"Childhood and Other Disabilities"

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"Childhood and Other Disabilities"

TITLE

BY
Sandra Beauchamp

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MA English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

This creative thesis, a collection of personal poetry and critical analysis, explores the experiences of women and children who have grown up in mentally and physically abusive environments, and examines the ramifications such abuse has on their subsequent adulthood. Each poem focuses on one particular individual's struggle to cope with violent or abusive circumstances in her past or present existence. Since the poems are arranged sequentially, mapping a woman's transition from childhood to adulthood, the works deal with various stages in the lives of women. While some of the poetry finds its genesis in my own personal experiences, like the confessional poets, I have also found that by writing of other women's experiences I attempt to empathize and articulate the encounters of many women.

Therefore, I felt it crucial to research not only the confessional poets of the mid-1950's and 60's, but also the theorist Jeanne Perreault, who writes about the literary theory of feminist autography. The two forms of writing are related, but differ from the intimate, self-psychological inspections of the confessional writers to the empathetic, feminist purposes of the autographer. In a critique of Plath's later confessional work, Caroline King Bernard writes that the confessional poet is one who explores the meaning of the intimate self and "makes of the private psychological vulnerability at the poem's center a cultural symbol, an 'embodiment of civilization'" (109). In contrast, a feminist autographer is a writer who sees herself in all women, and tries, through the written word, to give a voice to other women who suffer in silence (Perreault 132). Perreault explains that a feminist autographer is one who "...inscribes herself in one voice or many" (132).

Consequently, the section devoted to critical analysis delves into uncovering the lives, work, and motivation of the confessional poets such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and W.D. Snodgrass. It also deals with understanding the definition of feminist
autography, and the work of Andrienne Rich, who is defined by Perreault as a true feminist autographer.

However, a great deal of the poetry uses my own personal, chaotic experiences to place the study of "self" into a larger societal context. Others who have experienced similar struggles or tribulations may identify with the personal voice, witness revelations and participate with the pathos involved therein. Initially, the personal revelations are cathartic for myself. However, it is my hope that throughout my own psychological inspections, readers of my work may experience some form of connection with the subject, a "universal yesness" in a way, and thereby feel less isolated and vulnerable to the stigma often self-imposed by victims/survivors of abuse. I believe this "connection" to be the effect and purpose of both feminist autographers and confessional poets. As Anne Sexton once wrote, "Through {speaking} of my inner life, I reach other people's inner life" (Middlebrook 382).
I would like to thank Dr. Olga Abella, Dr. John Guzowski, and Dr. Lauren Smith for all their encouragement and assistance in helping me to accomplish this creative endeavor.
"What Kind of Beast Would Turn Its Life Into Words?"
("21 Love Songs" Rich)

Sweaty palmed
I enter
ready to hold
an honest to God
sit down
with the robed conduit
to the landlord
upstairs.

After the purgation
of damning evidence
I leave the creaky confessional
spiritually cleansed
ready to rub
fingerprints off
onto rosary beads.

This admission of guilt
this vocalized trembling
at having failed
some cosmic quiz
is, in effect,
an act of dumping manure
onto a lawn
which chokes down
the shit
and blossoms.
"Childhood and Other Disabilities"

Perhaps the most crucial result of my creative and academic investigation of contemporary poetry, its authors, and their critics is that I have found my own writing culminates in a combination of two closely related genres of poetry: confessional poetry and feminist autography. These related forms of writing both begin with a conscious examination of the self or selves housed within the individual psyche. For instance, some confessional poets, such as Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell use their immediate personal experiences as subject material for their poetry. Similarly, feminist autography employs subjective experience but, "...it is not necessarily concerned with the process of unfolding life events, but rather makes the writing itself an aspect of the selfhood the writer experiences and brings into being" (Perreault 4). Likewise, in my poetry, I attempt to draw the reader into an understanding of my personal life like the confessional poets, and although my writing is very much in the tradition of confessional poets, it also fits within the genre of feminist autography. Hence, I believe my own poetry is a "hybrid" of these two writing genres.
While this assertion requires me to closely define and explain my own writing connections with such confessional poets and writers of feminist autography, I believe it is equally important to define the terms "feminist autography" and "confessional poetry." Consequently, confessional poets such as Sexton and Snodgrass are defined as those writers who

...create that which appears to be personal confession, employing the self as the center of investigation and offering what seem to be supremely private revelations. But the confessional poet in the specific and contemporary sense, is more than that. He or she is, as the poet M.L. Rosenthal has observed, one whose work is highly charged, and who makes of the private psychological vulnerability at the poem's center a cultural symbol, an embodiment of civilization (Bernard 109).

These confessional poets employ first person "I" in order to express an immediacy of experience. This technique removes the guise of third person objectivity and unveils their identities. Like sinners in a confessional, they divulge and share their life experience with the reader/audience/priest and translate the chaos of their lives into an understandable medium. Thus, the writer takes his or her own pain, puts that anguish into words, and
perhaps touches a reader who may empathize or even be able to relate to the experience first hand. Some readers may have gone through the same kind of pain and turmoil experienced by the divulgent poet. The confessional writers take their subjective life experience and create a shared experience, a silent discourse between reader and writer.

Like confessional poetry, feminist autography, or writing of the self, is a genre which has the ability to open seaways of the imagination, and allow for an unspoken but understood discourse between writing and reading/reacting communities. Such writing allows for a feminist writer to realize her multiple roles in life as mother, sister, teacher, victim, survivor, and to write comfortably with the "I" and "We" language. However, while a feminist autographer may write of her own experiences, she may also feel inclined to write about the experiences of others thereby solidifying her position as a speaker for all women. For instance, a Feminist Autographer may write one poem about her own subjective experience within marriage while still writing another poem about being an aging spinster.

More specifically, Perreault writes that, "Giving voice to that which has been silenced is consistent with the ethics and actions of contemporary feminists. The individual writer inscribes herself in one voice or many" (132). For instance, Perreault discusses the ability of a
writer, such as Rich, who is self-defined as Jewess, white, mother, lesbian, feminist, to use words of other women who are abused: "he slammed his hand across my face and I/ let him do that until I stopped letting him do it/ so I'm in for life" (Rich, "Poem 4", 86). In these lines Rich is empathizing with the situation of a woman who finds herself in an abusive relationship. This woman, whose voice Rich assumes, has killed her husband in retaliation, and is hence sentenced to prison for the act. It is in this manner that Rich and other writers such as Audre Lorde, Carolyn Forche, and Ai, give a voice to possible communities of silenced women through means of empathy. The woman sentenced to "life" for her murderous deed is a woman whose story would have otherwise remained cloaked in silence. However, Rich assumes her voice, and relates the woman's experience to readers through an accessible vehicle of poetry. It is in this way that Rich's feminism "is a natural extension of her poetry because for her, feminism means empathy. And empathy is the essential tool of the poet" (Jong 31). To clarify, Rich who thankfully has never been beaten by a man in her life, felt a duty as a feminist and an artist to write about the problem of domestic abuse and women's rights to self defense (Gelphi 182). Perreault continues that autobiographical writing is not easy, as it "requires a recognition of one's self in the mad woman, the victim, the vicious one, not only because of one's own hidden madness or weakness, but because
of certain shared conditions in the material and discursive worlds" (133).

Consequently, autography allows a writer to assume the role of another, speaking through the human capacity of empathy in order to give voice to a silenced group of women. In other words: "'I' and 'We' are the most important words in the writing of contemporary feminism, continuously transformed and re-enacted as feminists claim the rights of self-definition. These texts work actively and explicitly in the contexts of feminist communities. Communities which are inextricable from the discourses of selfhood" (Perreault 1).

Autography enables us to acknowledge that as women we are part of a greater community than just our immediate circle of interactions. Religiously, racially, politically, we interact through all these circles to some extent, and the concerns of many may also be our concerns. Through empathy, and imagination, I may write of another's plight, and try to vocalize the pain which may otherwise go silenced. While I write of my own personal issues, I also write of others' personal issues. In this way I try to create a survivor's tract with my own writing, much like Rich does in "A Poetics of Subjectivity." Perreault writes of Rich: "Telling women's stories including her own, means both naming the violations and oppressions and retelling the
stories that escaped the grasp of silence, those that had a voice, but no public listener" (33).

Hence, by examining my reactions to the works of the aforementioned poets, writers, and critics, in addition to writing 54 pages of my own poetry, I have concluded that my own verse may be categorized into a hybrid, or combination of these writing genres, termed "confessional-feminist/autographical" work. Both involve an extensive personal investment on behalf of the writer who uses self experience as the basis for the creation of art and employs, also, a heightened sense of empathy towards the plight of all women struggling to create order out of the morass of senselessness we see and encounter as feeling, thinking individuals caught in the web of life.

As I am a female, I feel most comfortable writing with a feminist voice, an "I" or at times a subjective "she" which is steeped in the experience of being a female in a largely male-dominated world. Likewise, writers such as Plath, Rich, Sexton, Giovanni, Forche, and Ai, are women poets who also use the feminist voice and experience to such an extent as to be termed feminist writers. Since these writers have influenced my writing through their word choices, subject matter, form, rhythm, rhyme, and voices, I found it imperative to investigate their lives in addition to their art.
Essentially, my own work explores narrative themes similar to the aforementioned poets. By reading the biographies of both Sexton and Plath, and reading the self-criticism of Rich, I have seen how their personal lives and beliefs influence their writing. The issues of marriage, societal expectations, religion, death, love, unhappy or turbulent childhoods, arise frequently in both their work and my own. I have found it not only interesting that the writing of confessional poetry was used as a means of therapy by many of the named writers, but that they all had distinct influences upon and relationships with one another. Interestingly, the autobiographical "I" in poetry in the mid-50's, started by Snodgrass and Lowell, "invited the reader to equate word with person" (Middlebrook 83). But it also allowed the "person" a medium by which to examine that which previously had been hidden from view, much like a festering cancer. By writing about their tumultuous lives and relationships, many confessional poets such as Plath, Lowell, and Sexton, were able to stabilize their lives. It was a form of typographical therapy in that "Survivors of trauma must undertake a process of 're-externalizing the event' which can happen only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside" (Perreault 69).
While Sexton started writing poetry under the advice of her therapist, Dr. Orne, after several attempts at therapy were unsuccessful, it was Snodgrass' writing which opened her eyes to the possibility of laying 'hearts' on the page (Middlebrook 78). After reading Snodgrass' poem "Heart's Needle" she wrote to him, "When I read your poem, that first time...it walked out at me and grew like a bone inside my heart" (78). Snodgrass' autobiographical account of his divorce allowed Sexton to write of her separation from her daughters due to her mental instability. For instance, in "Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward" she writes, "I burst empty/ of you, letting you learn how the air is so./ I am a shore/ rocking you off" (8-10). Here she not only emotes the experience of giving birth, but also a feeling of guilt at having both physically and emotionally abandoned her daughters. The verb "burst" denotes a sudden action, an uncomfortable swelling, then a bursting, which releases pressure. This could be interpreted as giving birth to a child, then "letting" the baby breathe on its own. However, the ninth and tenth lines read, "I am a shore/rocking you off" which gives me the impression that while initially the speaker had little control over the "bursting," she does have some power over the continual motion of constantly rocking the child off, or away. This could be indicative of the guilt she confessed, both in her poems and her sessions
with Dr. Orne, about being a "horrible" mother (Middlebrook 48).

As we now know, post-partum depression may afflict many mothers, making them feel inadequate, overwrought, and unloving for a time. Many women must endure this hormonal imbalance alone. However, because Sexton wrote about her experience with this subject, divulged the "heinous" truth about her lack of maternal feelings, many mothers with similar feelings could feel at ease: they were assured that other women felt the same way. As we discover later, Sexton's poems about motherhood and marriage greatly moved another poet: Sylvia Plath (Middlebrook 105).

Similarly, Sylvia Plath's later work also spoke of her inner life, her boiling turmoil, and mental instability. Both Sexton and Plath studied under Lowell's direction at Boston University in the winter of 1958-59 and seemed to feed off of each other's writing styles (Middlebrook 105). Plath even spoke of her admiration for Sexton's autobiographical, psychological undertakings, "I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton who writes also of her experiences as mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting" (105).
Sexton's influence upon Plath is evident in her later work found in Ariel and Colossus; her poetry takes on a more personal, vivid, and angry tone as she writes openly about motherhood, death, her father, and marriage. In the poem "Electra on Azalea Path" the underpinnings of the Freudian terminology evoke painful images of a daughter not yet at ease with the early memories of her father's death, "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at/ your gate, father-your hound bitch, daughter, friend./ it was my love that did us both to death" (45-47). The speaker assumes the responsibility for not only the death of the directly addressed father, but for her own attempts at suicide. The other poem which deals with father-daughter relationships, or lack thereof, is most memorably, "Daddy," in which Plath employs distinct hyperbole, naming herself a Jew who is persecuted by her father, "a bag full of God" but evil as "the vampire" which "bit my pretty red heart in two." This inner turmoil is blatant and scourging, and as Adrienne Rich writes,

"a subjective personal rage blazes forth, never before seen in women's poetry. If it is unnerving, it is also cathartic..." (Adrienne Rich's Poetry xii).

However, critics of confessional poetry, such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, asserted that such writing, "is an isolated and solitary affair and...it therefore does not locate itself in a larger cultural context...it offers only
pure expression of the anguish of self or derangement” (Bernard 108). It therefore appears to be solipsistic and irrelevant rambling (109). But Diane Middlebrook argues against this assumption, “Within the autobiographical line of the poem, is a second network of meaning that broadens its reverence, making it an important contribution to feminine psychology” (87). Sexton herself writes, “I write of my inner life so as to reach others’ inner lives” (Middlebrook 130).

Like Sexton, my intent is not only to inspect my own psychological layers, but to confront problems which affect others. My own poetry examines the experiences of women and children who have grown up in mentally and physically abusive environments, and explores the ramifications such abuse has had on their subsequent adulthood. Each of my poems focuses on one particular female's struggle to cope with these violent or abusive circumstances in her past and/or present life. Because many of these poems, though not all, find their genesis in my own experiences as a child, adolescent and young woman, I can clearly identify with Sexton, Plath, and to some extent with Lowell and Snodgrass. While Lowell and Snodgrass are considered by critics as the first true confessional poets, it is the feminist writers which influence my writing to a greater extent.
I have found that by writing about my own chaotic experiences, I have placed my own encounters in a larger societal context. Others who have experienced similar trials or tribulations may identify with the voice within the poem, witnessing revelations and participating in the pathos. Initially, as I have mentioned, I find that the personal revelations are cathartic for myself. However, it is my hope that in my own psychological inspection, readers of my work may experience some sort of connection with the voice and thereby feel less isolated, and less vulnerable to the stigma often self-imposed by victims/survivors of abuse. I believe this aim at universal connection is the effect and purpose of confessional writers.

Whether the poetic subject is defined by critics and readers as political, feminist, autographical or confessional, it is my belief that poets' experiences with different emotions and thoughts provide a basis for the artistic expression of their vision and beliefs. More specifically, it is crucial to understand that poets write about what they think, feel, know, and care about. These facets of our emotional and intellectual capacities provide poets with the inspiration to write. Furthermore, a feminist Autographer or a feminist confessional writer will write about issues which affect them and other women. For instance, if one poet was raped as child, the ability to articulate that pain onto paper, speaking with the
first-person "I", shows not only a psychological necessity to release the anguish of that experience, but also a need to burn into paper an experience which any woman could have undergone. By creating art from the well-spring of emotionally catastrophic experiences, the poet becomes a survivor as well as an inspiration to others. As Rich writes in "The Anti-Feminist Woman": "I believe feminism must imply an imagination-identification with all women (and the ghostly woman in all men) and that the feminist must, because she can, extend this act of imagination as far as possible" (Weiner 172). Whether the genre is confessional poetry or feminist autography, the goal is still the same: to employ empathy, imagination, and self-inspection to such a degree as to reach as many communities of women, and readers as possible.

While confessional poets such as Plath and Sexton and writers of autography such as Rich, have influenced me in my use of subject material and voice, I draw from a deep well of other poets for word choice, form, internal rhyme and rhyme scheme. Poets such as Sharon Olds, Carolyn Forche, Louise Gluck, and Liz Rosenberg have all written poems which deal with sound and form as integral components to their writing. The rhymes do not detract the reader's attention from the passionate, highly charged content, but instead act to reinforce the craftsmanship of the poem. For instance, while Old's poem "An Unjustly Punished Child" deals with a
child throwing a temper-tantrum, rolling on the floor, face turning many shades of red, the form of the poem contains tightly formed stanzas. This controlled stanzaic approach lends a bit of irony to the subject of the poem. The literal subject of the poem is out of control. However, the writer reminds us that "out of chaos" comes order; the order is in the form of stanzas.

Another poet who is adept at form and control within her writing is Carolyn Forche. In one of her earlier poems, "As Children Together" the speaker examines her adolescence. She recalls slinking out of the house with a girlfriend, who always had boyfriends and received flowers and postcards. The poem contains subtle "s" sounds and rolling long words which lend a melancholy, yet biting tone to the address, "Holding each other's/ coat sleeves we slid down/ the roads in our tight/ black dresses," (9-12). The language here is so concise and controlled both in sound and rhythm, that the real message of the poem is veiled. The speaker is somewhat bitter, but satisfied that her popular friend has grown up to live in an unromantic trailer court, heavy and loaded with children while the writer has "been to Paris since we last met."

In addition, Snodgrass has the ability to create structurally prescriptive poems, complete with exact end rhyme, which does not hinder the listener or reader from discovering the meaning of the poem. Instead, when his
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poems are read aloud, correctly, following punctuation, and
not line breaks, the rhythms and rhyme create a subtle yet
controlled voice. In a way, his craftsmanship and exactness
with language apply order to the chaos of the personal
experience being revealed. For instance, in "Mementos I"
there is a haunting clarity to his emotions over having
found a photograph of his ex-wife in a pile of yellowed
bills and notices:

Before we drained out one another's force
with lies, self denial, unspoken regret
and the sick eyes that blame; before the divorce
and the treachery. Say it: before we met. Still
I put back your picture. Someday, in due course
I will find its still there. (19-25)

Although this poem concerns a highly personal, painful
revelation for Snodgrass, the end rhymes are ordered,
intact, and eloquent, creating order from a chaotic
experience through delicate sounds like, "force", "divorce"
and "course": all words with a soft "s" sound.

As I have indicated, Snodgrass' deliberate rhymes and
sounds do not detract from the memorable images he creates
with those words. Likewise, it is my intention to create
images within my own poems which are not easily missed nor
forgotten. I write poems which stem from my own personal
experiences along with poems which take into account the problems and trials of other women such as the prostitute in "Melody's Song" and the betrayed wife in "Everything Dies". In this way I hope to achieve that which Rich achieves in her poems: "For Rich, the composition of 'self' occurs in the act of writing. Self representation rather gives words to external and internal silence, resisting the forces that have made so much of a 'woman's' story or a story of silence, powerlessness, self-effacement" (Perreault 53).

Hence, the arrangement of the poems in "Childhood and Other Disabilities" creates a woman's story. They are arranged sequentially and thematically, mapping the transition from childhood to adulthood. There are many poems which act as companion pieces. For instance, "The Digging," the first poem in the collection after the frontice piece "Confession", deals with a young girl who is neglected by her alcoholic/suicidal mother, and subsequently raped by her mother's lover. This poem is written in first-person and is told from the perspective of the young girl as an adult reflecting on the chaotic experience which calls to her, "bringing me, even now, still back."

Following this poem is "Violets." In this poem the narrator is an adult in the present, writing to her physically abusive mother. The poem deals with the silence sometimes invoked by abuse, but transcends the imposed silence as the
woman acknowledges her own pain and that of her mother; an act which results in forgiveness. Other poems consider father/daughter relationships and the lasting psychological impression an abusive male figure can have on a young girl and her future sexual, social, and personal decisions. Still other poems examine the situations of older women who are isolated from society by domestic abuse or who are caught in circumstances from which there seems no way out, such as prostitution, depression and suicide.

It is my understanding that there is and can be a connection made between the confessional poet and the writer of feminist autography. Both delve into the subjective realm of experience with grappling fists. The self is the center of investigation. In autography there is an imaginative charge to voice the anguish or suffering of others, and to recognize ourselves in humanity. In confessional poetry, this is accomplished through a true psychological inspection of the self or selves dealing with personal joy or suffering. Both forms of writing enable the reader to connect with the experience, which is articulated despite the pain which would otherwise remain silenced. This is an astounding component of our psyche: we may live life in our own heads, experience the world through different lenses, lay down to rest in a lonely coffin at the end of it all—but the fear, joy, suffering, and light which we all share are what make us a community of humans.


Theoretical Bibliography


Violets

Remember those dark
blue violets
glaring up at you
from a field
of thin white skin?
Bruises ignored
until I eased my body
into a bath under
your steady gaze.

You saw only tumbles,
scuffs, a little girl’s
lost balance
on a bicycle,
murmured:
Shouldn’t be so clumsy,
boys don’t kiss little
clowns.

I hated you
sometimes, with a rage
God-awful real,
the raw-beatings
with hangers, slaps
quick as boiling copper,
grips silent, coiling
flesh into my hair.

Then the remorseful
kisses so heavy,
attempts at breath
left me gasping
for air.

Now I fear your death
more than I ever feared you;
even under the covers
with a lover who grips
me tightly,

I feel you as his fingers
gouge my neck and breasts,
planting bruises
to speckle up under skin;
bruises pushing blood
to surface like secrets.

With a hatchet like this
I want to split
open the silence
growing between us like weeds
and surface from memories

Of your marble-heavy fist
at my back,
because, mother,
I have more to offer up
than these violent
blooms and pinched
bitter words.
The Fall

My father loved apple picking before his legs bowed under the weight of middle-age and too many beers palsied his grip.

Dutiful daughter I’d spend those autumns in old branch arms, clasping them between my knees with a gawky balance.

I remember those plump apples well, hard roses begging to be bitten with my milk teeth, filling my fingers with their waxy skin.

Plunk. Plunk. they lined the baskets like heads while I clung to limbs avoiding the frost hard ground swirling below me.

I swear I tried for every fruit, scared of falling, failing in front of my father-- trying to be the boy I thought he wanted.

But those ovaries of trees, seeming so hard and stony, would tumble
and split
in the grass at his
tapping boot.

It sounded just like
the baseballs
missing my outstretched mitt,
or the dull slug
of my B.B. gun
connecting with the barn
instead of his tin-can target.

Even now,
I watch his water-blue
eyes roll
when my car breaks
down in a cloud
of smoke and phrases
like "toughen up
for God's sake"
squeeze between his lips
and tipped beer can.

And though my father
never touched me,
ever even feigned
loosening his belt
in front of me,

Whenever I visit
his orchard
year after year,
I listen for those
fragile buds, hear
them fall to earth
with the thud
of a fist
pummeling fleshy skin.
Tanqueray and Water

You stumble in,
whiskey spilled
down the front
of your rumpled lapel:
“Worked hard
honey-baby angel.
paperwork. Its late
for you.”

These lies bubble
past your lips,
dripping still with those rusty whores:
women you think
I’m too young to smell
when you bring them home
on your clothes.

I’m not your baby-angel anymore;
not blind as mother,
not a dumb silent crier
who wrings my hands
and slips bourbon in coffee
for your hangover.

I’m the one who wakes you
when the alarm can’t crack through
the stupor, lies,
lies to your office,
and our relatives
for your stumblings.

Tonight I see the mud
where you tripped,
splashing you in ditchwater,
and smell your breath
juiced with gin.

Have you forgotten,
could you have forgotten, rocking
me to sleep, comforting
my cries with a steadier shoulder?

Because now you calm
your own crying jags,
soothe shakes with a fist
of liquor and hammer
nails into this family
shot by shot,
leaving me to wonder
if you have forgotten
you are not yet dead
and neither is this daughter.
The Digging

That summer my mother
was brown-bottle sick,
cursing the swelter, cursing the sweat,
chasing her morning blues
with Beef-Eater's
and shiny yellow
"keep-me-asleeps,"

her lover silenced my mouth
with fear of her death
at suddenly hearing confession
of his midnight
trips to my room

(how loud dear God, his shadow moved)
fingers slipping
under blue Raggedy Ann covers,
prying and digging

like me in daylight
spent in a gravel bed
built to house a '78 Vega--
rooting toes, slender pigs
into mounds of pink pebbles,
lingering over those dusty jewels,

a manic six year old
hunting for a diamond
precious enough,
stronger than the glass knobs
on any door,
or Indian beads
to buy that shadow away
from mother and me,

digging until sometimes
I bled, digging a grave
to hover in, surrounded
by iron-wet earth,
an underground shed,
far from any lover--
clawing into dirt,
fingers left red,
fingers rubbed raw,
digging until finally
darkness would call

leaving all diamond hopes dashed,
and into the falling long of shadows,
bringing me, even now, still back.
Searching

Even now, the mother still searches after years of turning dumpsters, combing fall’s thick corn fields, peering over her shoulder to scan stretches of farmland and ditches, straining at stoplights into idled cars.

She remembers living as a scared young mother, charged with a life pushing against her own adolescent belly, small breasts protesting the daily filling of milk, then the thirty-eight hour labor spreading bones, tendons, tearing her delicate flesh.

A child’s cry still sends her heart into a panic, and when she calls out *Victoria, Victoria*, there is no answer only an oily sharp echo grinding its honed edge into her head, carving around the memories of her daughter.

Her once bright cries are silence, and she curls fetal in the dark, sweating against the tub, her fingernails gouging a tattered doll head, feeling with one hand for the switch to flick on the light she knows is there.
Melody’s song

Fourteen and high,
I circle Prospect Avenue
looking for tricks--
put my old man out of his funk
and maybe he won’t torch
me tonight--Newport
cherries hurt
the merchandise, but girls
like me--dim stars,
arrive in litters.

We pace neon store fronts
like drowsy cats,
pausing to complain
about slow nights
tight tippers,
the hardcore fantasies,

And offer faceless love
to the hungry, forgetting
those who slipped
between our thighs
and left us alone,
wiping down with stained
motel towels.

Fidgeting under silk
and fishnet, I face
this black station wagon
as the window slides down
and a bald head emerges,
shiny as a baby crow,
slick and wet

As my uncle’s palm
pressing my new breasts,
his fingers nudging at my panties
as mother cackles behind a tipped
gin and tonic--
dollar bills crumpled
on the nightstand.
I pull the door shut beside me, 
lock the buckle across 
hip bones, watch his fingers 
grip the gummy wheel 
and steer away from the drone 
of downtown into the gaping 
mouth of countryside;

When the car lumbers 
into a well-worn pathway 
of some farmer’s cornfield, 
his hands release the wheel 
and the moon clicks 
into my eyes.

I smell the promise 
of corn, hear the crickets’ 
high piping, finger scars 
on my arm and remember 
some blanketed fear 
pulsing against my temple 
and I understand 
I am not the first whore 
to know this place.

My eyes trace 
his calling still shadow 
and I pad out into damp 
grass, tripping over starlight, 
feeling the weight 
of every last wet step.

"Melody’s Song" Cont’d
Harvest

Running
through flaxy walls
of cornstalks
I hear the comforting
hum and haw of the combine
sputtering “home home home”
at the edge of our field.

We play hide-n-seek
in this musty maize,
and my breath heaves
in pink as I pause
like a boy, hands gripping
my threadbare knees,
listening for
their chasing trampling--
that lack of grace
boys have in the corn.

Buried deep within the rows,
I pluck a frayed silk cone
from the nearest stalk,
snap it clean and twirl
the light weed like a baton;
its strings flicker
in the sun as I pitch
it into the air;

The ear rotates end over end,
and falls to dirt
with a soft flit,
an elegant cartwheel
dredging up
the girl

He found so alone,
naked, not yet twelve,
lying sliced and blue-chested pale
among the corn rows: a beacon
in his side of the field,
and he told my mother
in the kitchen that morning,
shaking coffee over the floor,

Of the radiant skin, radiant
under the pulse of his combine’s light,
the metal thresher
a crashing maw,

Of how he tried to turn
the wheel so hard
the muscles in his neck
almost snapped,

Of how all he could see
was me laying there,
lost—so near home,
near here...

I race
against the drying husks,
the dust blurring
under my feet, the locusts
a slow swelling thunder,
and the boys are spread
into sight at the perimeter,

Edge I know well,
edge I would never enter
against the setting sun—

The light of it so bright
I lift this arm to shade my eyes.
Old habits

Nightly she wished for this death, imagined laying down to sleep, his singing fists silenced, the callused groping chained still.

She dreamed his froggy voice muffled by a steel coffin, never again grunting disapproval of five pounds gained, or hair growing white.

For 25 years she hunched her life around fears of the roar downstairs, bore bruises beneath her skirt, twitched with the loneliness he beat into her...

And now his funeral flowers perfume the front hall, and her hand is slicked of the wedding band, but naked, she lays on her side, palms the dent his body contoured over the years

And imagines his corpse, starting to rot, infested with burial worms and maggots eating through his chest, finally finding a use for his heart.
Magnets

You watch the sky
like my father
who would sit on the cool
cement stoop
in the dry dead summer
and scout about for lights
in the night
or tails of jet cloud
in the blue-washed day.

Camel between his lips,
Schlitz can sweating beads
over his hoofed hands,
his head tilted always
skyward, he’d count
the blinks from airplanes
soaring almost within reach--

He’d map the stars,
amateur astronomer,
and oh and ahh
that they just might fall
into the scared mint green
of our front lawn.
He would grab my hand
fierce and hard
as teeth, making me wince
at his gigantic grip,
saying, “Ain’t that a beauty?”

You, smoking weed, drinking
a glass filled to the brim
with malt whiskey, grab my hand
like he did, harder sometimes,
when you think you see some
featherless bird, or shiny
celestial thing--so that I too
might see those free-floating vamps
which capture your glances,
your awe, your thoughts on God,
unfilled dreams, or maybe,
wishes to be free from magnets,
earthly magnets like me.
Your Hands

Wrinkled and fat
my hands curl up--
incapable of twisting
open a pickle jar
or prying off
a lug-nut
without severing a vein.

But your slender fingers
and cupped palms
can color sun
onto canvas,
assemble time
from broken watches
and throw fire
into a catcher’s mitt
without so much as a squint.

Some mornings my eyes
eat on your hands
gripping the coffee mug
by its stomach--
throbbing with the possibility
of a sudden touch to my cheek
and my neck
feels the shivers
those callused fingertips
can raise.

Swiping a hank of hair
from my eyes
with these gnarly snakes,
I watch your hand
in silhouette,
face turned in thought
from me, and I envy
that warmth of that meaty fist
balanced on such a graceful wrist
as yours, and I suffer
the heat rising in my face,
my own hand curled
in a cold arthritic clench.
One Morning, Long After a Quarrel

Driving a spiked glance
into my skin,
you rolled over
and let me fight
for sleep
after the issue of marriage
was waged and rested.

You wonder what scares me
about the custom,
people do it everyday,
march the aisle, take
the vow, commit
their hands to steel.

In the morning,
I scrub my face,
look for the fearless,
bright-eyed woman
I wanted to recognize
at this age.

I see only shadowy
brown spheres and hear
memories of hard words
bang up the stairs:

Mother tells him
what a coward he is,
spineless, balless, slow,
and I watch the ghosty girl
brush her teeth until blood
seeps around gums,

Feel pigtails pulled
tighter than fists--
a part split down
the center, whiter
than ice.

I taste salt
as the front door shuts
and his work car chokes to a start,
I hear mother weeping over carpets to be cleared of domestic rubble.

Everytime I look at this I cringe under a dread that drives me to scrub harder, shatter every surface reflecting what I want to forget.

But when I gaze into your face I see my past sewn into my skin like a scar--a dirty welt rising like fear under your steadier heart.
Drowning

We scrambled like children
to avoid the storm
building above our heads,
blowing the maples
into a clatter,
promising thunder.

Raindrops hard as silver
dollars melted bangs
into our eyes, and through
water I glimpsed your
bare arms, bone-sculpted
and heavily veined--
like twisty map roads.

This wet sight caught
my stomach in a clench
so loud, you heard me moan,
and under slices of lighting,
near home, you took my face
into your hands,

Drove two blue stones
into me with that look
and right then I wanted
to pluck out your eyes,
hold them within my jacket pocket,

Keep them well within reach,
like cool marbles, but you
kept me from it--candy-sucked
my breath and led me
into the pitch, gasping
for air in the rain.
Morning

I curl up on my balcony
in a threadbare robe
sipping the last legs of paisano

While migrant workers drain
thermoses of steaming coffee
in the dark parking lot below

Possibly rubbing their eyes free
of women still asleep
under sheets at home in Mexico.

They watch me, peering
over tin cups, nodding
--Buenos dias.

I let the robe slowly slip
off my shoulders, exposing
my bronzed back and

Send these men to the fields
with a bony curved kiss.
Amputation

When I marched
into the salon
searching for a new “do”
to attract another man,
blue-haired hens
perched under bee-hive domes
eyes me hard as I was tucked
into a plastic bib
and drenched
with water.

These ladies
flipped through Cosmo’s
waxy pages, glossy with photos
of pouty waifs, limbs
wrapped around bottles
of Calvin Klein’s
“Eternity”.

“Cut it all off”
I managed, staring
at the drippy mouse
in the mirror--Bev
hovered my head like
Michelangelo surveying
a lumpy slab of stone

when a drying Diva,
lips fire-hydrant red,
bleated: “If you ask me,
I wouldn’t touch it.
Let it swing past your ass,
into piles at your feet.
Cut it, be crying
like a baby, all that
lumped off like it was trash.”

She climbed back
into her magazine, thin
hair licked tight around pink curlers,
bony fingers rustling like leaves
over air-brushed pictures
of younger women.
I looked at my reflection, eyes puffy from tears shed over a man who ran callused fingers through my locks, buried his head in my hair when we curled up for bed.

Clasping Bev’s scissored fingers in a gentle fist, I said, “Just a trim this time around...enough to clip off all the dead ends.”
First Child

As a kid
I drank
strawberry Nehi,
loaded myself up
with its sticky syrup,
and in the porch swing,
rolling heels against cool concrete,
I felt my belly
slurp and gurgle,
sloshing in measured tempo.

Mother warned I would bloat
into a fat seeded bulb ready to gush
and split open. I loved
the idea of growing red and round,
a bright shape easily
rolled between fingers
and plunged into a watering mouth.

In the dark, love, you hover
over me,
slip washed fruit
between my lips,
stroke my swelling belly,
heaving with a silent promise
bright as blood, sweet
as raw strawberries.
Alarm

When blood stains
its ruby exclamation point
into my underwear,
I sigh at the dull
cramps to follow,
the water swell
flashing a neon
vacancy sign
in my belly.

This morning’s bright
discovery presents
a stranger fret
than anxiety felt
in adolescence, when
new to sex and monthly cycles,
I waited,
prayed for the red flood,
thumbskin chewed raw,
and worry hovered
over my head
like a swollen
question mark.

My poor mother
waggles a pudgy finger
at this spinster
and the wrinkles
fighting for a place
around my eyes, tells me,
“Squint harder, maybe
find a man.”

She mentions my grumbling
stomach, ringless hand,
sinking breasts and clucks
her fat tongue
at time slipping fast
beneath my heels.

So I figure time
for a hungry nag--married
to death--drumming
her razor nails
into my bed,
screaming
for me to rouse up,
take in a squalling red renter
and waddle my way
to the midwife,

push out my purpose
and silence her shrill ringing
with a pulsing balloon
of skin blood and bone.
Deluge

I think of you
in seasons and degrees,
balmy, brisk
or Arctically cold.

Now, I know
I could have reduced
myself to embers
just as easily
as I froze
under your icy stare.

But with a roar as loud
as lighting is bright
you flashed me
out of your life.

No room in your sky
for stormy weather
like mine.

Everytime it snows
I let the flakes dissolve
on my tongue
tasting your heart
in my mouth.
Killing Jar

You leave me
in a white-fisted vigil
over the insects
winding down
in the mason jar.

They flutter
in vicious whorls
like spurned lovers:
oblivious to death
and hungry for air.

I don’t know which way
is more humane--you clasping
them between thumb
forefinger

Nipping butterflies
at thorax, while
worm tails
quiver with fear

Or allowing them
to rake against the glass,
unknowable energies
boiling to the last wing beat
before you arrange
their bodies
under glass,

Hoard them in drawers
like pressed
hot-house flowers:
Adonis Blues, Chalkhills,
Damselflies, fritillaries,
Monarchs--

The damsel glows
more alive for me
with a blue translucent
body and too many hearts.
An easy catch for you, bug man:
trusting, simple-minded
and sad.

So carefully you trap them
to murmur their scientific names
like a star-crossed suitor,
and graze their folding velvet lobes...

Like in our bed, you caress
my hips and nibble
with gasps at the beauty
you think you've pinned
spread-eagle against the sheets.

I allow it,
no choice
with my foot snared
in this clamp,

No choice
but to gnaw
it off
or wait for death
creeping up like a
sweet suffocating kiss.
Stripping

Piece by piece
I want to undress
myself for you,
negotiate
a shy smile here,
offer a slow,
two-eyed blink there,
give up a ruby blush
under your long
cool fingers.

It is easy
casting off
my blouse,
slowly exposing
my sun-rubbed stomach,
knowing your gaze
travels over my breasts
and pale nipples.

Harder is shedding
tears over a lost
lover, angling
hands along
so many tracks
of failure.

I want to peel
away these layers
which bundle me
fast; I need
to strip myself
of fears

separating my underskin
from your grasp;
help me
unbutton,
slide from under
this smothering fabric
I struggle against.
Everything Dies

Fueled by the youth
of the beautiful bride
and her virile groom,
we left the lakeside
wedding reception
famished for love.

You bolted along
the country highway
we once knew so well,
gas pedal ground
against floorboard,
grinning like a virgin.

I stripped off
stockings and dress,
tried to gracefully
roll my fist between
your legs, despite
the extra rolls of flesh
cascading along my stomach.

I also tried to forget
last night’s fight
over the scarlet kisses
I rinsed out of your jockeys
and the damn diet
I blew at the cake table:
tried swallowing
all those mornings
I woke up starving for you.

Feeling you stiffen
under my knuckles, I watched
the country grass
undulate with summer wind
like a green-haired sloth
and wondered if you loved
the young office Chippie with berry lips,
if she reminded you of me when I was bright-eyed and slim.

A creamy doe charged into that question,
ricocheted to answer off the grill
with a slick bust--
we sliced through her like butter,

And finally sliding safe
against soft ditch, I
tumbled out the window
half-naked--saw
the fawn's entrails

strewn across blacktop
like fresh sausage casing,
her small head nowhere
to be found: probably
chucked into some farmer's
wavy cornfield,
dinner for buzzards
or wild dogs.

At your heavy touch,
still vibrating with hunger
for backseat-love,
I vomited
against the rear wheel
of the cadillac,
tasting the hate pump into my belly,
choking on the broken vows
I smelled in her freshly
spilled blood.
Mute

You
glide arms around
my stomach,
hand graze
my ribs
like harps strings
and I feel
your face
roll into my back,
breath steaming
my neck
and your flexed
white skin
glides
against me
so hard
I feel the pulse
of your blood,
the bone
of your hip

fitting me
like line into curve,
like locks
giving way,
prying apart
the solid silence
of body,
until I hear
you give up
a long deep roar--
the sound lodging
in my heart
like a bullet.
the house we called home
for six years running
was emptied of every familiar smell and shadow,
after it was scoured clean,
our possessions boxed
into separate trucks,
destined for separate places,
I felt the absence,
heard the low echo
of the love and hate
we pounded into the walls
together,
saw no sign left
of ever having been us.

struggling out into July,
arms heavy with failure,
I felt you embrace my shoulders,
whispering in my hair
to keep the damn ring
because it was the only beautiful thing you ever gave me;
I believed you.

two years, and time is kind,
simmering old aches,
cooking them down
to hide within the red soup
of our hearts.

After dinner and too many bottles
of wine, you nod as I ramble
about unfinished poems and the men I banish
when ideas of marriage eventually rise;
You smile, a sliver of this knowledge
wedged in your lip.

After I shut that door
behind you, remembering the boy
I loved, I finger the ring
in my pocket, and my heart
rolls over with a stiff sore cry,
realizing, you lied, baby
you lied.
Road Tripping to Tombsboro, Tenn.

Driving my route
through the midnight
fog and mist,
I light up, take a drag
and exhale the burning
against my Chevy's lens.

I squint myopic
between the droplets
of water splashing teary
where my wipers
limerick it off the glass
and swipe for a moment clear.

The radio snaps and crackles
lyrics from some rock-n-roll soul
wailing with a guitar
filled to the strings
with fear of fame, women,
an eventual dive off
a forty-story...

Reminds me of the funeral
which looms ahead come morning
for an old friend who spun
her life out, swallowed
thimble-sized pellets
of pain-killers.

Like a skipping heart,
I realize my roving animal:
its sputter on wet asphalt and gleaming orbs
pushing apart highway air,
grill filled to the teeth
with moth, wasp and locust meat;

Checked only by yellow reflectors
and my semi-conscious grip
on tongue levers, it gauge its miles,
its perimeter, while its own interior
warms me within it belly hold.
Another deep drag
drops an ash, burning
a circular tattoo,
black into the animal’s skin
and I hear over the radio’s rumble
and caustic snaps, the engine purr
with a resilience I wish we all had.

“Road Tripping....” Cont’d
Heart’s End

The backdoor smacks
as I stumble from another
cock-tail party--too tired
from fending off
gin-savvy winks sailed
by men old enough
to know better.

I blow smoke,
lingering over their heads
like wet milky cobwebs,
let them know
my heart was inked
and erased
a long time ago.

Sliding through damp
yard, I feel granite
settle in my limbs,
hear my friends’ voices
float into murmurs
which lift up through the dark.

Watching the stars
glint like ax sharp asterisks,
I see clouds melt like
arms circling a watch,

And feel the wet blades
lick my back, reminding
me of that boy’s sudden lips
catching mine under a sky
like this:

The plumbness of those two
soft birds soaring
at my shut mouth,
the way he kept both eyes open
for my first kiss, then
the flashed disappointment
when I did not push back.

Dead two years later,
seduced by a naked to the eye cancer,
he was cloaked up
in a wood box, doused
and set to flame--
his ashes tossed
into the brilliant air
over our idiot tears.

Were he still alive now,
I would take his face
with older hands, crush
passion into him
with parted lips, open eyes,
and push into his mouth
my heart, with one shuddered
breath--an answer to his question
about woman, love and death.

But this old moon
paces on and my friends
will gabble a dialogue
they won’t remember
come dawn--and Knowing all this, I exist

Blindly
aware of sudden
movements in this life
which scream
I am constantly dying,
slapped to tick and stop
like a cheaply oiled timepiece.
Cast Petals
(Elegy for Anne)

She had many lovers
all wanting
to chew her pieces
on by one by one,
consume her bawdy laugh,
tangled black hair,
and her hunger for kill me pills.

They wantd
to save her, make
her real, not some dreamy
illusion destined
to die
as she lived--
vivid as scarlet,
selfish as a light
starved moth.

The men mourn, now,
like boys who never
knew her kisses were meant
to be bone cold--
she was faithful
to the end.

They just cast
rose petals
on her tombstone,
write poems
she would never read,

And dive into their beds
for her body,
now cleaving
to death--
her only lover.
The Things We Bury

You came to the bar, sister,
face damp over finding her
crumpled against
the porch step--
teeth pushed back
like bloody chiclets
in pink tar, one eye
bulging, a paw
stamped flat.

All this spilled out
as I held you,
stunned numb
by the news of our dead cat,
our pet
reduced to a bundle
of empty fur.

I admit now
to sick anticipation
at seeing the bloody mess,
the same glee of toughness
I felt whenever she plopped
a mauled chipmunk
at our feet,
its tiny paws curled
like a child’s
around a roller coaster
lap bar, neck cleanly snapped.

She waited with purrs
and smug licks to be rewarded
for her feline prowess:
we took proud turns
sweeping the nauseating
carcasses out the backdoor.

I wanted to shoulder this burden
for you, and as we pulled up
I steeled myself for carrying
her stiffened body to plot,
ready for my stomach to roll
at gripping dead flesh, prepared for stumbling dark.

But you had already
dug her grave in the yard,
placed her into a shadowy hole
covered the mangle
with a tarp
so I wouldn’t be forced
seeing a last violent image
of her open eyes and stretched mouth.

You waited, arms crossed,
for my finishing
and I clenched the shovel
still slick with your sweat,
scooped up the loose
earth, barely able
to shake it over her,

Feeling the weight
of the heaviest task
already borne and buried
with your first digging.
Reply to the Guy at the Bar who Asked Me to Go Home with Him

what other women falter as clumsily
beneath your canned come-ons and side-long glances,
sizing up our bones for soup meat,
leaving us to stew over the question:
are women aloud to lust,
or do we just stand around
and silently take
your sex-stale flattery?

It is no wonder
my heart is chlorinated
against the gibbering
of fuck-hungry men
like you, trying
to salve my rough
hewn skin with
colorfully romantic
rock lyrics, trying
to paint me pictures
of beauty which will fade
like the bloom
of roses:

They are glorified
weeds, not worthy
of portraiture--
only quilted images
patched and pasted
together under
a kaleidoscope light.

So it shouldn’t surprise
that when I think
I know when to give up chase,
shout “Love!” from rooftops
or whisper it under the covers
like some flame-torched ground hog,
I shake like a ripe autumn turkey,
ready for pluck and hatchet.
Typhoid Mary

“Mary walked more like a man than woman and...her mind had a distinctly masculine character, also”
--Dr. Charles Soper, confined Mary Mallon, aka Typhoid Mary to isolation.

This blustering red Irish woman, gripping hard knots of potatoes in scalded fists, scaled their skins into trash bins.

Her home was with sharp knives, loaves of fresh bread, bricks of bloody beef, wet cabbage, onions, tins, and huge pots; their handles suffered her firm grip over roiling burners.

She never saw men in starched white jackets lurch behind her, grope her like a wine barrel (she was no dainty Irish rose) and whisk her into seclusion without explanation.

She peppered these men with blue curses lipped over a thick accent, bit one’s knuckle nearly off, gouged the other’s eye, scratched a nurse’s milky breast while scattering pins from streaming blonde hair.
"Typhoid Mary" Cont'd

Carted away like a wheelbarrow
of turnips
she wailed "monsters"
from North Brother Island,
watched the sea lap
the shore, thought
the same water which sailed
her to some promised freedom,
now a liquid quarantine:

She died there
never believing
she baked death into bread,
that she cracked skulls
into skillets, and alone
deserved a prison
instead of a kitchen
for a home.
Paper Mary

We gamble through the bar,
lighting on men’s arms
like tattered dizzy moths,
searching with girls’ green
visions for matches
among search-light whispers
of our “fool-red strapless”
cigarettes at a dangle,
precarious in pleated ruby lips;
eyes wrinkled almost shut
from squinting down the tunnels
of liquor bottles.

We stare for days
when men clamored for their lighter,
asked us to dance, strained
of sound of our crinolines
crashing about small-boned ankles;
we teased promises of coveted
moonlight kisses, knowing
how to play the pout
at the shakes they had,
arms wrapped around the slips
of us...

Tanked chin-high on vodka gimlets,
these nicotine stained memories
are blurry, like images
cast from hot paper lanterns;
we’re not courted or kissed,
too old now for the men flocking at our yellowed
shadows.

But we still dance
in weathered stilettos,
mumble under tar-heavy breath,
“this living is a lonely way
to go.”

Trying to be the center of any man’s show,
we shuffle under and over neon flashes,
blinking us, under bar lights red,
young, if only young, on and off again.
House of My First Illness

Dad says I was six
when I began to glimpse
hairy shadows
 inching the wood slats
 of my floor
 and cried my concrete mother
 from her bed.

She says I slept
with a sweaty twitch,
gnashed my milk teeth
in the dark,
and bawled at some devil
man in my sleep.

I don’t recall this--

But I remember that time
my cousin bent close during my nap,
called me his angel
and crushed my lips
with his curious lust,
a kiss and caress
warning me
of pain and blood.

I remember the yellow yarned bedspread,
the spring air blowing lace curtains,
and the sore faces I watched
in the fake wood paneling
as he moved on top of me,
whispering angel, angel, angel.

I still listen
to my parents’ stories,
their laughter at my old sleeping fits,
but that nightmare
wakes me thrashing,
trying to shove away
his fingers and mouth,
still ready to plant halos
on my lips
and march fear into my dreams.
The Levee

The water in my levee
laps at these cracked walls
with icy tongues, licks
my rotting stones,
ready to swallow me
in one lusty gulp,
leave the black
stain in my mind
bleach clean,
slate silent.

Its sweet ebb pulls me numb
though the murk;
time-sharp pebbles
slice my soles, but
the muddy silt takes me
soft as an old lover.

It rolls around my ankles,
glides the dress above my hips,
*always a dress for this plunge*,
kisses my crotch, stomach,
breasts and neck,
blow bubbles against
my freezing skin.

As I slip under again,
*this time for real,
this time for real*
I wonder how to fight
this desire to drown
and swim with the cold currents,
battle the violent crest
rising, always, without sign
of storm clouds--
no bells or sirens,
just a seductive whisper
calling me to dive
headlong through
this terrible wet plate.

If only my mind could breathe
with the answer, quell the bawling roars
and wrest with tar-heavy questions,
it would be clean,
like my mouth filling
with this pool,
but I can’t suck deep enough to catch the strength
I seek within it--

the waves rush over me so,
submerging me with a hope
that it doesn’t spit me out
leaving me to ache
from the diving line
for the squall and pitch
of this water.
Heritage Ridge

I check my watch,  
knead oatmeal pies  
through the paper bag  
and wait for the plump  
nurse to wheel her  
down the hall  
fresh from her nap.

Trying to ignore  
the aroma of navy beans,  
disinfectant and urine  
wafting under circular fans,  
my eyes settle  
on the display cabinet  
lined with doilies,  
toaster cozies and wool  
scarves—all pearled  
by ladies named Mabel,  
Stella or Goldie.

Grimacing, I close my eyes,  
won’t what she looks like now—  
I know, but his death farm  
loomed in my dreams,  
peopled by yellowing  
ghosts who roll eyes  
and tongues behind  
steel walkers and IV units.

The pendulum of the wall clock  
reminds me of her  
black hair swinging  
between her cow-thick  
shoulders; she would stoop  
over the sink, suds  
slopping onto the floor  
and hum through sunlight,  
sweat running rivers  
into her penny-wide wrinkles.
Her arms were muscled from lifting loads of laundry and children, from carrying a widow’s weight of raising eight babies, and burying three in the country alone.

Until her stroke five years ago, she baked fruit pies from scratch, changed the oil in her Buick and the diapers of our children.

The clock peals its time and she rolls herself into the activity room, hair braided thick as a pretzel, eyes shiny brass, and slits a smile which placates my fear, and I know her life is mine to inherit.