Notes for a primer

Beth Wolfson

*The University of Montana*

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University of Montana
NOTES FOR A PRIMER

by

Beth Wolfson

B.A., University of Montana, 1985

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1993

Approved by

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date
Acknowledgements

"Ritual for a New Day" and "The First Stone" appeared in Kinnikinnik.

My true list of thank yous is very long. At least let me thank: Patricia Goedicke, for her unfailing generosity, fine ear and good sense; Connie Monson, Julie Cook and Mark Coleman for their fierceness and their fellowship; Paul Guillemette, my sweet pal, for the incitement of his brilliance and the shelter of his grace; my mother, Anne Kogen, for her compassion and faith—exemplars all.
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I. Learning to Swim
That instant between getting it and not getting it, into which I stuffed everything I could to keep from getting it, took about twenty-five years.

I first suspected in kindergarten--at least that's my first memory of it. I raised my arms to my side on the way to over my head in a game of Simon Says. And right then, as if a wind had swept through the hollow of words ("hands over your heads; Simon Says hands over your heads") and entered the bottoms of my feet, I began to rise up. And the ether of my mind was released over the field of brown sleeping mats below.

I drifted. What a sleepy day. What a sleepy, dreamy day. How amusing the people moving this way and that. And the big one, the teacher, facing the others, making words. How satisfying to watch the soft tips of their gestures drift off into wispy clouds.

And then all at once I grasped my condition. The glance I shot down the line of my mooring--and there was a mooring, though I hadn't noticed it until then--only substantiated the horror of my intuition.

I saw the years I would travel stack up and collapse like the pleats of an accordian played by some pink and bleating idiot. Not just some idiot. MY idiot.

And if I had not become already so fervently good, I would have recognized my panic for what it was. For an angel also came to me then. Its pudgy, fidgity hand motioned toward the ground and then toward me. It touched my brow, lingering at my temples. It played with the tip of my ear, whispering something. But I did not understand.

Still I understood perfectly when called upon. And I was called upon, so I hastened down the wheezy accordian stairs before they could give way.
I read perfectly too, because I did, and because I was a girl. And because I was a girl and read perfectly, I was good. This went on for some time.

In fact, once when I awoke from my nap, I was pinioned to my mat by the admiring gaze of my monitor. She whispered to me about the delicacies of my supple mind. She had devoured me, and was now bathing me in the nasty light of her satiety. Two or three other kids approached, as if pressing their faces against the glass wall of a cage. She cooed to them, and then to me. They backed off, lining the glass with parallel columns of snot. I drifted off to sleep again, but was aware of a certain dark commerce in my dreams from that time on.
I couldn't sleep one night because of the murderers in the trees. So I got up and went out to the patio where my sister was reading. She was lying on the couch and the shadows from the trees played across her body. She lifted her arm and I slid in underneath.

Did she read aloud to me? Did we speak?

My mother rushed out towards us, in a rage. "What are you doing?" I told her I couldn't sleep.

"Indulgent," she said, disgusted with everything. She grabbed my elbow and pulled me through the house into her bedroom. She sat me down on the bed and closed the door.

She opened the door to her armoire. The sweep of that gesture articulated all the generosity in the world. It also sold me shoe polish and travelling kits, and reminded me of what was not, generally speaking, to be had.

Mother looked amongst her things, and I took in the musty, woody smell. I watched, but was careful to be good. And though the smells swelled within me and spun me through time, I was still as a valise. She took out a small, gold, vinyl padded box, and indicated for me to open it.

It was filled with brooches. I took them out one by one, looking at her. I found a brass one with a terrier on it, and another smaller one with two little terriers on it. Those were the ones I liked. She told me to take them back to bed with me, and that they would watch over me while I slept.

I was pleased with these new things, and comforted.

But when I got back into bed, I couldn't sleep because of the murderers' knives coming at me through the mattress.
I was a sliver of green glass, a bit of toast. I was an old dish under the couch, a cracked wish in the family photo, slipped between the lips of Mother's smile. I was an eye in the ceiling lamp when the salesman came.

Mother opened the door and he walked right in, over to the little shelf where the encyclopedias were. He picked one up, groping for the unknown with the back of his brain. His long, white sleeve pushed straight out into the shelf, and his hand slipped out like a jackknife, like a lizard's tongue. He was as calm as a lizard on a hot rock.

He opened a book and gazed into it, smiling. Then he closed it. He eyed a bowl of fake fruit on top of the shelf, measuring something. I could hear a ticking sound as the skin behind his eyes retracted. And then he readjusted himself, asking Mother for a glass of water. While she was gone, he picked up an apple and bit into it, then laughed, winking at me. He tossed the apple a few inches up, then snatched it out of the air.

When Mother returned, he thanked her for the water, taking a sip and placing the glass on the shelf. Pulling a pamphlet out of his coat pocket and pushing it toward Mother, he said, "You see, we're very unusual in this regard."

"I see," she agreed, looking at the pamphlet, and then at him.

"Then it's all set?", he said.

"Yes," she said, "Thank you."

They shook hands and he let himself out, whistling.
One of my favorite games was Pammy Meeker’s house. It was on the end of the block, and I liked to circle past on my bicycle. There were six identical tract houses on each side of the street, with a farm on one end, and a vacant lot on the end past Pammy’s house. So touring past always gave me a sense of foreboding, of something about to end. This was scary, because I didn’t know which side of things I was on, the side being born or the side dying. But the ambiguity interested me.

Sometimes I sat on the curb out front, the big mulberry tree and the deep tangle of ivy at my back. I tortured myself by thinking of the treasure of lost balls I could not retrieve because of the rats. Ruthie had told me about the rats. I didn’t really believe in them, but that only made them more delicious to imagine.

I excited myself by thinking about the dim, exotic, lives in the house behind me. I thought about Thelma’s dark circles, her varicose veins. I saw her shadow drifting down the hallway as she shuffled from bedroom to bathroom and back again, dying a little more each time. I saw grandmother, an empty ship, desperate and resigned in her ministrations. And I saw Pammy, a bitterly pink little girl. I saw her snapping and hitting as Grandmother labored over her two perfect braids.

This last was enough to bring me to my feet. I enjoyed being polite to Grandmother. I enjoyed being fawned over and thought to be a good little girl. And I liked being thought of as a good—possibly the best—playmate for Pammy, though I could tell by a certain added restraint of Grandmother’s that the troubling question of my Jewishness remained. I enjoyed ringing the doorbell and squinting through the crocheted curtains into the dark house, waiting for the slack, gray body, the housedress that was Grandmother. I could see her through the curtains, could see the
terrified jelly of her ethereal body slapping against her brain, as she rode the current of her fear to the front door.

I was fascinated by her fear, and disappointed by her relief to see it was only me. But my disappointment vanished as she, fearful again, ushered me hurriedly into the house.

In that moment, the world fell open. If Pammy were not home, I could contemplate the mystery in solitude: this house, identical to mine, but where the light and sound were sucked down through the floor, and deeper, by some force, by the mulberry tree that darkened the yard and swallowed down that entire corner of the block.
Mother says, Get up, Sleepyhead, get up. If you shift just right in your carapace of sleep, rolling from head to foot like an ice-cream scoop, you can almost slice out a piece of the melony light. But with the rocking motion you turn more deeply into the suffused silence, saying, No. And even then there are stories.

Outside, the wood bows as the windows swallow down the last of the night. The violet light expands inside of you. Not the daylight, which grows by broadening and tensing into a blinding web, until everything is held by the merest surface tension, poised on the curve of a drop of water, or an eyeball. No, this deepening light expands against that dreaded flattening of the sky into which her sharpening voice threatens to eject you.

When you think you are clearly free, swimming fathoms below the skittering traffic noises, bother becoming no more than the faintest crackling of eggs frying at the far end of the hall, Get up, she says, dammit, get up.

And the crackle is amplified, the spattering multiplied, and flattened into the static by which your day will be measured.

And the stories? Most you will forget, or they'll fly by you in pieces you'll snatch at as they pass. Dragging a sack of potatoes, or of pots and scarves and boots; Adriatic ports; the death-distilled faces of your lost ones, you're breathless with the effort of remembering. Breathless from chasing after that old black train clacking backwards the length of this platform, the length of all the tracks to the last station, and the one before that. Sister, put down that sack. Relax and let the light swim up through your head and into the many lives you've never had.
II. Why Kids Start Fires
I sat very still on a wooden chair
my legs shooting over the edge
all that time
I ran all the way home
I'm still running

Say which story's true.

Your childhood is what they let down
on their hooks, that sad day on the pier.

Your childhood is a red flare
sent to the animals: Come quick!
What a terrible party, bring gifts.

Which is it? Quick!

I right each of my monkeys, wriggle
up from my fish-sleep and into my day glove--
some skin flakes off, inevitably.
Is this a problem? I'll have to call
someone and ask. Mother, hello. Yes,
the world's glorious and I'm finally
Father, hello, how are you
down there with the fishes. Fine, fine.

(No really, how are you?)
Horology

Last night
I slipped into the tear in space
where mind begins. In a dream
my friend, an astronomer, said to me:
The children in my life are inferences
drawn from the dying.
I wanted to call out:
The animals are alive. We are alive.
& the small mercies we allow
to animals are not difficult
not difficult but easy to let the mind
seize on the wrong things.

My friend, nearly weightless, reptilian,
was drawn toward the stars.

###

The ecstatic ribbon sails out,
rippling in the August light.

###

The human electrician said
grief, grief to the body
joy to the body

And I remembered my house
my house was a template of pure treason

###

My hair was on fire
A stranger came into the yard
I pounded against a tree my head
Mama I said I'm scorched I'm thirsty
Then we'd laugh, my brother and I
as if all the hypocrisy
in all the houses in town
would be rolled over and crunched
under our friendly little machine

But we were cruel

My favorite game the little wooden paddle
a ball tethered by string
the Earth punishing itself

I'd watch a particular face, the face of
a stranger, reproduced electronically.
How many of these I took into my body.
I'd find my own face sinking down--
would pick it up and let it coalesce,
back into the light of the beam.

Oh I loved my body then.

And my head was my own best toy.
And Mother came to me in my dream,
shivering my synapses; but I held back,
drawn by the milky screen.
Waking now, I don't know
if I'm a baby or an old man.
There's the memory of something
some jagged tongue
sawing me open my head

There were these books
volumes snatched by the keepers
on cranes of memory
or lies
and let breath by breath
out of our sleeping heads
The doctor said how are you
I said
the doctor said HOW ARE YOU
and a disk of light sailed
broken from my side
the wheel creaked around and
cut loose sulphur floated up
from the cracked places
the wheel lost hold and the
queen flew out screaming
what a fool I've been
came into my head my head
reeling out and out what a fool
I've been just fine yes
To a Neighbor Girl

Of course I will give you
the plums from my tree, greedy
little girl. Though you're fat as
the fruit you covet, you're bursting with
a sadness someone's fattened you on.
Neither mean nor sweet, you need
what you need. Please, ask. Ask.
1. They'd use only the third person
there in front of her
She won't touch a thing, etc.

She'd look straight at me
until I'd untie the mask

Afterwards they said
how lovely she was
how it was too bad

One wrote a story and got famous

I still can't touch her

2. Our hands floated up the grandmothers
beating them back down
(Mine would yell: Don't touch your face)
(Hers would make everything so pretty
the clothes the perfect braids)
So pretty
smoothing us down
in our heads the only hallowed places
for the hands to rise up--

3. I think of everything that is missing
though I myself have lost only a couple of fingers
it is difficult to count

I do not understand who is at war here
The Unsaying

In my mind you do not die You ride with the negroes to the end of town You'll be there clouds of dust in your wake forever And I I still graze your side kid-crazy for your mother love If I say the unsayable something in what the radio keeps leaking through the static Maybe there's a code inside the noise for how to get to where the heroes are

Maybe there's some noise inside the code for how to get beyond where we keep the niggers Not beyond where we keep them Beyond keeping them
Why Kids Start Fires

I cannot say why children start fires.

Perhaps it is because they like the warmth, enjoy seeing the flames.

Strange that animals in cold times would seek to warm themselves.
Searching Too Hard

for truth
in the dark
earth
cool and fat
little worm
that I am
Grandfather Dream

You'd drowned, I thought. I rushed to hold your feet. They were so long, and old and far. You came to, crying. I held you the night through. It was cold.
My Friend

My friend said,

"I promise I will always like you, though I may have other friends.

"I promise I will never leave you, though I may move from here some day."

And I have not forgotten his words, though his face passes, like the shadow of a pony I want to touch.
Kindergarten

I rise across the rice fields of another day.

Brown mats below me flatly peopled a map of someplace both familiar and strange.

I'm in two worlds and somewhere else all I wanted.
Two Boys at Maple Lake, 1969

(For Paul Guillemette and David Harris)

Paul, I've begun your poem
late for you, I'm afraid, since
the words you needed me to speak
no longer hold. And I'm sorry.
My mother phoned just as I began--
a little thing--and I was glad, but
stunned by the dark shape of my love
for her. Then I wanted to return to
your childhood; I couldn't find it.
It was lost under the startled trees
that saw everything. They knew what
my dumb exigencies had blotted out:
In the debris of fall, leaves
everywhere, the cries of two boys
held out across the pitched skin
of the lake, shied to the pitch of time.
God knows what they couldn't say.
III. What to Do with the Evidence
The First Stone

1.
Was it hollow, like the love I felt yesterday for those rusted sewer pipes at the construction site? They seemed terrible to me, like two beautiful lovers strangled in the act of it... Consumed by desire, the animals. I felt sorrow for them, they were sick. I mean I felt them to be two dying animals. Let me explain the exchange: compassion, perhaps dereliction. Heavy head, light head: something had passed.

The first ions of a stone forming there. But history now. Hysteria: the head floated off while the eyes hardened.

Let me tell you the real story: they were copulating and were head-wise out the window when it fell on them. Gasp...ing, they saw it: Lucida Stella... the one for which speech is inconceiveable. He opened her cunt, pulled the trees from their mouth. To find a language there, in desire's nest.

Then he took flight in the mind-- self-absolving hunger and lode stone/star.

3.
Forgive me my false starts. We've got to pay meticulous attention to the exact details: edging, being edged to the window through which you see your own house folding in upon itself-- like the good book you slept with last night, so innocently. And your forehead's cold against the glass.
What to do with the Evidence

1.
On a scaffolding, at dusk
in an empty section of the city,
your parents copulated indifferently
while watching two men
toss bricks from a wheelbarrow
into the back of a small truck

This is the evidence of it.

2.
You could stand against the wall,
considering the evidence.

Behind you, on the other side
there is someone else, measuring
the same problem from a different angle.

3.
Sit down.
Weigh everything, balance; build

the house. Drink tea. Have sex.
Villanelle

They have monkey faces, and I wonder
who they are. Such grotesque faces, and delicate hands:
the hands of an insect, or a lover.

Or a watchmaker: the way they hover
over the levers, astute as a monacled man.
They have monkey faces, and I wonder

(the soft certainty, the brilliant blur)
incurably about these creatures, Rabelasian contraband.
The hands of an insect or a lover,

signing under the aqueous eye of night, won't uncover
the mystery of who or from which wizened lands...
They have monkey faces and I wonder

who they love, and how; what one does with another
to show affection, to show he understands.
The hands of an insect or a lover

poised as hierophants', won't disclose what I can't discover:
what to do with heart, and mind, and hands.
They have monkey faces, and, I wonder--
the hands of an insect, or a lover?
Pirate Dreams

When I caught you in my spy glass
I wanted to be a ship captain
and you my lady.
We were so in love.
Oh we were rich.

I slept in my tree with an axe
dreaming of Madagascar--
The days chafed.
Wishing made lepers of us both.
But the corpses of hope were soft flakes.

Our little island was not enough.
The civility of coconuts was not enough
I was too watery for that and the night
exploded in one fat hatchetblow
my Love.
Ladder Suite

At the airport I held you. I held you close so that my breath pushed me away from you. Through the gate into the jet and over the range of animals.

***

I am here very much wanting to write you a poem about ladders. If only I had a ladder. How quickly the mind splits from the thing.

***

I may take this game seriously, enough to kill. It may kill me. It may kill me to play, but it's just a game so o.k. If it's a game about ladders then it's fun and also it may help to build something. It may be good for all of us to play, and then we can say how good we were, how good of us to play.

***

You think I am going to write a poem for you about ladders but maybe I won't or maybe I will write one about something else and leave both of us to wonder what it is about. Maybe it will just be about itself or maybe it will just be. What do you want? I want something or maybe not. This is a strong position, nonetheless. Outside my window there is a long skinny shed with a roof like the shedding skin of a snake. It is slipping out of itself and travelling along the river into fall. It may be a long boat. Maybe not. It may be a long boat, yes.
A Ladies' Show

1. Lies
   follow lies
   follow
   lies

2. Many will come
   forth. But until
   they do, cover your eyes.

   Eat daintily and dress in order
   not to offend. Wash often.

3. Q. How will you know
   if you've seen it?

   A. Whenever possible
      sing while alone.
Many regarding m'Lady enviously, are ignoble.
Some, wordlessly, are kind.

The recipe's for m'Lady's
practice of stroking the victim
before striking its death cord.

They wonder, some ignobly,
some wordlessly bound.
They can't know the sweet pleasures of her table.
The savor of her flavor,
the palaver of her saliver, etc.

This was to have been a recipe
for those discriminating palates of the savory
practices of domestic perfection.

Anyway, we dined well on baked chicken
and fucked blissfully afterwards.
Your eyes were steel,
the gray of rivers and storms.

Later I saw your eyes all over in the modern world.

Sunk into the old highway at Battery Park,
they narrowed at the approach of passing joggers.
They blinked wildly on the Ginza, my almonds, my full ovals,
drifting amidst the neon clatter of sticks and stones.

Incised into the I-beams of Sullivan's Chicago,
they winked at me.
They scorned me from Taliesin, taunting:
Less is more.

Come back, I cried
The rain's leaking in through the lathing in my house.
(And my honey is leaking out.)
Industry will be choked for a century.
and my children will starve.

Time is a slotted spoon.
You were sadder then
in Idaho there were snakes
slow as dust and harmless but
closer than the mind
could bear
so I got scared

There was that little one
you held up in your palm
like lightning
the true size of fear
and laughed
Two for the Years

Not

because speaking
hurts because not
speaking hurts

Not sure

why except
they're so
close and
so now
unable
to speak
Equinox

What is it about persimmons only a word
this staggering mid-March snowfall
  a gaggle of widows on widow street

  I was saying something but you weren't
  who I thought you were you were
  but weren't for me what I thought

A field somewhere in the ripening of
the listening body all love stays
  husks fall away to their weather
Now’s Christmas Again

The head of my Christ
is what I left behind
when I left what I left
flaking away on the skin
of the seas we entered &
parted on I’m not sure
what it was I couldn’t
hold on I couldn’t love
what I couldn’t hold onto
& all that beautiful fruit
kept coming
I had no appetite
I couldn’t love what I
couldn’t kill the seas sated
on their own violence
the mercy revoked
in the moment it’s staked
to the exquisite dying
breath
You think you know something
and pretty soon
you don't know
anything

Dithering down dark halls
    after God
Shivering in an ocean of Yes

I thought I knew
who I was
what it was
I wanted

Ha Ha
little monk's head
fish without skin
If you don't get it right the first time
I don't know I don't like to reenter trouble
I'll see you down by the ocean
where I'm going to cool my coconut head
I met someone told me I could if I snagged
the right song Figure though I won't know
the song 'till I find my head Going to the
ocean to find a girl (guy) Going to the seashore
to make a journey there I like that
I may not know when I reach the edge
I don't like to look for trouble
I fell upon the shore, onto my face.
A grain of sand? The world. It's rather odd.
Down on my hands and knees I thanked my God:
there is no end or measure to his grace.
I prayed, then stood, then struggled to efface
particulates of silicates, and clots
of them, from my body, slack and water-logged;
then slogged onto the beach, in His embrace.

I crossed the night to find some cigarettes---
ocasionally I smoke to calm my nerves.
I found a greasy spoon and went inside
to testify and watch t.v. Leatherette
dinettes: I slide my hand along the curves,
like riding waves, while waiting to be served.
Ritual for the New Day

Mornings I stroll through the revolving door
aorta of the world.
I hear there the flattened, copy-cat
hearts of milk carton kids
fed too late and not
incidentally, interspecially
on the mother-love of cows.

Cows!

Oh I'd wash their ears, labyrinthine and enormous
with the centuries' listening.

I would wash their feet
with Borateem and Tang, frankincense and the fat
of lambs

as if all good animals deserved this.

Imagine.

And the teeth, the teeth especially
I would delight to polish.
Hospital of My Head

One morning I said yes and walked

There's no how but what I held
under my tongue refusing to swallow

How terrifying and beautiful it was
out there the asphalt luminous

with the breath of animals
It was still a house
with all that darkness shot through the walls
I climbed up to where the roof used to be

Well, I turned the radio on
something like bebop playing
but remotely more terrifying
it cancelled your childhood

On the roof where the fire had been
I fanned my lifelong sadness
I called into the hole
If it's a river in there then say so

I showed the photo to Paul before he left on his bicycle
he was sickened
they'd wanted their frailties to stand for something
to me-- only that there was a house

My shards, these shrouds and swaddling clothes
the human voice, for example
I'm not afraid of being old-fashioned any more
I feel sexy, aroused, hungry