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Wading in the Lethe

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
English

by

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Marshall University

Huntington, West Virginia

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Month Day Year

as meeting the research requirements for the master's degree.

Advisor Katherine Rodier

Department of English

Leonard Deutch 4/28/00
Dean of the Graduate College

WADING IN THE LETHE

To the memory of my mother, Wendy Jones Stephenson, whose love, generosity, beauty, and compassion had an impact on my life that could never be undone by death.

To my family--immediate, extended, and adopted--who have helped me grow through the pain and joy that fill these pages and my heart.

To my husband, Bryson, whose love, patience, and passion make this work and my life richer and more vibrant. Thank you for promising me I will never be a great writer because you will never let me suffer.

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>i</i>
SPRING OF THE JACARANDA	1
Wading in the Lethe	2
They Cannot Stay	3
Optimist	4
Better Sorry	6
The Nursery	7
Burrow	8
Exploratory Procedure	9
Thank You	10
Self-Reliance	11
Lyle, the Crocodile	12
Heliotrope	14
Don't Rock the Boat	15
Denial	16
Challenger	17
Fourteen	18
Object Lesson	19

THE CORMORANT'S SONG	20
Kite	21
Tepidity	22
Heirloom	23
No Truth in Things	25
All Saints' Day	26
The Discourse of Death	28
Perspective	29
Comfort Food	30
What Alone Is	31
Seeking Definition	32
Vigil	33
Waking	34
Maybe	36
Getaway	38
Math	40
Misspoken, Misread	41
GREEN SHOOTS IN SNOW	42
Angel Mint	43
Makeover	44
Not Jesus	45

Forgiveness	47
Catharsis	48
Hindsight	49
Longevity	51
Wendy	52
Remembering to Play	54
Kiss	55
The Smell of Home	56
Breakfast Waltz	58
Tartan	59
The Art of Underwater Breathing	60
The Banyan	61

INTRODUCTION

To Honor (by Wendy Jones Johnson, circa 1976)

*The rosebud mouth, the round, little thighs,
Our plump, bright elf with the dark, blue eyes
Our lives before were so incomplete
Soon the flutter inside of two, tiny feet
We thought we knew freedom
The years before you came
Now we know the wonder of creating life's flame
A flame to grow, to flicker, and at last be an ember
To enrich our lives for years to remember
How we cherish and love you, your innocent glee,
You, the miracle of warmth and sensitivity.*

My mother wrote this poem when I was an infant, and it has always served as a reminder to me of her love, warmth, and creativity. Even though the original text is yellowing beneath a glass frame and temporarily collecting dust in my in-laws' basement, I had no trouble transcribing these lines from memory. I hope that time will never blur or erase them. Although several of my family and friends are dear to me and have significantly influenced my development as a person and writer, my mother has been, and

to an extent, continues to be, the most influential of these. From the time I first learned to read, between two and three years of age, my mother began filling my small, wooden bookcase to overflowing with volumes of poetry, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and fables. A few of my favorites were Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *A Children's Garden of Verses*, *Lyle the Crocodile*, and two encyclopedic books on various breeds of dogs and cats. My mother also subscribed to *Ideals* poetry magazine, and I have many fond memories of nights and mornings spent cuddled up in her bed, reading the latest issue.

When I was around six years old, I began writing short rhymed and unrhymed verse (what I called "poetry") and short stories, and drawing accompanying illustrations for them. I wrote most of these in small notebooks or "diaries," though I often submitted them to my mother for approval and correction in spelling. My mother always praised my efforts and encouraged me to write more. She even submitted one of my poems (written when I was around seven) to the local newspaper, *The St. Petersburg Times*. Unbeknownst to her, I had crept from bed late one night and seen some footage from a television documentary on the Vietnam War. The poem, "The Sadness of It All," contained my reactions to what I saw. It wasn't much, but the paper printed it, and my mother (of course) thought it was wonderful. As I grew, so did my love for reading and writing. I used writing to express and explore my feelings regarding my parents' divorce (when I was three) and my mother's remarriage (when I was seven). Although my parents sent me to see a guidance counselor, my thoughts regarding my new stepfather and younger stepbrother were more accurately reflected in the things I wrote when I was alone. I learned early that my feelings of confusion were natural, but that my anger,

jealousy, and resentment were not-- or at least were not good-- so I began to keep my emotions, and therefore my writing, secret. Even my mother, to whom I was closest, often could not see what I wrote. I never really fell into the practice of writing "Dear Diary" entries describing how my day had gone, but I definitely felt that I had found a silent confidante in my pencil and paper.

I always enjoyed writing because it helped me question and explore aspects of myself and the world around me, gave me an outlet for my creativity, and allowed me emotional release. I also learned that writing held power, and I tried to use that power to my advantage. For example, when sent to my room to await punishment, I took paper and pencil and wrote, as eloquently as possible, a letter of confession, acknowledging my wrongdoing and explaining that I had certainly learned my lesson. I then slipped the paper under my door for my parents to read before they came in. For at least the first few times, this tactic actually worked; my parents were too amused by my rhetorical efforts to administer a strong sentence. However, the novelty eventually wore off, and this technique ceased to be effective.

Despite the love I felt for and received from my father and, later, my stepfather, my mother was the parent who had always been there, and I considered her the one constant in my life. In retrospect, I realize I was probably too close to my mother, too dependent upon her for approval, self-confidence, advice, and my perception of the world. Although I tried to assert my independence by attending college out-of-state, I now see that, to an extent, that was only a matter of geography. My awakening was sudden and violent, and was precipitated by my mother's equally sudden and violent death in July of 1997. After battling cervical cancer, undergoing a necessary radical

hysterectomy, and facing the reality of the failure of her sixteen-year marriage to my stepfather, my mother fell into a deep depression and ultimately committed suicide. This event made me question everything I had ever believed about my mother, my father, my stepfather, God, love, marriage, and myself. I began to see how strongly my perception of others was influenced by my mother's opinions and beliefs, and how this influence, which I had always understood as nurturing, and overprotective at worst, had actually done irreparable damage to many relationships, and stunted my emotional and psychological growth.

In the months and years that followed my mother's death, I used writing, talking with friends and family, psychological and pastoral counseling, and community support groups to try to come to terms with the past and envision a future in which my mother would play no active role. All of these methods helped me somewhat, but my writing, specifically my poetry, was the most therapeutic and instructive. Since my mother was no longer part of my present or future, all I had left was the past, so I turned to memories, both mental "pictures" and actual photographs, to help me regain perspective. In this way, I hoped to attain a greater understanding of my family and, perhaps more importantly, myself. However, I quickly learned that life is what happens before and after the camera flash goes off, and that time has rendered many of my mental pictures nearly as unreliable as the images captured on film.

The poems contained in this thesis, all of which have been written and revised over the past two years, are the medium through which I have expressed, revisited, and explored my various reactions to my mother's death and the situations that arose from it. I have also used these poems to examine my relationships with other members of my

family, to see how these relationships and/or my perceptions of them have changed, and to consider their potential for reconciliation and growth. Finally, I have included poems that illustrate aspects of my personal development and identity as a woman (“Don’t Rock the Boat,” “Fourteen”), more specifically as a daughter (“Kite”) and wife (“Hindsight,” “Tartan”), and as a Christian (“Not Jesus,” “Misspoken, Misread,” “Forgiveness”).

I have organized this work somewhat chronologically, beginning with poems containing images of childhood, then progressing through adolescence into adulthood. However, just as present and past often intermingle and sometimes fuse through our acts of recollection, images from the distant past, more recent past, and present often commingle and overlap throughout this work. For example, the poems “Optimist” and “Better Sorry,” which portray (respectively) a specific interaction between me and my father and my understanding of our relationship, appear before “The Nursery,” which depicts my mother planting a tree shortly before I was born. Although several of the poems deal with my mother, her death, and my reactions to it, this collection also represents a progression or development, not merely chronologically, but emotionally and psychologically, as well. For this reason, the final section, “Green Shoots in Snow,” contains poems that resolve or attempt to resolve issues introduced in earlier sections (“Not Jesus,” “Catharsis,” “Hindsight”), or simply return to previously established themes and/or images, thereby achieving some sense of coherence, if not closure (“The Art of Underwater Breathing,” “The Banyan”). Although the majority of the poems in each section of this work are retrospective considerations of objects, people, or situations, it is my intention that the poems in “Green Shoots in Snow” suggest a more mature

sensibility, and a clearer sense of perspective regarding others, my interactions with them, and myself.

The poets whose work I have found most influential in my own writing have been the American Modernists, specifically Marianne Moore, Hilda Doolittle, and William Carlos Williams; the “Younger American” poets, such as Carolyn Forché and William Pitt Root (a native Floridian like myself); and the Confessional poets, particularly Sylvia Plath. From the Modernists I gained a more expansive definition of the poetic subject, and learned the value of conciseness and the evocative power of images. One of the interesting characteristics of the “Younger American” poets is that many of them are college and university teachers. This fact came as somewhat of a revelation to me since I’d been weaned on romantic stories of the eccentric lives of poets and, regardless of the fact that my family contained a long line of teachers, I had somehow received the impression that where the arts are concerned, “those who can’t do, teach,” and I desperately wanted to “do.” I also found the contemporaneity of these poets refreshing and reassuring, and admired the way that their poetry, while coming closer to speech than to song, still possessed a kind of music. Finally, poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath impressed me with their sensitivity and courage, which allowed them to “utter raw feeling before time, conventional reassurance, or contemplation have alleviated it” (Ellman 1195), and create art out of intense pain and madness. I try to achieve that kind of painful immediacy in poems like “Heirloom,” “Tepidity,” and “No Truth in Things.”

I delight in the sounds of language, so I frequently experiment with alliteration and rhyme and engage in word play, in which I capitalize on the various shades of meaning that words possess. I also explore various kinds of meter, since I want my

poems to have a sense of rhythm, whether subtle or more explicit. However, I seldom strictly adhere to traditional verse forms, and I often prefer the French system of syllabics to English metrics. Although many of my poems deal with elements of the abstract, I try to ground them in vivid, concrete images, and I consider rich, evocative (particularly sensory) images and word economy to be two essential characteristics of good poetry.

Since this work is strongly autobiographical, the majority of the poems' personae have my voice. However, not all of them do; I sometimes employ the third person for dramatic effect or to achieve a greater sense of objectivity, e.g., in "Maybe" and "Hindsight." Although several of the poems address issues of guilt, fear, anger, confusion, denial, and betrayal, I tried to offset these more negative themes with poems that express hope, renewal, healing, joy, and peace (particularly those of the final section). However, I did not try to balance the positive and negative perfectly, because such a portrayal of life (or at least *my* life) would not be accurate or honest. Similarly, this thesis is not merely a journey from black night to dazzling day. A key lesson in my development as a woman, Christian, and writer has been the discovery that, while I believe in absolute spiritual truth, it is almost impossible to view the human realm in terms of strict, Manichean dichotomies. For no one's hat is all black or all white, but mottled gray. The tone of the final poems is hopeful, but not pollyanna-ish. The speaker recognizes as valid all her experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and takes them with her as she moves on to the next phase of her life. The last page of text contains a sense of resolution, but no definitive end, which is as it should be.

If asked why I wrote this thesis, I would have to answer that my choice was based partly on desire and partly on necessity. Authors and poets often feel the need to write on

a particular subject simply so they can “get it out of their systems” and move on to bigger and better things. Sometimes, quite by accident, these deeply personal works receive high critical praise and achieve enormous popularity. Needless to say, my expectations for my thesis are not quite so lofty. However, I have tried to create a body of writing that is not only personally significant, but well crafted, aesthetic, and in some sense universal, as well.

Works Cited

Ellman, Richard and Robert O'Clair, ed. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. New York: Norton, 1973.

SPRING OF THE JACARANDA

A curious child, who dwelt upon a tract
Of inland ground, applying to his ear
The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell,
To which, in silence hushed, his very soul
Listened intensely; and his countenance soon
Brightened with joy, for from within were heard
Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed
Mysterious union with his native sea.

William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*.

Wading in the Lethe

Unripe guest at the riverside, feet, head throbbing,
I see eroded banks, proof of power to erase.
I seek a balm, purification, but see vapor rising,
fear a harsh awakening by fire or ice.

Hidden currents wait to drag me under
but the surface ripples like a mother's laughter.
Promising release, quiet surrender,
it draws me edgeward like Siren strains.

I reach in a toe and am baptized with ice.
Frost torpedoes through my vessels, jumps synaptic gaps.
Memory begins to decompose, grief to vaporize,
as each foot submerges, anesthetized.

"Deeper," a voice whispers—almost familiar
but I stay in shallows, preferring to wade.
I need this persistent ache, a reminder
that Charon has not ferried me yet.

They Cannot Stay

Memories of joy
distrust caresses
of the aggrieved.
Squeezed to distortion,
left mere shadows,
they remain only moments
and then take their leave.
They know their healing
ephemeral, and futility
a prolonged goodbye.

Optimist

We go for a walk.
I'm still a foot or so
shorter than you,
gazing up at trees,
feeling warm breezes
on my cheeks.
I look up at you and smile
but you don't see.
I watch squirrels hop
along branches,
say I want to run with them.

You tell me that's fitting
since I'm knock-kneed
and have "monkey toes."
And I feel an urge,
though I don't know why,
to paint my face black,
lips red, trip over myself...
somehow I'm sure
you'll laugh at that.
(Even then I had an inkling
of the price of your smile.)

And I saw your toes
peeking out from under
sandal leather,
long, thin, and hairy,
revealing natural connections

you chose to deny.

So seeing them, I decided
to take your comment
as a compliment.

Better Sorry

You held me
like a porcelain
teacup--
object so alien
to you,
who prefer
thick coffee mugs
with easy-grip
handles.

Lightly, awkwardly
you held me--
I barely knew you
were there.
Unsure, uneasy
you placed me
on a shelf,
confident
it was safer that way.

The Nursery

She kneels on cool ground
belly in full bloom
girding the sapling
with handfuls of fresh soil;

gently tugs the little tree
gauging resistance,
making sure
its foundation is secure.

She finger-smoothes
the dirt: *tabula rasa*,
traces small figures--
heart, flower, sun.

She leans back,
eyes closed,
breathes deeply,
smiles.

Bright rays dance
through curtains of cloud,
touch her face,
already warm.

Burrow

I didn't want to play outside
talk to grownups
watch pro wrestling
breathe Papa's Raleighs.

I was
in the dryer
again.

Barking dogs,
loud voices, words
like "nigger," fell silent
in my cool, metal womb.

Curled up, eyes closed, I'd go
in a spaceship, cave...rabbit hole.
Mama and Baby Bunny winters,
electric blankets, each other:

"Shhh...in the burrow, baby!

The fox is coming!"

Fuzzy cotton earth---
silence--then a face,
my sun, a sigh: "He's
gone." Peeking out,
giggles, kisses and hugs,
we sleep soundly, our battle done.

Exploratory Procedure

Mother hands me the knife, says “go to town”
on the unfortunate, orange fellow.

I follow the thick, black marker lines
with the blade; blinding him so he can see;
gouge out his teeth with enthusiasm,
force him to grin and bear it.

Skipping ahead, I scalp him next, eager to plunge
my hands into the wet, squashy mess
inside his skull; squeeze it between my fingers,
imagine how the vines felt, groping through slick,
pulpy soil, like poems spreading through the dark,
wet wrinkles of my brain, driving deep and dreaming of sun.

Thank You

In the days of ring-around-the-rosey
before we all fell down,
I running-jump hugged you
buried my face in your belly
felt the ripples as you laughed.
My cheek warm against shirt linen,
nostrils filled with the mingled scent
of dried sweat and Brut cologne--
another late night crunching numbers
hunched over computers that hummed
a monotone reminder of where you weren't,
but wanted to be, the monosyllable,
Home.

Self-Reliance

Dirt, tiny black seeds mottled my sweat-slicked legs
as I waded through waist-high weeds, gathering
rose petals, mint leaves, fronds from banana trees.
My search for food made me desperate, brave;
every nerve buzzed with survivalist fire.
And when I sat down to my Spartan meal,
I conveniently forgot that my bowl was borrowed
and Mama would soon call me in to supper.

Lyle, the Crocodile

Her tall, green, amicable
reptilian friend
of bedtime story fame
wore hats with flowers
went to the beach, liked
to play children's games,
was somehow less bestial
and therefore good
when in driving togs
and cravat he stood
politely at the door of the house.

He even smiled
a toothy, innocuous grin,
until the day she lay
daydreaming, sick in bed
watched one of his stories
play out on her wall.
He suddenly descended
hands became feet
eyes narrowed
brows arched in classic
evil cartoon style
He turned and saw her.

Jumping from bed,
she watched him
watching with pupils
no longer cordial dots

but cats' eyes.

She inched toward the door--

he followed slithering.

She started down the hall--

so he crawled after.

Screaming, she fled

to Mommy's room

hysterical, forehead burning

cheeks flushed and wet.

Closing scene in the car:

all are safe, parents, child

to the hospital ride, she

huddled on the bench seat

beside Daddy, her shoulders

under Mommy's arm.

But in six square metal

radio buttons in a row,

six green faces, eyes aglow

sharp teeth grinning still.

She buries her face in Mommy's

sleeve and cries.

She liked when Lyle acted

the way she expected,

smiled safely behind

the bars of his page.

Heliotrope

A lunch break stroll
in stockings, turtleneck,
long skirt, high heels,
feels Victorian on a
glorious seventy-degree day:

Recalls bare-legged walks,
tanned, sandaled, sundressed,
seventeen and vain,
sashaying past construction sites,
smiling smugly
at wolf-whistles, "Hey baby's"
from passing pick-up trucks,
sunglasses masking
the fear of their stopping.

O nourishing, coddling sun!
you kept me company as I played
in my jungle backyard,
on unevenly asphalted basketball courts;
watched as I took three steps
to my mother's two, traipsing downtown
in a South Florida summer,
soft, bare arms and shoulders,
afraid of nothing but the dark.

Don't Rock the Boat

My grandfather's recliner--a ride nearly as exciting
as the quarter-powered horses outside strip malls.
I climb up, determined to sail the La-Z-Boy sea,
reach down for the controls, but hear Grannie
(she's gone turncoat): "Now, you can't sit there.
That's Papa's chair." A female child, I share second-class
status with Grannie, the "coloreds" at the dairy with Papa,
and the Indians in the family woodpile of whom no one speaks.
Reminded of my place, I silently disembark, and
fetch my little plastic shopping cart, resignedly resume
my make-believe errands, the recliner
conspicuously unmanned.

Denial

When our Irish Setter died,
Mother said he'd gone to live
on Grannie and Papa's Georgia farm
It was easier to believe him not dead,
merely playing in another field.
Years later, she accused Father of adultery,
an idea more plausible to her
than love going the way of geriatric dogs.

Challenger

Standing on my school's front steps
Mom saw smoky ringlets in the sky.
I watched it on t.v., rising, rising
glowing, blooming, a fiery aster.

I made public tragedy personal:
Christa looked like Aunt Suzie
Judith was a co-worker's sister
because she was a Resnik, too.

And Mom cried for her fellow teacher,
but we felt pity, not grief. Grief is when
part of yourself explodes, its fragments
coming to rest on stars too far to reach.

Fourteen

Stuck in the world of Disney
(Someday her prince will come),
She sees him in a boy of seventeen.
Sucked into worlds of groping
Fingers, discarded clothes,
Dangerous seductive romantic,
Baptized in a viscous explosion
Of guilt, disgust, fear,
She wakes,
Remembers that afternoon---
Merry-go-round, surrounded
By swings, slides, monkey-bars;
A hand cupping her freshly-bloomed
Breast for the very first time.

Object Lesson

Sticky, back-seat fumblings
rushed gasps and whispers in
darkened rooms--

“Tell me I’m beautiful
I’ll believe.”

You shower until skin peels,
find guilt harder to shed
than clothing, self-worth.

Mistake a stretch of skin
for identity,
the loss seems heavier
than it should.

Don’t metonymize yourself.

Stop storing your treasures
in someone else’s basement.

He may not give them back.

THE CORMORANT'S SONG

Soft notes... the omen

Of destructive tempests coming

William Wordsworth, Part I of *Ode*

Kite

Driving home, I thumbed through radio
stations, switched the stereo off, then on,
not sure if I desired distracting noise
or feared silence.

I navigated side streets blindly,
dragged by an invisible tether,
gripped the wheel till its leather cover
branded my palms.

I came home to silence, terse "hello's,"
felt an emptiness I never knew at three:
absent father, mother who tried to hide
her tears from me.

Our home was happy once, or so I thought.
Music danced among us. Now, forgotten
rhythms, empty words ricochet from walls,
detached and cold.

I try to tend her wounds as she did mine
with alcohol and iodine, but hers
need healing far beyond my means--
a grim prognosis.

Winds have shifted, left our foundation bare
We weep to see nothing permanent there
She says her life is like a kite and he's
released the string.

Tepidity

I know thy works, that thou art lukewarm, neither cold nor hot...So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.(Rev. 3:15-16 KJV)

You sit in lukewarm water, your face wet, red, viscid with tears
Lines at your eyes, mouth, crevices deepened by betrayal.

You clutch soap to your chest like a book of prayer
Fingers squeezing so tightly it escapes.

Fumbling, you reach, grasp, give up.
The bar, like you, ultimately forsaken.

While you rinse with dirty water,
I study cracks in the ceiling.

When you're finished, I have
nothing to offer but a towel.

Heirloom

You aimed at the muscle
where you thought love lived
curled your index finger
like a beckoning.

Such an awkward gesture,
I wonder...
did you use your right hand,
reach across your chest
in a pledge of allegiance?

Or aspire to ambidexterity,
the gun's weight strange,
heavier
in your weaker hand?

Did you hear the dog barking
to wake the nearly-dead?
smile drowsily at release
or grimace?

What was the feel?
sharp? hot? quick?
Which nerves reacted
first?

I want to crawl into your belly,
my long-ago cradle,
and spread out from there,
a benign metastasis.

I want to reach up through your ribs
grasp your heart,
pull out the bullet
with my teeth,
swallow it whole;

Sew the wound shut
with strands of my hair,
Undo your undoing;
squeeze the slippery sacs
of your lungs, force you to breathe;

Then slip out of you, easy as air
through your navel,
not between your legs as before.
This is your rebirth, not mine.

What were you wearing?
The tee-shirt and bathrobe
I saw you in last?
Where are they?

I want to touch the cloth,
finger the ragged holes.
I will cut them into pieces,
kneel on them in prayer,

Store them in the cupboard
so my daughter can use them
to polish the family silver.

No Truth in Things

The mattress has been turned over
so the stains you left aren't visible.
The Rorschach blots of darkened blood
I'm deemed unqualified to decipher,
the yellow tape that framed this room,
all traces of the unpleasant, gone.
They would have made this scene more real.
No one sleeps here now, but the bed is made.
It lies, cool, unmussed, brazenly suggests
life is pastel, cotton roses, hospital corners.

All Saints' Day

On this day of the saints, I return to the town
where my soul first wore skin and spoke,
and see someone has felled the jacaranda.
I pass broken swing sets, rusted slides,
faded murals on abandoned buildings.

For years I've longed to walk in my old house
where I once padded on small, bare feet,
teddy-bear pajama-ed; sleep-encrusted eyes
comfortably half-open, trusting,
overfed on mother's milk, unconsciously tainted.

I wanted to find where I'd carved my name
on my bedroom wall, trace the scars gouged
in pink paint, read each one like a hieroglyph;
hold the kitchen phone on which I called Santa,
sit at the table where I later learned he wasn't real.

But no longer. There is nothing I need to see.
Memories grown thin, spectral,
are still more tangible than truth.
In last night's dream, I danced with my mother.
She sang in trick-or-treaters' laughter.

Her voice boisterous, triumphant,
echoed through a warm October night.
Her hands, too gossamer to hold me,
brought comfort as they whispered through mine.
With a prayer of thanks for what is gone,

and what remains, I drive away.

The Discourse of Death

How seldom we write the names of the dead.

Whispers voice verses inscribed on our souls
but pens are silent.

Writing demands a visual admission:

See that I am gone.

Concrete conjuring, summons to return
recalls Christian birth-names etched in marble,
crude carved signifier surviving the ashes.

Words take on bodies and haunt us.

Perspective

I sit cross-legged, cradle my photo album,
caress clear plastic like your soft face.
Beneath it we smile, wear matching suits.
I always wanted to look like you.

In a second picture, laughing, we stand
in the living room of great-aunt Suzanne
with since-withered branches of our tree.
who, like you, left seats palpably empty.

In these static images I see the spark
that flew before your shell was scorched to ash.
You always urged me to look deeper, further.

And I remember your body frozen in another frame--
a long, mahogany rectangle-- eyes closed, unsmiling.
You were, even then, still teaching.

Comfort Food

With steam-dampened face,
breathing salty seaspray of
my Florida home, I stir noodles,
watch their ecstatic, writhing dance.

Spoon-churned memory tumbles me
to another kitchen where Mother
mixes macaroni---smooth, brown arm
stroking in painterly rhythms.

Gazing up, I tug her skirt hem.
She jumps, shrieks, splashed and scalded,
and I am crying...my pot bubbling over
burns my hand, but I persevere:

Drain, dollop, pour, mix, devour the lot
with too-large tablespoon, straight from the pot,
eat until stomach is swollen once more,
painfully full, empty as before.

What Alone Is

I once questioned my sanity, but it didn't answer.

Running screaming through the halls,
tearing invisible cobwebs from ceilings and walls,
hoping to disturb the residents
if anyone was, in fact, home

I skidded to a halt in holey-socked feet.
Two seconds, two hours, two years, too late
to hear even an echo, in dusty darkness I stood
and found that I missed myself.

Seeking Definition

You wrote, colored, laminated, stapled each page,
helping me learn how to read myself.

In block letters, "Who Am I?" blazed on the cover,
bordered by bold squiggles of purple, yellow, blue.

My self-encyclopedia taught me words like *Irish
Setter, station-wagon, English Tudor, and Siamese.*

My eyes were blue, Daddy's car was red.
I liked *Sesame Street* and macaroni and cheese.

Years later, you died the death spoken in whispers, if at all,
and I returned to the basement in search of myself.

I dug through countless boxes on my hands and knees
to retrieve my handmade touchstone from mothball oblivion.

Its simple phrases and illustrations set me apart
made me more than flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone.

I feared I would be strangled, dragged underground
by still-unsevered apron strings I'd clung to too long.

Vigil

I
light
a candle,
leave it burning
in remembrance,
with the hope
that you
might
return
tonight.

When the bullet pierced
and your heart exploded,
I bled, felt the impact.
Fragments of my illusions,
my image of you, lodged
like shrapnel in my mind.
Come heal it; suture, solder,
fill the gaps in my understanding.
Do it silently, lovingly, the way
you stocked my Easter basket
and carefully arranged gifts under our Christmas tree.

Waking

Your departure was sudden,
not peaceful or pretty, but
you never cared for fashion.
You didn't think who would find you,
couldn't see past that moment,
beyond the barrel of a gun.

In my mind, I see your caressing,
praying hand, still and cooling
with the petite, pearl-handled pistol:
a vision as real as your now-empty room,
image-echo from childhood nightmares
fueled by abandonment fears.

I run down the hall, crying,
feeling both four and twenty,
shocked and disbelieving.
You promised not to leave.

I had to choose the jewelry, the dress. I, your
dutiful postmortem wardrobe consultant.
Your beautiful face casketed, fluid-filled,
radiant smile barricaded with tiny stitches
I DID NOT WANT TO REMEMBER THESE THINGS.

Needing an embrace, but too frightened to touch
the woman who lay in that dimly lit room,
I chose pictures, both more and less real.
I held you, though not often, in these frames,

reminded of existence now confined to paper:
flat, glossy, sharp-edged like a blade.

Maybe

In a kitchen, she stands facing her father,
but eye contact is rare.

Voices must communicate
without visual aids.

She sips a soda, he smokes a cigar.

So, you've heard the fair's coming to town?

Yes, I heard,

she traces linoleum patterns with her toe.

You gonna go?

he glances up through his glasses.

Maybe. You? she takes a measured sip.

He takes an anxious puff.

Yeah, maybe, maybe... He inhales, speaks
a rush of air, smoke, words:

I might be taking someone with me. Eyes meet.

Her breath catches. *Really?*

Yeah. Maybe. He tries a nervous smile
to make light of this announcement.

Such self-consciousness disturbs her,
he who once seemed so confident.

But many things are not as they used to be.

He speaks again:

I've come to the point where I'm at the edge,

but I don't know

if I'm ready to jump. She forces a sympathetic smile,

wonders if this is a pool edge or a cliff
and whether she should give him a push.

Getaway

Perched in shiny red, beaming,
you honk and pull into the drive.
My eyes widen at your new toy.

One of many news in your life--
car, house, job-- you smile
tell me how the deal went through

say the Toyota had to go.
But I recognize your habit--
replacing everything old.

Three months after Mother's suicide
guilt clings to your conscience like
mothball scent to a newly-aired coat.

You hate the dusty bags and boxes,
old furniture, photos cluttering our
garage, keeping your sports car out;

curse her clothes hanging, unworn
ghosts in the guestroom closet,
feel no malice, merely want to escape.

You buy a car that does zero-to-sixty
in seven, race down the highway,
cold air invigorates you, you feel younger.

You press through red lights, unyielding,

try to outrun two failed marriages,
widower at forty-one; trade in again,

marry wife number three. For you,
speed limits are optional, braking an
afterthought. How long can you keep running?

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Math

Parents married with unrealistic

expectations of one another,

divorced when I was three -1

Four years later mother remarried +1

to a man with a son +1

Stepbrother sent away when I was twenty -1

Year later, stepfather planned to leave -1

Mother shot herself -1

My distaste for math finally clear to me:

Life had been an exercise in subtraction,

long division: $-1+1+1-1-1-1 = -2$

Two negative.

Misspoken, Misread

When you collapsed in grief on the kitchen floor,
I sat and held you while you cried.
We both wept, and I cleared your guilt:
Not your fault, I murmured, *that she died*.
My bare legs, cold on dusty linoleum,
too numb to make a stand,
I anointed you with sweet perfume
rather than having you wash your hands.

I wore down a thousand pencil-ends
in my mad desire to erase
the pain that proved a palimpsest
of the history of grace.
I never saw your grief-etched brow,
or knees calloused and red,
so when you claimed that you'd been saved
I tossed and turned in bed.

Reading your peace as indifference,
my eyes boiled in their sockets.
I collected hot coals to heap on your head,
but they only burned holes in my pockets.
I couldn't see that each of us
had tasted guilt and shame.
We've choked down one Sahara each
and both deserve some rain.

GREEN SHOOTS IN SNOW

We grow great by dreams...things [seen] in the soft haze of a spring day or in the red fire of a long winter's evening. Some of us let these...dreams die, but others nourish and protect them...till they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who sincerely hope.

Woodrow Wilson

Tomorrow is the most important thing in life. Comes into us at midnight very clean.
It's perfect when it arrives and it puts itself in our hands.
It hopes we've learned something from yesterday.

John Wayne

Angel Mint

Melting in my mouth,
instant sugar high,
soft coolness dissolving
on my tongue.
Mama got it for me
at the Grove Stand
where she bought
paper cone cups
of fresh-squeezed juice.
She always warned,
"Save the mint for last.
If you eat it first,
the juice will taste sour."
So at her funeral, I take
a Wintergreen Life Saver
from my purse,
place it on my tongue,
and savor my small,
white ring of consolation.

Makeover

I remove the cap of the pearlescent green tube
found among her things,
twist, reveal a column of impossibly lustrous
bright pink--her shade--
one side worn down, a vertical drop,
a precipice of rouge.

In remembrance I study still-visible lip prints,
lift the tube to my mouth, inhale a smell
dark, powdery, stale, like mothballs, damp earth.
Replacing the cap, I stand, traverse the room,
stop before the trash can and my purse,
and contented, drop it in.

Not Jesus

Between twelve and twenty-five
I saw that I could no more:

Stop Father's smoking
three Salem packs a day
than restrict Grandpa's
wanton use of the "N" word.

Undo the cruelties dealt my brother
for which I never stood trial
than breathe soul into my dead mother
so she could dance at my wedding.

Penetrate the "sealed hives" of others
(lessons from Mother, Virginia Woolf)
than understand the Great Beekeeper
(though Heaven knows I tried).

Beat myself for yesterday's sins
(log cabins in my eye)
than slit my own throat
and deny myself tomorrow.

I'd tried to turn the tide
with a sandbox shovel,
been parched by thirst for control.

Having squeezed countless
fistfuls of sand

I'd only abraded my soul.

Forgiveness

is not dismissal of truth, sweeping anger
into corners, out the back door,
being too lazy to bend your knees, use a dustpan.
It's not scribbling over errors in permanent marker
or erasing them, but explaining needed corrections,
sometimes realizing you don't know the right answer.
It's understanding we're all amateurs with bit parts,
though some memorize lines faster than others,
have better timing, expression, grace.
It's willingness to love despite fear, pain, incredible loss;
burning your hand on a stove someone else left on
and hating neither the burner nor the negligent cook.

Catharsis

A phone rests by my ear
but I am the receiver
of this news from his side:
She was "wonderful," his "best friend,"
but he, exhausted kine,
felt unequally yoked;
resentment burned
through a love grown brittle, dry
like fires through Yellowstone in summer.

Sometimes while driving,
he hears her favorite song, theirs,
has to pull over, a saline haze blurring
already-impaired vision.
While we talk, his smoke alarm sounds,
its shriek an unambiguous warning
of impending destruction,
so unlike her signals
we were unable to decode.

He describes how he takes each day
not forgetting
but living in spite of the pain.
At conversation-end, I replace
the receiver, now warmed by my skin;
its impression, a red blotch on my chin,
already beginning to fade.

Hindsight

1970-1978

He descended from strong backs, gnarled fingers,

She, aquiline noses, fencing scars.

He: leathery skin, gospel hymns. She: symphony tickets, fine bones.

He: fried chicken and cornbread. She: English pot roast, potatoes.

It might have worked

Without hopes for one another unrealistic, unmet:

Growth and change

Or their absence.

1982-1997

She: Episcopalian Virginian DOC

He: Church of Christ Democrat Yankee

She: vulnerable idealist

He: dubious cynic

It might have worked

Without emotional baggage unchecked

Wounds unhealed, reopened

Communication abandoned.

1998-

Speaking promises her parents surely meant at the time,

Knows differences indivisible, love binds without condition.

Fruit of two mismatched unions still sees marriage riskworthy,

Prays her near-sightedness resides solely in the eyes.

With pen in hand, she begins to revise

The chorus:

This will work.

Longevity

Cherry Chloraseptic, Vicks Vapo-Rub,
corn starch powder, rubbing alcohol--
odors of Grandma's room
before she and Grandpa go to bed.
Nightly ritual, balancing on the bed-edge
removing shoes, leg-braces, untying each lace
unbuckling each strap, swabbing, rubbing
dabbing, dusting-- with gnarled, sunburned
hands, he firmly lifts her feet,
brings her legs round straight, as he has
each night for fifty-six years,
pulls up the covers she's washed that day,
mumbles his love through stubbly lips,
kisses her, or not. It is well understood.

Wendy

I.

Never-Never Land's patroness--
Gracious, charming,
Ebulliently, passionately
Laughing, singing, dancing--
Executes with equal grace
Pirate battles, mermaid swims;
Sparkles through marriage,
Pregnancy, divorce;
Indomitable spirit.

II.

Peter abandons ship
When it begins to founder,
Takes the only lifeboat, all the vests.
Anchored by leaden betrayal,
She cannot fly,
Succumbs to the waves.

III.

As she sinks, she rises,
Raised by the Creator
Who taught her
To love and play.
The happy thoughts
She bequeathed to me
Lift us both ever higher.
She gleams just east
The second star to the right,

Helps me live and dream
Straight on till morning.

Remembering to Play

We visit the old banyan
of our hide-and-seek games,
look for the ice cream shop
where you ordered rum raisin,
and bought me rainbow lollipops.

We stand before our old house
on the same sidewalk I cruised
on my trike, where I measured
my gait carefully, never too anxious
to leave or return when you came.

We drive to your old apartment,
recall memories of late night t. v.-
watching, eating donuts with milk,
playing catch in the front yard
with a rubber beach ball.

Now, joined by a third player,
my husband of two years,
past and present merge perfectly
as all of us, laughing, throw a softball
to each other in the rain.

Kiss

Herald of love and comfort
Humble gift in the deep cold
Warming, like the snowflake
Melting on my cheek
Awaited with anticipation of
Sugar plum dreamers
The touch of a small, gentle miracle.

The Smell of Home

Half an hour has passed,
passion's condensed,
run, cooled-- lifted
by diaphanous
fingers of air.

Enduring aromas
cling seductively
within creases
of cotton and skin.
Once darkly fresh
like rain-drenched soil,
they rise now, warm,
delicious
as baking bread.

I slip on my robe,
don't bother to tie
the sash that dangles
languidly at my side,
like a dog's tongue
on a summer day,
and pad barefoot down
the carpeted stairs
to the kitchen.

I notice my lover
has opened the blinds
to wash the floor
in afternoon light.

The sun pounds through
the sliding-glass door,
and I'm not sure if he's
reaching in for
a genial handshake,
or wagging his finger
at our idle hedonism.

My lover sits
in the living room,
laughing at Sunday comics,
his feet carelessly propped
on the antique coffee table,
made by a family in Haiti,
who, like us, knew the value
of sunshine, sweat, and hands.

I rummage through cookware
beneath the stove,
pull out a frying pan.
As I stand, my robe
flutters open and shut,
and I smile at the sun
and the neighbors
who might have seen,
as my nostrils fill
with the fragrance
of fresh-baked love.

Breakfast Waltz

Cashmere-sheathed iron arms
around my shoulders, waist;
velvet pressure, lips join,
melt in a single, warm-sweet pulse.

You lift, swing me circling.
Spiraling dust mites pause,
dizzied, in the wake of
my flailing feet--

At last I touch down--
you spin me across
a yellow linoleum sea,
pull me in again, whispering

words like "delicious" and "love,"
as toaster, waffle-iron
gleam their applause at our
feats of domestic grace.

Tartan

A square swatch of cloth
lies beneath perfume bottles,
guarding my dresser's veneer
from random leaks.

Its bold colors vociferously
demand a better assignment.

Edges frayed, like cut-off jeans,
it's beginning to resemble
the antique it may one day be.

A gift more symbolic than real,
what your family wore
when the flag they raised
bore a lion, not stripes or stars.

For hours I studied the fabric:
how each delicate thread
made the pattern whole,
the depth of the intersecting colors:

ebony, crimson and gold,
each holding a promise:
nights of pleasure, joy;
bloods mingled in progeny;
suns to rise, light unseen years.

The Art of Underwater Breathing

My husband watches as I write,
his brows furrowed in confusion.
He cannot see why
I dive into waters
where I've almost drowned before,
haunt sunken galleons
now little more than driftwood.
He patiently lies awake in our bed
as I type into dawn,
always ready with life preservers
despite my insistence
that I don't need to be rescued yet.
He may never see
that to recover lost riches
I have to return to the wreck.

The Banyan

by the water,
unmoved but not
unchanging

still stands, wrinkled
streaked and graying
imposing

welcoming all
to hide among
its branches

that gently hold
the setting sun,
not piercing

the huge egg done
sunny-side up,
bright, liquid.

Its thick roots plunge
beneath the sand,
quiescent.

But look beyond
a few feet's space,
discover

resurfacing
resurgence of
xylem, phloem.

Fading evening's
dusky glow now
sets ablaze

seven new trees
sprung from one. Their
strong limbs reach

both east and west,
a greeting and
valediction