Letters home

Judith Alice Hougen

The University of Montana

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LETTERS HOME

By

Judith Alice Hougen

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LETTERS HOME

Poems By

Judith Hougen
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The poem "She Spoke Of Tomatoes" appeared previously in CutBank magazine under the title "Tomato Growing."
To my mother and father for their loving support and to Carolyn, Dave, John, Mary and all who helped make a home for me and my poetry in Missoula.
SECTION ONE
THE MAILBOX IN WINTER

Before the heat remembered to switch on
my limbs bunched together like nameless
fawns dreaming the clock-blurring hour
of my father's coffee. My mind walked back
to me slowly, a wide winter field, pocked with deer
prints leaping towards the wood.
My toes felt their way past the empty
blue cups of hooves, following
the click of dishes warming my ear. School
mornings, before I knew anything, I drowsed
beneath blankets thick as my mother's orange
peel cradling upon her plate. Outside
the mail truck creaked like new
leather shoes in a fresh sweep of snow.
The engine grumbled up to our box, idling
till the think of the cold metal door
scattered for good the rustling antlers.
In flannel pajamas, I padded across the cool
crack of linoleum beneath my double-socked
feet. As I skated to the table, my father's boots
tromped in the door, envelopes wedged
in the mountain of his mitted hand
kettle steam erupting from the stove.
One more morning had given us back
our names, given for winters later
a ragged-edge stamp of memory
for all the coming meadows of unbroken snow
postage enough for mailing myself letters home.
SUMMER ON LAKE MINNETONKA

I
We put out in old Uncle Howard's pontoon boat with a canary canvas roof.
I grabbed the rail, my neck swallowed by a pumped-up orange life preserver.
The boat chopped frothy caps,
I glanced back--
the cabin, Bredeson Point,
that late summer greenery merged into one long mess of shore.
I crouched down by one foot of the boat, letting plowed slats of water kick at my fingers.

My younger sister and I stood ankle deep in lake, motionless, minnows scooting around our great, silent toes or coaxing surface with midget mouths. Clean peanut butter jars held wide, we swooped like kingfishers, scooping up a pocket. "Judy, I got one!," she cried. Uncle Howard allowed a nickel a dozen. Unconcerned, they shashayed in cloudy water, shining past my glass magnified thumb.

II
I plopped potato salad on my plate, piled like the eroding stones lining the Point. Older cousins disdained picnics and littered Bredeson's dock, edging towards bronzedom. My older brother, thirteen and glandular, lay buried in the fraying hammock eyeing the underwear ads in the Ladies Home Journal. Bob Bredeson strolled over, waiting for a new load of rock, arms crossed, determined to stone each slap of water, the slow ransacking he could never stop and never quite forgive.

(Stanza break)
Bass, northern, walleye.
Daylight, 1969, my sister
and I hold humble poles,
baskets meager with perch and sunfish,
dreaming of a meaty tug.
A grandaddy bit at dusk,
whacking us with water
as I strained him to surface,
a long whale of a thing,
a spit up burst of beast,
spine fins spiked out,
tail hacking air,
re-swallowing lake, indignant,
jaws jerking line, snapping off
the bamboo tip of my rod.
My sister ran off the dock shrieking
and wouldn't swim for a week.

III

Great Uncle Howard
paid two hundred thousand
to remodel his cabin two years
before brain cancer.
Last time I saw him
half his head was bandaged, safety pins
holding the bows of his glasses
over mumified ears, hoisting
a clumsy smile no longer
of this world,
the old dance of his long
hands adjusting
the pontoon's skewed canopy.

At evening, Mother ferreted out her own,
found me in my grass-kneed jeans,
brown feet in P.F. Flyers,
fingers carefully tightening
around pancake rocks
skittering black on Minnetonka.
Her hand nuzzling into mine,
chill air sifted over
our salty skin.
We navigated towards
the single porch light
as a dark, mammoth sound slapped
head first into stars,
the stony fish eye
watching us breathe, rise, drown.
COMING OF AGE

We skidded up in late afternoon
to the lake cottage
hot, steel bucket in the back seat
bulged with wild strawberries
the cologne of July
in our full blown hair.
Engine off, the day
squeezed close again
like the sweaty arms
of my old aunt
damping our clothes dark.
The women buzzed the bucket
to the kitchen
in a rush of blue aprons.
I dug out the hulls
green hats flopping into the sink
my mother's words rising clean
as the scent of fresh tableclothes
snapped open in the dining room.
My nails, hemmed
with russet horseshoes
remained unscrubable for days.
After dinner, the berries
baptized in heavy cream
dreamed in our mouths.
We relaxed in a humid breeze
barely breathing off Minnetonka
the sky sinking into a last
cup of lukewarm coffee.
I was twelve, growing up
old enough to sit amid
the women's tribe
in loose, poppy-print dresses
and red-faced toenails.
Mosquitoes whined past our ears
in a heat evening couldn't shake.
In our patch of porch light
I learned the dark postures of grass
the lost sound of waves
voices I could no longer see.
SHE SPOKE OF TOMATOES

June, they'd arrive in the driveway,
jungled in the trunk
yawned up to divulge a hundred
dumbfounded flowers
suddenly famous with light.
Mother pounded down stakes,
smiling, shredding
a loud daisy print dress
worn ten years ago.
Drenching holes all afternoon,
she smoothed out the roots in mud.
By July, they'd punched out,
fists that woke hard and green in her palm.
Mid-summer brought a ritual morning hosing,
souping each plant till cracked ground
remembered again how to drink.
She burlaped them in September
from mean arguments of frost
and Canadian winds.
Come harvest,
tomatoes lit up the kitchen counter,
gorgeous redheads scattered sexy
at her elbow, picked
when ripeness most approaches speech,
when her low garden whispering
swelled to a perfect answer.
They were mother's pumped-up
opinion of summer,
a private conversation rowed
on the brown windowsill,
what she and the sunlight
said to each other.
LEARNING TO DIVE

My toes twitched the air beyond
the redwood planks of Bredeson's dock.
The damp tulip suit plastering my body
made sleek the steady concentration
of my back hooked over Minnetonka.
Form was achieved in an afternoon
but it took a long time to teach
the body to tip headfirst
from the solid, let go the bad stare
of the drowned fisherman
who floated in to me like a water lily
with white, rain-clean hands
softly bumping shore, arms rocked
in a limp hug of lake.

    Half the summer
my flowered belly banged into the lake until
I was sore enough
and willing to give in
to the unsteadiness of water
remembering high cannonballs, the thump
into sandy floor in a slow motion
undersea movie dazing
the brain to not know up.

My legs bent slow
the smell of seaweed darkening my hair
like a field for sunfish to walk.
The soles of my feet peeling up
from the dock, lungs locked shut, I watched
my wet shadow scatter gnats.

My head tucked for the first
breaking of water, hands pressed
white in a prayer that my arms
would row me back, shoulders embraced
in a cool breath of sky
my chest a bloom of new air.
THE ANNUAL HOUGEN STRAWBERRY FEST

Small, deep flame, ready in my palm
poised proper as a girl in church
tilt your warm ear, keep time to the thick
thick plucking you into my cardboard box.
Picking since nine, I squint
as shadows shorten up into a humid noon
that damps down my temples.
I think about the next three days
face pressed to the pink breath of preserves
that will ring in nostrils a week.
Sealed with a thick fog of wax
jam enough to make me forget my knees
aching blind in top soil, Carver sun
puncturing my back. But now
my berry-creased nails pop another
into my hand. June ruby
craved till my tongue
juices to the right pitch of crimson
till our voices agree
and I leave, my box thirty pounds full.
What summer had said straight out
in mile rows boggles taste buds
rusting forever the lines of my hand
that lifts one more, desire dressed
in a hundred seeds, crushed fist over fist
down the good red muscle of my throat.
LAST LIGHTS

I surveyed my sister from the beach, three years smaller than me, launching a suspicious smile a hesitant wave from waist deep water. It meant she was peeing in the lake again. There wasn't a move I made she didn't broadcast for our mother, the annoying chihuahua of her voice crazed on all fours in my ear. My older brother lurked in a crew cut behind every tree. Lacking local boys, he taught he baseball. Strikes, balls, fouls, I couldn't get it right much less match the grace of his brown-armed swing. All afternoon, the eternal pitcher I bird-dogged balls in the bushes, a clumsy glove clumped on my hand. Come evening, we quested after fireflies drowsing in the backyard. We allowed my sister to tote the peanur butter jar with an ice-picked top. My brother and I trapped the bugs in our hands, depositing each glow with a quick snap of the lid until they were the last light possible. Downstairs on the kitchen table, they leaped and rested in darkness while we slept, constellations silently bumping glass.
THE HOTTEST JULY IN MEMORY

Sweat and lake water juiced
down the dark mat of my hair
blotting the T-shirted middle of my back
like an old map of July.
I sprinted across the lawn
after swimming with my sister
my cool, raisined fingers jumbling up
stones, wet-shined pennies and dimes.
Circling my sleeping father, I watched
his small breathing catch the attention
of a handful of gnats, dizzy
for the soft rush of the next breath.
The old mountain of his body
on the chaise lawn chair
I wished to wake those eyes
coined shut with huge, Old Testament heat.

After a too-much-fruit-salad-with-marshmallow dinner
the adults sat bloated and spent
watching the final bit of sky collapse
into the molasses-slow traffic of waves.
Unable to sleep that night, I lay
on the screen porch daybed, a shoebox
of rocks on the floor, dry and unbeautiful
the hot weight of stars needlepointed
in the wire mesh. I braced
my palm upon the screen
pressing the lighted stones against
the warm lines of my hand.
They were bright coins with the jingle
of the authentic that could buy something
beyond a stinking hot night, silent
except for air sucked through the wet rags
of my lungs, its sound clean in my mind
and more and more a clear, fearful gift.
Accompanied by the comforting cracks of the rocker, small bedstand light and her voice stroking a tired scratch of blond hair your mother reads you into sleep. Tonight, there is a darkness in your closet thickening into something awful. The blue-tufted, leaping lamb quilt smoothed to your chin will never warm you as before. Your ears prick past the story towards shifting floorboards, the chair dressed in dirty clothes shadowing up the wall stories with more believable plots. She trembles the air with fables, but her voice cannot follow your life behind the door you slowly close into sleep, cannot help leaving you mid-story, alone in a world without the wonderful ending, the one soft glow spoken for the deaf ears of night.
MY FATHER HAS GONE TO WAR

A year's turning of knobs
for brief, hourly news.
Packages of Oriental dolls
arriving in the afternoon mail
wrapped up with stories written
in a threatening tongue.

She'd wash, I'd dry
poking a fisted towel
into the single blue coffee mug
pegging it beside the other
dust tasting its lip.

The twist of the doorknob
a man, a telegram, it took
twenty minutes to
tremble the paper apart.
It only announced a baby somewhere
but she cried anyway.

Her dreams snapped on, off
like the bedroom light.
All night in our separate rooms
they bled on our front lawn
the faces of men
with astonished mouths
shining in streetlight
not moving
absolutely not moving.
TWO THINGS MY FATHER TAUGHT ME ABOUT HORSES

Giving a horse sugar or
apple slices, stay on your side
of the fence, clutching the gray wood
rail. Bend your hand so it arches sleek
as the body of a woman, thumb
tucked like a board beside
your fingers. The stallion's lips
will thunder upon your hand
blind in its dark creases and
his hay-stained teeth, large
as hammers, might mistake a thumb
for a stub of carrot.

When gripping
the reins, keep them taut. Stretch
your arm like granite, jerk firm the left
rein for left, right for right, wrist
snapping leather, his jaw
will respect you, even if you're one
tenth his size. Especially on the blackberry
road, nearing the barn at dusk, perhaps
on a hot August evening, if the bit
senses slack, your fingers resting
on his withers, he may break
burning for fresh oats and water.
These things you'll understand better
later. Horses can go crazy
with a girl clasping the reins.
Horses are always hungry.
RATTLER

My older brother and I chased
garter snakes that sizzled our back yard
inking an S to the woods or
snoozing through afternoon heat under
the WELCOME on the front porch.
Inspecting run over rattlers
near the highway
the tiny blade of his pocket knife
scrutinized each knob of the poised-up
tail, angles of surprised jaw
the eyes popping towards
the unappeasable Augusta sun.
When we finally blundered into a live rattler
I saw fangs jump from startled razor grass
exploding into his calf. Two bad
kisses of blood carved down his ankle
screeching our brown stationwagon away
gray exhaust chasing out the tailpipe.
Later, wrapped in his red terrycloth robe
venom still fogging his veins
he raised the right leg
of his ducks-in-flight pajamas
to show me. The V of his fingers
straddled the puckered bite
rubbing as if to erase the wet teeth
of the diamondback. I lay awake
that night, seeing the wound lobed
on the ceiling, sniffing out
the white shiver of my skin
like a knowing that would someday split
the grass, lunge into one grip of four wicked
arms and spit me back, stumbling alone
in my own blood, doomed and changed.
BULLHEAD

I gripped the dark body
powerful, heard the hook
awkward in his guts
a thick stab of whiskers
stinging the smooth
skin of evening air.
Black fish
eel dream bashing
blind the shallow waters
of sleep all summer
tail beating dock
each night for breath
sucking the wet light of stars.
I snapped open my pocket knife
with a potent click
I sawed that line
clean below
the sinker till you
plopped into the huge
fist of lake.
Speaking a thin plume
of blood, you swaggered
near surface, then twisted
depth into water the color
of your death, reflecting
my face, big as the moon.
OBSERVING THE BEHEADING OF LADY JANE GREY

After a painting by Paul Delaroche

Blindfolded
your hands falter
short of the block
fumble with damp Thames air
strange in the distances
that grow huge without sight.
A rope of hair twists
down one shoulder
the bare throat's glow
and turn melting into
the gentle connections of spine.
Cloak folded aside
your lungs tire like
unbelieving sparrows
beating your ribs for rescue.
Women in the corner
buckle with grief
you listen
the scent of straw stronger now.
Your arms like thin
doomed wings step
off canvas, anticipate
forever the simple lean
into darkness
the sweep of fingertips
reading like braille
my face watching
the cold shift
of the headman's feet.
July. Breezes tease the drapes.
Sunlight warms
its bright packages across the rug.
My morning coffee drifts into a wish
to be where blood scooted
through our hearts
with quick, narrow hooves
in the back yard
grass in our hands
flung into the old, blue gift
of sky, rising
above my face.

That evening, the last breaths
of lilac cooled the air.
I crouched behind its hundred hands
hiding in a game. The lilacs said
we have gobbled up all the light
and the night tasted just like
tangy soil that foldled
its dark way out into a rich
purple foam, fat with a last
swallow from the empty bowl of sun.
When I was eight
I wanted to say
this, this will never end.

Lately, in dark morning mirrors
I notice my face
half-lit with light from the hall.
The seriousness surprises me
the eyes set deeper than before.
Fingers gliding down my cheek
I remember the twitch of curtains
the huge air of my bedroom
at dusk, the scary black cracks
of closet doors that I believed leaked
into the whole house while I slept.

I watch my coffee smoke into
dust-spangled air.
Relaxing on the carpet,
the sun stretches across blue fibers
and dozes in the slow grain
of what has lived
opening a box wrapped up in light
I examine a laze of milky air
powdering from a window.
I'm growing old this morning
we all are, realizing what sharpens
with age, startling at such
strange, radiant gifts, when
for the first time, fingering
through gray miniscule
coals of our lives,
we see exactly what we're breathing.
FAMILY PLOT, NORWAY IOWA

Beneath horses and the sound of horses,
in October, Iowa prairie walks
past our lives
into horizons of broken corn
stalks and sky.
In the first cold smolder of dawn,
we brush back the red sleep of leaves,
fingers reading hard-cut
hundred year old words.
Christine's stone forehead
barely juts above the soil
her boys grew up to break,
spit out, slap from dark overalls
at evening on the porch.

Erik, Hjalmer, shhhh, clear your eyes,
sleep a dream
of your father in morning light.
When you weep
it's like the break-up of hard winter,
hard, hard winter.

Huddled like wheat sheaves,
we imagine their eyes, hushed
shut decades ago, bulbs
that will split blind in spring.
Their thumbs and fingers
sift a cup of good soil,
hunger to plow fertile ground.
Our breath beats air with fists
that blue and blue and vanish.
The sun rouges our faces,
strength enough still
to warm the winter barns.
Through the steam of trees and fenceposts
shadows, sharp as hooves,
stretch from our heels.

Listen to Mama,
the wind flapping in the shutters
is only talking our names tonight.
Hougen, Hougen. The only happiness
in this world is to have cried many times.
SECTION TWO
THE RAILROAD CHILDREN

They dream the darkness
dull, coal-heavy, packed on
the twelve thirty-six their father pilots
to the stars held between the tracks.
The glob of headlight rattles by
their beds, lifting a million
crossties all night slowly
as if a gift. Breathing
its own shadow
the engine leaves a sad
voice whistling the porch
like a man in tired, gray clothes
they'll recognize come sun-rise.
The children rock
on those terrible, unliberated shoulders
a quarter mile of unknown cargo chugging
the thick metal of their sleep.
In steamy train light, they follow
their father's huge, white eye
rising past a far off town
one moon measuring
the sad distances from waking to waking.
FLAGMAN, NORTHEAST MONTANA

Quarter mile from jackhammers
jamming agitated iron and wind
in the old highway
your sign seesaws in
unequal gusts
out to slug everything this morning.
Your options are clear:
SLOW, STOP--warnings, that's it
with ten bucks an hour for bad arches
and all the boredom you can stand.
In the minutes between cars
you can look straight into Canada
Saskatchewan lining the north horizon
the spine of other lives.
At this distance, it resembles
something heaped, pressed
tarred into a look of permanance.
Today, the wind rattles your clothes
battering the spaces between
shirt and skin until it's
a concussion to think anymore.
You learn the hard grasp
and teeter of the warning pole
wait the next car's
deceleration into your life
study your choices
readable from a long way off.
STRANDED IN HARLEM ON GOOD FRIDAY

For Mary

In a twenty mile radius of nothing,
your Olds quits, bucks,
quits, pitching
into the crackling gravel of Harlem, Montana.
I heave the hood
and a nervous incense shakes up the flatlands.
The engine you try
moans with 128,000 miles
worth of grime
until we're only left
the large nothing sound of air and us
not knowing what to do.
We bluster in the door
of Wally's Cafe off the two lane
where Doreen, the only waitress,
eyes the Eastern in me
with a careful, Hereford-like regard.
In boots and a tooled belt declaring MARY,
you take charge, ask for a phone,
get wedged a larger slice of pie.
Mustering conversation,
we re-stack pink packets of Sweet'N Low,
chat with our waitress
about Wallyburgers versus the special.
It is hard work waiting and hoping
on a voice two counties away.
I watch the dirt-bruised Olds out the window,
thinking maybe this day
will only seem like three.
Kicking my rickety chair
in reverse, teetering
old wood cracking back to the wall,
I see how I live
balanced on two legs and blind faith.
IN AIR THE COLOR OF GUNS

My two friends crowd into the only phone booth in Hysham, Montana thick glass warping the motion of their arms digging for quarters. In last light I feel my Minnesota plates growing larger, my fingers hook the wheel waiting. Everything's closed except a few tight-lipped houses fading around parlor lamps and two windowless bars at street's end signaling me with neon elbows. Pulp mill cowboys in pick-ups dog the boulevard. The one in the thirty year old truck swings by again, throned high in that bubbled forehead, growling the swelled snout of his Dodge past me.

Parked beside the only hotel advertised, padlocked years ago I am drawn to the dark glass of stores sinister with empty dresses and hardware. Air tightens to the color of guns and my clothes stiffen like nettle against skin as if they no longer recognize my body. My friends clatter back in, the man cruises on a third pass and slows, his eyes two crows clutching the phone wires. Through the steel door I can feel the itchy tap of his snake skin boots. Our tires grind out from the curb, spitting back gravel, those heels thumping dusted rubber, crushing out day like a last cigarette, the bird's black-necked sound cracking come, come, come.
HOME FOR CALVING
For Kristin, Opheim, Montana

You quit the university
for March wind banging barn wood
causing a bad ruckus
that seems louder at 4 A.M.
and at this hour is not unlike
the clatter of cafeteria trays
in the mad exit for 1:00 classes.
In the lurch of a bare bulb
shadows seesaw up the walls
your own dark image
covering the downed yearling
in trouble with her first.
Arm oozed in to the shoulder
your cheek pressures the brown hide
twitching against your face
instinct teaching hands the brute
geometry of calf pulling.
It's worn muscle
alone that catches the slick
palm-small hooves lugging out
the new bull, bloody mucous
mucking past elbows, cow shit
ground into your Wranglers.
For no good reason, you want
to remember Machiavelli
and you try to think things to yourself
in French. The calf, your only grade
unfolds on the barn floor, shakes
his head, ignorant of everything except
tongue nudging the sprawled A
of his legs, the offer of a warm belly
and a dawn that dries him.
Out and across the yard
all you can recall is ou est
le metro and ou est la toilette.
Chill sun cracks
beautiful over horizon, acres
of light sparking frosted wheat stubble
like a thousand candles. Joints aching
as if you'd been run hard and put away wet
you clomp up the porch steps
knowing damn well where the john is.
A last lick of west wind blows
clean away tired barn smells
tests muscle and tendon
the upright crust of your body.
SUB-ZERO RUN

My skin is the thickness
of red sweatshirts
in a threadbare jacket of trees.
Each aspen admires me.
I'm the only pliable thing for miles,
my blood a traveling circus advertised
with my gray megaphones of breath.
My feet crack quiet,
crunching ornery snow
like a language I invented.
The jealous pond pretends not to notice,
the water edge lipped
like a thick-rimmed goblet
of dark wine sworn
to a trembling secrecy beneath ice.
My warm shoes, gumbo of smells,
chase this winter
dreaming of muddy, unknotted earth.
Every branch marvels at my ruckus,
their old woman fingers cup over the path,
crave the quick flame of my passing.
"MUSCLES". HOUGEN COMES OUT OF SOFTBALL RETIREMENT

Years ago, I was so lovely
at second, diving for the fly in the ninth
kneecaps pounding packed infield in a hard
tumble, raising a pregnant glove above
my grimed-out body. A play so solid, you could
display it on a coffee table in your head
for days. My left hand is again an elephant
ear of old leather, a second set of hot dog
bun fingers shined dark and smooth in spots from
a thousand line drives to right snagged
on the bounce or plucked like an overdue apple
from flight. These days, it's difficult to cash in
my body for trophies. The nights are long
hot baths and "Liniment" Hougen
smells more and more like my true name.
With my knees two small sloshing buckets
of pain, I stalk the second base line, spit
for effect, crouch down with palms against
patella and wait the play at second
that's still second nature. Left foot
on the bag, left arm stretching
for the grass-streaked splendor of the ball
swacked to left, I brace for it
lean every bone towards the catch
the chance for one thick
leather hand to reach into that much beauty.
NINETY-FIVE DEGREE RUN

"They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed..." Daniel 3:27

As if Nebuchadnezzar raged again
in the boiled soup of my blood
my clothes do a damp, flimsy smolder over skin
past grass sucked to straw
and the pious jitter of mantis.
The day is a furnace heated
seven times normal
and I run the miles unburned
Shadrach in blue shorts
oven-fried air in aspens limped down
in worship of their own shade.
The hope boned in my legs
is strong as Meschach's
making my heart a greasy-hot engine
that could burn anyone's tampering fingers.
The pond drinks itself green
with a wide, unquenched mouth
the edge hemmed with cattails
waving a weak banner of surrender.
The hot traffic of my shadow chars
a cadence down this path
about to brighten into flame.
Pounding the heat, my shoes
carry me fireproof through the world
the coals of each hill, lost
in the motion of prayer.
AFTER TWENTY YEARS, THE STATE FAIR
FINALLY UNDERSTOOD AS A MASOCHISTIC EXPERIENCE

It is not a moral thing to be gorging your third basket of batter-drenched, deep fried cheese curds at the Minnesota State Fair in the late August of your life. But it took twenty jam-packed minutes of breathing humid second hand air for your turn to come, watching half dozen sweaty teenagers hoist out mounds of the spiked and spitting curds, nearly alive in five hundred degree oil. So you sit alone on the curb outside the Food Building surrounded by a hundred thousand people dressed like Jamaican jungles and love how those golden cracklers almost match the beautiful, non-Norwegian brown of your skin. You want it to always be this way: the crisp fritters ascended to lard-glossed lips, the lovely cheese oozing out just for you. Each one funnels down through thin shoots of capillaries and sets up housekeeping in major arteries but you don't care, you really don't. We all live for a moment in one good piece of shade, feet planted in a littered gutter when one hundred thousand people are as unimportant as confetti and basket number three is piled up and all yours. Maybe you'll never leave this curb, this calm eye of state fair storm where life is a hot, limitless chunk of potential. And even with the final batch already reupholstering your aorta, stomach vying for the green of your shirt, go on, chew another nugget! Swallow the last little heart stopper, realizing how you'll feel by the time the Midway lights flick on, knowing by then all about the bass drum band marching through your gut, your new definition of regret.
WHY THE YOUNG GIRL DREAMS OF HORSES

At meadow edge, fetlocks dressed
in jonquil and shooting star, he shakes the proud
trumpet of his head and gallops
the girl to the other side of her life.
The black mane cracking with wind
is a ribbon he offers the girl
shining between clutched fingers. His shoulder
muscles rumble up bone like dark
fists in a new rhythm that percussions
her shins hard against packed ribs.
The girl's cheek burrows against the stallion's
neck, listening to the strum of wrist-thick
tendons, his pulse like a mallet
in her ear, pounding her into
a music she's never before heard. In the sun,
his moist muzzle gleams and his eyes
are two dark water ponds she'll drink from
someday. But for now, it is enough the warm
voice of the wind in her mouth, her hair snapping
back like a banner from her neck. Soon,
with knees still wobbling in time to the ride
she will ease down from the saddle, the smell
of leather wound around her hand, and her feet
will dance in one unsteady moment upon
earth now singing the endless flute of her body.
DRIVE TO FLORENCE, JUST FOR PIE

For Dave

Twenty miles and three brawls
with Dave's old Volvo that shimmies
down the Bitterroot till it kicks up
gravel shoulder, skidding us
to the door of Glen's Cafe flanking 93.
Mrs. Glen plates up a piece each
adds cold vanilla to nuzzle
our wide wedges of heaven.
I'm not Montana
but I decipher the lingo
of this crust and slow teasing ooze
hot enough to warm your vertebrae
a week or three.
I dig away at this cherry miracle
gooey plasma, sweet guest of my lips
while Dave forks through a melee
of mincemeat, room enough
for two more slabs of the Promised Land.
Our moist forks cluster stray crumbs
until stars start to shoo us home
in our yolk yellow transport
where I, one pie-happy Minnesotan
scoot a little closer to this Missoula man
his face kindled in a long savor of moon
riding the fine memory and last slice glow
of sunset rhubarb, darkeyed sweet with raisin.
SOUPMAKING WITH THE MAN
WHO DOES THE SHY TUNA

Full October moons of carrot,
celery's weak crescents dumped
in the orbit of chicken steam
and here I am,
your unromantic rose
working the stove,
balancing out everything
in a gray bloom of broth.
A sting still half-moons
my left index finger knife mistook
for onion, shut up
to a buzz saw grin.
You carve down wheat bread,
sweet, careful slices padding counter,
I fish bay leaf
out of this simple gold sky.
A cut on my hand,
a bruise on yours,
look at us David,
two-stepping linoleum to the tunes
of sage and basil.
The old, welcome place
of your smile opens,
it means contentment, yes,
the quiet simmer warm
in our stomachs all night.
AT CAROLYN'S

Mad at your landlord about the chill,
you flip the oven-dial
to four-fifty and open it,
electric coils thrilling to orange.
I've lived too long lately
in the weary cold of the world
and I want to winter in the aroma
of gray wool socks steaming
in your kitchen, do you mind?
We scoot our chairs closer,
my red hands rooted around a mug
of smoking Cinnamon Rose.
Heat burrows till my kneecaps
glow like candles. We ease
shut our eyes, laughing with a warmth
we can't borrow from any stove.
A good fire walks our marrow, steps
down our bones until it's frictioned
in the twitch of thawed-out toes.
Talking together, I nearly believe
the core of the world is a molten
million degrees right now.
Canyon wind wallops on the door
like an old, impatient man.
Sitting in the mouth of your oven,
heat coaxes blood back to our fingers,
shivers our faces
with a soundless roar,
dazzling the hairs on our skin until
perhaps like small animals
we will age a winter
and rouse amazed in new bodies.
BEBOP DOWN TO THE CAR WASH BOOGIE

Yeah, Mary, early April and seventy cloudless perfecta-mundo degrees in your 69 Olds 98 you haven't so much as spit on since October, cruising down to the All American Auto Wash like it was Mecca on a Friday afternoon with Dan Seals singing I'm not after your body baby, I just want you to dance with me so sincere you about kiss the radio. You are the biggest dancing fool I know, Mary, doing the Lindy down to the All American Auto Wash with crooning Dan and me in mirror shades playing a wicked air guitar passenger-side. What else can we do? This cowboy wants to bop with you baby all night long I want to bebop with you baby till the break of dawn.

Bumping down Brooks we screech up in the Auto Wash driveway by the high powered (yeow!) vacuum for the simple subtraction of paths of crumbs and smushed boxes we've stomped on all winter or lost beneath the seat: Better Cheddars, Nilla Wafers, Cracker Jack, Cap'N Crunch, Ding Dong wrappers and three dozen Diet Pepsi cans. Like those German kids who left a clever trail we've driven our way back from zero to the car wash line. Radio up another notch, sunning on the hood legs crossed, the white bone of our ankles waggling to so much music. Mary, this day adds clear up to infinity. Believe me, the numbers inside don't end, they never, never end we could spend our lives trying to count this high.
ATTENTION: ATTENDANT HAS ALL SALVAGE RIGHTS

For Dave

The concussion of the pick-up over no road at all jolts in time to your C&W on the A.M. wailing up the hill to the B.F.I. landfill, flatbed loaded with junk, garbage, whatever wreckage we've made of our lives so far. Near noon, putrid mountains sizzle to a gumbo no crow for ten miles can resist. An old man with a rotted melon grin folds your check in half jams it in his shirt pocket and waves us to a fresh heap. Tailgate down the truck backs through a sharp flurry of horseflies with large, green-metal bodies and we shove out the cardboard boxes and 30 gallon bags. Upright on the grooved metal, we listen to our debris swish in a slow rolling decline, watching how sun can spangle expanses of trash like fields of our worst selves scraps of love lift to light. Jarring down the hill, we abide the rubble always in the back yard of our nature the sewage of a thousand people's lives choking the cab, stinking louder than the radio. We glance gack as a Caterpillar levels the mound scaring up a hundred junk yard birds, a black bouquet thrown up and over our heads catching Mickey Gilley's first smooth percussions of "Stand By Me."
KAFKA IN A LATE MARCH SNOWFALL

I clack a frost-furred package of chicken in the sink to thaw, one hunched-up shoulder wedging the phone to my face consoling you because you cannot understand Kafka this quarter. Out the window patches of smoke inhaled by the sky breath back a little more snow. Yes, we're always given more cold than we ever ask for, but Kafka was crazy, I say, and is best read in the middle of June with all the lights on. It's hard, tulip greens tucked against the house chilling to a painful leather, the sad plod of cars through exhaust-colored muck.
The only thing defrosting today is dinner. Still, even this slush will sink, page-white into a gumbo of earth that will suck our shoes and dry holding our joyful steps home. When spring is only a calendar photo, seek the smaller metamorphoses, perhaps in a snow dripping down the gray forehead of an afternoon when Kafka strolls through your life. Perhaps alone in a warm kitchen sliding fingers down a plastic-coated bundle of chicken, glad for how it is wet shining and melts with a hundred slivers of ice.
THE RAIN OF LEAVING

Believe me when I tell you
I drowned last night
in the rain of your leaving.
Sitting on the curb today,
waiting for a bus in a downpour,
I smell your beard
in the dark flaps of leaves
deep as orchids around my head.
The cold drizzle
of your name beads my lips,
eases to my chin before
the blind burst to ground.

This water belongs to me now.
It will trickle down my shoulders
and slip into my lungs forever.
The air, weighted hard with November,
perfumes itself with the exhaust
of late busses, the ghost-breath
of those that never arrive.
Listen to me. My rain-creased face
is the map to a cold country.
But look love
how in my pocket
I have saved the first
terrible bloom of your smile.
COUNTING THE PORCH STEPS HOME  
(For Grandmother Williams, 1890-1984)  

From 87 on, she'd call me  
to thread her needles  
spray of light from the skinny  
brass floor lamp no longer enough.  
In the creak of parlor boards  
and restless curl of her tarnished  
pin-colored hair, I speared  
those eyes, bobbling them  
on a string, invisible as air  
until grabbed by a sliver of light.  
Her thick fingers sat  
disobedient in her lap, disgusted  
with a stubborn snake  
of thread, wetted  
aimed, 10, 11 times.  

The clear I.V. bottle drips  
into a transparent tube dripping  
a thin, clean rope of something  
that will not help into  
the tender crook of her elbow.  
A stick of fluorescent glare  
above the bed crashes into  
every corner. Bruised  
blue veins of her hands  
trip over bones thin  
as sparrow feet.  
Face, fingers never let on  
half her brain  
has bled to death already.  

On the gray porch  
we would strip  
down the luxurious hair and  
husk of sweet corn, pale  
in our hands as large, bubbled  
noodlepoint. The porch air tasted  
of drying timothy and shuckings  
I plucked the few sticky strands  
woven between kernels.  
Sewing she could never finish  
lay in the hall closet  
folded neat in a blue basket.  

I count her breaths  
carefully as if I could  
string enough together for her  
to wear and walk back to me  
on the downbeat.  

(no stanza break)
My nostrils filter out
nurses and urine until her life
fills with one ragged sack
of air never repeated.
Sinking above vein-colored lips
the scent of bread trembling
in the distance, she threads
the narrow gate
and her fingers stretch like
lean summer grass in
this poem that desires to close
with me hidden under the front stoop
breathing the cool slats of sun
counting her porch steps home
but instead will stay with me
at least one moment in
the acid light of that room
helping me to keep my lips
pressed to the last warmth of her cheek.
WORDS FOR UNCLE DAVID AT HIS FUNERAL

This afternoon, you're tanned
as though you'd clipped hedges in the backyard
all morning, and decided, strangely
to nap dressed up
perhaps bored
by this room, the snooze
of mahogany walls, Sunday bests
embalmed with grief and relatives.
I feel like a skirted statue
young enough to be unsure
of etiquette, sticking an inch
from my mother's elbow.
Mourners speak in whispers
to temper this air
loud with the uncertainty you advertise
that will fill their sleep later.
But what you and I have grasped
is bigger than cemetery-gray angel wings
fanning down doubt for an hour.
Forgive us for living unaccustomed to it:
the torn heart healed permanent
in blue, inexhaustible rooms
the waltz of your large hands happier
than our whole bodies know how to be.
David, I can run my fingers smooth
across the thick-glossed oak.
I can bear
the stupored half-expectation
your dark suit
will inhale momentarily
one hand lazily scratch the other.
I know how I'll sleep tonight.
LETTER TO KATE

For My Grandmother

It's ten years and raining,
the morning paper gray-damps the table,
the dry spot under the oak in back
dwindles, the bark delicious and pungent
as your old oak furniture,
its huge, lemon polish
hinting for hours in my nostrils.
After three days of rain
crackling the roof,
wet fingertips stroking the panes,
I come to the day you died,
buried in well-shellacked oak
like an untouchable ice.
In rain that never stops
I finish breakfast,
a last gulp of coffee and rise.
The oak that will bury me
deepens in this weather.
I walk to the kitchen,
glide my hand over the cool counter,
knowing it still grows,
each branch crooked upward, reaching,
it still grows.
THE SECRET HILLS

Two hours out of Great Falls, Montana, the bus lugs up speed, grinds down into third for Roger's Pass and with the last of our egg salad sandwiches gone, we lean back into conversation, the stink of diesel breathing in our stomachs. The window darkens into a bad looking glass, a rush of sooty hills evaporating into rows of ghostly faces. I want to say something but often friends are only strangers carrying a secret the other can't live without. The pane etches our cheeks into warped stone pricked by the far off stars of homes and stable yards. Perhaps to be human means we can't see the hills held by windows, because it is always nearing midnight and our eyes are unable to penetrate the dim portraits windows hide behind. Like us, their loveliest thought peaks under a fragile sky alone. The secret hills inside every mirror lure us, disguised with out hair and our noses, the finest glass grafted with real silver and the most precise skin of mercury, so beautiful and specific we believe there are mountains shining in back of it. Leaning into a pearl-white rub of sky, we keep watching, needing to glimpse the shy country within the dark cores of our eyes, so that without knowing why we will think of ourselves as vast and amazing landscapes. I would be happy to give you just one small mirror for all the false reflections, one true looking glass, clean amid the darkened images rumbling in the long aisle of night.
DESCENDING FLIGHT

For My Parents

The 737 rides
the long mane of these clouds
like a fearless girl
fist full of tough hair
nuzzling terrible air.
My head backed against
the plaid cushion
I am the one
your poet-daughter in this storm
for whom you wished different things
trying to come home.
Coffee unsteadies
in a plastic cup
the sound of wind in my ears
like cadenced muscle
wrestling over bone
until the snowy glow of Minneapolis
cracks into view, a second sky.
I know what girl wild
with the scent of horse owns this field
gallops the shadows by instinct.
My suitcase loaded with warm clothes
a few poems dangle
in expectation for the incredible plunge
into small, scattered beads
of light, syllables
I could jewel together
for you to wear and be proud.
You wait beneath my feet
uncertain in the large lobby
a private galaxy
where an embrace that takes a long time
will pack my ear over your hearts
and the poem I write
ends there after we say
yes and love and yes.