. Close the gate. Ignore the boy leaning hard at the window as you drive away.
Stepping Into The Open

"Why should those points of light in the firmament, I wonder, be less accessible than the dark ones on the map of France? We take a train to go to Tarascon or Rouen and we take death to reach a star."

Vincent Van Gogh

The moon at your back like an old coat.
You cry this is not my life and wake
to a soldier who, like you, sings under his breath
and gathers the darkness around him, weather
and rags, the fringe of his wife's shawl
tucked under his chin. In your dream
you do not empty your pockets for money.
You do not curse the shoes too small to step out of
or the planks heaving with cold and the cold
thumping hell out of ribs and lung.

Across the sea, the clearing you flush
at dawn and step into. Olive and cypress, the stone wall
where you place one hand, the other
striking the stone you might speak to and enter.
Bless the shoes that wore out
and were newspaper, the wads of money
and the cigarette tipped with ash, passed
from hand to hand on the road to Dijon.
Take up the language of shrapnel,
waves flecked with cap and trousers
and the star winking on and off like a broken lens.
Behind you, the twenty miles linked to a town
and the guns you walked out on. Light in the harbor,
at home your wife sews an endless sleeve.

She steps back for a better angle
of harbor and sky, the way you crawled
wooden steps to the sea, how the ship swung out of the harbor first light. She takes a coin from her purse and spits three times for the pain in her back, twice for luck and the war declared for fun. She dreams it across the sea, across the alley and fence to the house on Mathilde and the white folded napkin, the scalded cup in the sink.

There are webs of sand in the closet. There is a stone in her shoe, a spider washed up on her pillow and she dreams it, wheezing toward dawn and the clop of hooves in the marketplace. She dreams animals, mute in red air, rushing the tipped wing of the plough, now pulley and hook, now slabs of meat in her hand. From the window the harbor flutters with gulls like postmarks from Holland. She thinks the house will abandon her, soon the mumbling of weeds marching up to the gate. She must let them in, the bird snagged in the screendoor, the oxen glancing through curtains and the misery of clods summoning her face framed exactly in drifts of red hair.

She wipes the small grave of her mouth and enters the bedroom, running her finger across the stack of cards, the hatband. Even the map held up to the light cannot find you or release the loss in notes mailed from Prague, letters dragged like leather straps through her hands. She cannot hear what flaps in the harbor and rises, the stammer of terns passing. She imagines the moon
is a knee scraping the hedge, a sudden appearance of cloth at the window. A flock of crows flies apart. There are shrags of lint in the needle, pins tucked between her lips.
She must count them. She must count every one.
Let's say we named the child you carry
from April to December, here
at St. Ignatius, the cemetery good with names
and Catholic.

It's why we've come,
why we carry paper from stone to stone
in rain the Missions brush silver at our throats.
Our voices hollow, we motion to each other: this one—
this, so many. Their deaths are unspectacular as fever
or the stray who follows your wrist.

Sister,
we're older than all of them,
the woman who burned prayer on mission steps,
then burned her home and fled, dragging her hands
like an axe twice through the failure of men and crops,
twice the man slapping his trousers for dust.

We want to tell the boy
wrapped in a woman's burgundy skirts,
tell light through his nails
pared to the cutting edge of spoons,
there's no love here but accidental, no saint's
stony hallelujah from the river and the only fire—
cattle waking from their bones under sky
wrong as the torn wing of a bird
and the bird, claw and feather
at our backs.

Behind us, the valley swings shut.
We eat our lunch in the car because you are cold.
You want to go home where the living count what's left
of wood stacked by the door, of sleeves
ravelling in the closet.
When light fails
we turn back toward town. An old star disengages
as we shift into a last run against dark.
Bison hesitate in the moon's swerve
turned against them. Their breath widens behind us,
then circles back to the stamped bluff
where they reappear as rock and shadow.

Our headlights swing west toward a man's dark
face, the husband I've never met. He stares out the window
at sky, hard pine, straightens his one
good leg like a man surrounded by water
kicking hard with the other.

In that room filled with light
and the smell of garlic, he's hungry without you.
Water runs over his hands in the sink.
The egg he cannot eat, hardens.

Here, silence falls between us, the host on the tongue
shared in memory and the yellow room
where we locked hands and slept in each other's warmth
our first seven years.

Mile after mile of darkness
I watch you travel that ladder of silences
to the pair of hands
that was father, curled under the roof's
slope as the eaves nailed his breath
to each corner of the house.
He'd clasp the soles of his feet with a curse
for the blister and nail, for the sweat
washed like a pearl from his eye.

Mother, white in rose
flannel leans toward you from the sofa.
She holds a tin of buttons for your son, the one
whose face you cannot imagine, the one who begins your story
each time your hands, arranged carefully
as the red buds of your dress,
float up to the mirror to tell it.

At the root of this dream I watch the boy
you carry like a book of hours tucked under your coat.
He weaves his fingers through the wiry
spool of your head. He kisses your hair
like a skullcap.

At the edge of my vision
he is leaving both of us out. His glance passes
through you like the struck face of a deer
you glimpsed once from the car.
I remember the hooves flew up like water
to meet your hands begging father to stop, to go back.
You wanted to lie there in snow, astonishment
pulled through your skin like a nail.

I take your fragile wrists, heavy with water
you do not carry for yourself. It's for Matthew.
I tell you, they're better than we are, those behind us
held buoyant in nets of dust, the dead
whose names you've collected like spillwater.
Marian, they matter. They mean to take us in.
Leaving Emelia

Two sons, your husband gone,
you shake the seam of your dress
and lie down with the Bible, the comb,
the glass of water beside you.
You search the bed
for hairpins, for the lean man
who braided your hair in the dark
and the hands that held both sides of your head,
both razor and soap at once. You hold
the burnt edge of your breath
and ask, where is he.

In the next room
I wake from the ten fingers of sleep
to the sound of a train
rocking through badlands, the sky,
an absence of cinders
already baked and eaten, a landscape
of stars and horses locked in my fist.
Remember the night in Chicago
you took me into your bed, crooning
the world like a bad map of my face?
There are hands
I have not praised enough,
behind me, distance I never touch.

Morning, the hoarse cry of quail,
an old dog's death
nails itself to the house.
You brush the hair from your neck
and call for bread, pears,
for the daughters, Joyce and Lydia,
for nothing of darkness
in the yard hammered with light,
for Joseph and your sons in Albany
who bow their heads, forgiving themselves
again and again.

This is my leaving, denial
fixed in the heart's soft beat
and the blue flame of the stove, in your name,
Emelia Sophia that invented a home and the fear
that was never a home.
Even now it passes between us
like salt shaken from hand to hand,
once for your sons and daughters
silent as guests, once for this faith
in the odd bones of my face, and the moon,
creeling with light,
counting itself among them.
Bad Heart

At last we are all here,
stepping with our luggage onto the braided rugs
as if for a three-week holiday.
Here is my brother with his family, my sisters
identical in yellow raincoats and filigree
from the coast. Father, you should see
how certain we've become without you.
You should listen to that soft cup of bone,
mother's voice hushing, calling us each by names
we've moved away to outgrow.

Here are the photos we've taken without you.
This one, mother, the wife you called Rosa,
meaning, perhaps, you loved the way she slept
on her side, her mouth slightly open
as if ready to speak for you, to eat your meals
if necessary. In the dream
where she is the one whose fist
follows your back through the garage window,
no longer able to assemble your failures neatly
as neckties, she blunts her teeth against your chest
and wakes, ready to walk out of there,
and sleeps again.

You think it ends here between rain
and breath, the pulse that keeps you sitting all night
with a deck of cards, your bathrobe
knotted across your chest like a shoelace. Your hands
no longer warm you in darkness that stops
in another room at the bureau, lavender blouses
folded in tissue. This morning we watched you
grope for the lightswitch in your thin black suspenders,
apunishment we understand is meant for us.
If your father's voice summons you
to look out the window at sunlight deepening
in eucalyptus, at birds clattering from limb to limb
like ragged clothespins, you look away.
You ignore him and wish him back in Norway
40 years before you were born, before winter came hard
with cold no one remembered hating
until it came at the house, at the woman who hugged herself
by the stove and would not eat, and would not rinse
the blue dust of plates sliding from their hooks.

After his funeral and later, the chicken dinner,
your breath still brittle as silk, you crouched by the hen
coop and told me how in America he'd changed his name
to Ed and made it pay, how he slept with a gun
beneath his pillow like a claw he could count on.
How his hands mattered. Yours,
now stupid as bricks at your side, were too large
to knit bird bones or kite string, though once
you braided my hair and it mattered that I was four
and afraid of morning wolves,
that you pulled long strands across your palm
as if somehow they must add up.

You want it 1936
and nothing but Diamond Lake frozen before you,
Al Gossett urging you on from the back seat
with a ten dollar bill.
His sister, Francine, leans across your chest.
She taps your thigh with her nails. You look at the ceiling
and her face closes around words
you cannot remember because the ice gave way
as you knew it would, because you were sweating
and her breath clouded the glass
with a scent you would taste again and again
like spearmint. You close your eyes
and the lake recedes into spokes of blood
advancing from the heart.

In there with the monotony of each pulse
you have invented a cruelty that lasts.
The last memory discarded, your own face
no longer heroic even to you because your hunger
for those you've left out goes on: wife
and daughter, the skittery grandson whose resemblance
you plant between nose and chin.
There with the smell of diesel and the lumber
stacked clean, you have let each of us go.
Now, whittled down to the sunflower shells
you spit blackly into the newspaper, it is morning.
We go on pulling at galoshes
and hats, waiting for the cars that will carry us
back to Seattle or Baltimore. You push your spine deeper
into the bed and listen through venetian blinds
to the dusty rattle of trees in August and think nothing,
nothing can penetrate the pain, clustered
in your chest like a red beet, that if exposed,
would stretch blood-red and tenuous
from groin to glassy forearm.

You remember a woman you lost
stepping from the train in Newport
and wonder if she's still missing, the almond smile
of a woman you swore at 17 would save you
and the woman at 50 who didn't. She too is leaving.
We are all leaving, and you,
pulling the sheets up over your head, bearing
without witness only what light you need,
just barely get it the way you wanted.
Playing To An Empty House

You were the last to leave, battening windows, the slender limbs of fruit trees hoisted onto the truck. Now, propped in the doorway a last time, you give yourself to possibilities you've learned to ease out of like a wound, a winter coat.

You choose the room you lived in as a child, pushing your feet into square shoes, parting your hair first on one side, then the other.

Now, no child's spoon follows its trail of milk to the bed. The cupboard is gone where you hid from their eyes with scissors, and the doll trained to lose her head. You remember moments more dangerous, when you woke to scraps of dissonant voices humming through flesh-pale walls, words you rehearsed at night until you knew them by heart, until, unharmed, you could walk right past.

At this window, you ask how much for the yellow drapes, the view of swallows troubling your glance with their faithful return. How much for the terrace of sand, the pool lapping your eyes for another reason to empty and fill.

You choose the piano, the sheets of music flying off into afternoons of sunlight. Your mother would sit on the heart-shaped chair.
You knew her scent, mimosa
trailing each dip of her arm
as she turned the page.

Is it milklight that washes your hands, or the keys
you play before a black and white photograph,
the arched smile, your hands
pressed against knees locked together.

You imagine some sobbing in the next room,
mother and father whose voices
waved you away, or your own, more fragile,
come back safely as dust.

Later you crush your cigarette
and go out in your old coat.
Across the street and the trimmed lawn,
windows brush past a house where, inside,
a man and woman lean toward each other.
You imagine a tenderness in the V of her sweater,
the man, straining for words
divided between them like air.

You begin to notice the moon follows you,
an old man in a newspaper hat pulled over his eyes.
He crosses the sidewalk in front of you: a moon,
then a streetlamp and spruces
floating in the yard, and again a moon.
You say, "A charm,
a trick of light."

No, that was years ago in the schoolyard
where your hands, now polished, trained to play anything,
swung stick after ball, swung Daphne and Rheta,
shrieking, the length of your arms
that ached and held.

It was the field
where stars rushed through your fingers.
It was the way you spread your small coat
and waited for the soft bodies of animals to unfold
like boxes tensed into corners. A cave.
A paw stirring the grass
for the cry it would speak to.
Where We Would Lie Down

Here, this sadness between us again
we shake like a dustrag
then hang in the closet once more
with the bucket and broom.
Where we live, our neighbor's protests of love
sweep through the streets,
bubble under our door like a puddle of water
we barely miss, slyly wiping
the tips of our shoes.

At night, we are careful to draw the shades
against their murderous looks.
They want us to move. They think we don't belong
the way we lug our indignations
like bags of groceries
from the car to the porch, certain the other
is failing to hold up his end.
When you step out with the dog
and your thoughtful plate of suet, they follow
in twos and threes. They tell us
we ought to get a divorce.

And yet, sleeping in the room
dusty with philodendron, the cats
fastened like burrs to our sides,
my billowy gown strokes the air—the swaying barge
that carries us all.
We even have visions of dying for each other,
taking the other's place in line
for the furnace, the shower meant to soap us down
to the odor of bones. In my dreams,
I am always the one left alive at the scene
to comb glass from your hair,
or poking at the edge of the fire,
ignored by the star's six ragged points
that march you up and down the wall.

Here is the coin I'd place
between your teeth for the oarsman
whose language you will not understand.
The cake in the placid crook of your arm
is the last meal I prepare,
tapping out with floury thumbs
what I would say differently
to the tiny man and woman inside us.
They're searching the floorboards,
the mattress and pillows for remnants of warmth
where they would lie down; the woman
taking off her shoes, the man
watching his luminous hands grow faint
as a brushstroke. It is the moment
we collect nothing of ourselves.
It is the moment, animal or saint
driven into the open toward the stake,
the guillotine, our hair
oiled flat to our foreheads, we shake
our garlands and robes, we go singing.
To The Last Artful Man

Just as you say it could never happen to us,
I point to the men in white suits
who are crossing our lawn. Each carries a tray
of suspicious-looking instruments. You say
you need time to think, and go on
eating your breakfast. Through the window
I watch them set fire to the trees, the shrubs,
now the rosebush exhaling puffs of fragrant
smoke. When I open the door, one of them
dges near. He says we must get out immediately
and hands me a piece of paper with signatures
I cannot read. I shout at you, "This is no joke,"
but I can see you are not listening. Already
you have begun to perspire from the smell
of gasoline. Even as you sit on the floor
eating toast, your truculent eyebrows are gone,
all of your hair is gone but a tiny patch
behind one ear. Soon, that too disappears.
Your mouth opens and closes as you begin
to dissolve. The tiny bones of your feet
strut in thin air. I gather what's left of you
into a paper bag and together we drive
out of the city. I turn on the radio
because you have become so silent. Perhaps
you are sleeping, or trying to find an appropriate
explanation. "Look," I tell you, "You must understand
we are not the only ones. We must decide,
are we victims, or survivors?"

Now we can see the lake
and the crowds of people already there.
Children play happily in the water. They think
they have come to the lake because it is Saturday
or someone's birthday. We join the others passing coffee and sandwiches.
One of them points to a man sitting alone in the lake. We think he must want our attention the way his hat waves back and forth in the air. We hope he is someone important, an official or maybe a popular troubadour we should listen to. We can see he is very excited the way he skips across the beach, tossing us each a fish that plops, succulent-pink, into our hands. He tells us the fish are everything. We must handle them gently. We must make them last the rest of our lives.
Your Civilian Dream

You move into the attic with hopes for success and new rapport with your family. Below in the kitchen, your mother predicts hunger and doom. She smuggles in foolish messages with the plates of food you have instructed her to leave outside your door. **We have no butter or milk.**

The house is inching toward the sea. **We have had enough, the sea's terrible green pounding waves into waves.** You try to remember the delicate scar of her voice that could lift your name into air.

You wonder if her bones have gone bad, if the bruise that clung to her arm has dissolved. Sometimes you shout greetings to them all through the pipes. **I am happy. My plans for success are ready, my new life is nearly complete.**

If you stand on a chair you can almost glimpse the sea. From here it appears shaped like a heart or your children's fluttering arms as they run the path to the seawall.

How do you tell them, once you rocked in the warmth of their flannel bodies, and thought, too easy, this scent of lilacs drifting toward the house. It was colder, those mornings you tucked in your shirt and followed your breath into fields behind the plow, the strap already warm with your tongue's persistent murmuring, twelve hours and again twelve, **I am no farmer.**
How do you tell them the surest way down,
one foot in front of the other, the long slide
into lupine and cheatgrass, the astral blue
of tiny flowers brushing their legs.
If they could hear you, you would tell them
to look at the sky, then at each other,
at their hands and the angels
poised there on each finger.

Because they are children
and have told themselves, Everything lasts,
when a star enters their eyes, light beats there
and holds. But yours, when you close them,
can still mistake pale light for a scene
played back from memory, Poland
in winter, the way a woman cried out,
touching her lips for a cigarette.
You were there because the war taught you,
take care of your own, and you were looking
for someone, you watched through the station window
as they boarded the trains,
waved their famished arms and disappeared.
Even in the darkness of their bodies
they must have known it would happen, their hearts
torn out and fitted between their teeth,
the world gone flat against their lids.

Still you think of her, the woman
you wanted to save with matches
and a warm coat. You imagine her face in the mirror
where nightly you examine your mouth
and the one drawn around it you remove like husk
when it has said enough. You think of her now,
what she might have taken with her
when they came after supper,
breaking through the glass. How gently
she must have disengaged the youngest
from her skirts, the one with no word for memory.
She must have left her scent in the doorway,
the soft imprint of her voice
gesturing everywhere in corners.

It was warmer, bright as the bird
clapping yellow wings at your back
that morning someone dropped you off and you waved,
grateful, then hurried on in your heavy boots,
heavy the way smoke is when you breath it
like rain with no sky anywhere,
the war over and you refusing to believe it.
So you hurried, roused by a woman's clothing
spread on the lawn, sun cracking your skull
and the metal plates you will eventually
adjust to. Already you could see
the horses had run away, your children
would not come home from their field of bells.
Your wife leaned at the gate
dreaming of a move to Arizona, desert
curved like winestem against her teeth.
You wanted to tell her your hands were ready
to distract her flesh from the ache
of sleep, that you remember a fortune of cheekbones,
how her letters eased translucent words:
absence, love. You wanted to tell her
you would buy her new shoes, exotic packets of seeds
if she would only stop crying, if she could believe
you have come home to save your life.