Dreams of Her Mother

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Abstract

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This is a collection of poetry preceded by a critical introduction entitled, “‘My Beautiful Mother’: Memory, Image, Representation, and Poetry. A Critical Introduction.” The introduction discusses the concepts of image and representation as it intersects with memory. I compare and contrast my poems to the poems of Sharon Olds and the creative non-fiction of Peter Handke. The creative portion of the thesis deals with the subject of the various family members and my memories of them, but is not limited to this subject.

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Jill Allyn Rosser

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“My Beautiful Mother”: Memory, Image, Representation and Poetry

A Critical Introduction

Almost thirty years of her washing her family's clothes. Very rarely would you see anyone else out there—it was always her. She is linked with the clothesline in my mind, a figure constantly doing the laundry. She could be a silhouette, blacked out by the sun, standing posed as she snaps a clothespin onto some piece of clothing. This is one of my strongest memories of my mother, one of my clearest images of her.

Let me begin by giving you a description of her: 5'2", brown hair always in a bob, wearing her standard summer garb of a large T-shirt, jean shorts, and tennis shoes. She has thin eyebrows, brown eyes, tan skin (her face is just now beginning to show the years of time spent gardening), thin lips. She has a gap between her two front teeth in my memories (though she doesn't now). She's medium build. She is beautiful, though she would never say think of herself in this way.

Now let me give you a more specific picture of her: She stands at the clothesline in early morning, hanging dripping-wet laundry on the line. The green plastic wires snap back a little as she hangs the sheets, clips clothespins at each of their ends. It's near the beginning of summer, the beginning of summer vacation for myself. I'm about ten or eleven years old, still in the habit of waking up early, so I'm with my mother at the clothesline. The stench of rotting beer
hops carries from our neighbor's fields to my nose. I complain ceaselessly to my mother about the stink as I try to hang from the clothesline supports. She slaps my fingers so I drop down, tells me not to do that because there might be wasps in the hollow ends. She tells me I'll get used to the smell and asks me to go inside.

Now, here is this moment as rendered in one of my poems:

My Beautiful Mother at the Clothesline

Beautiful, the smell of beer hops
dumped in a neighbor’s field,
rotted down into earth by the sun.
Beautiful, my mother at the clothesline
at eight in the morning,
laundry basket hipped,
water dripping from it,
landing on the dewy grass.
Beautiful, the spread of clean sheets
across green plastic wires.
Beautiful, a moment in my memory
of my mother clipping a clothespin on my nose
to ward off the smell. But this didn’t happen.
Instead, it’s her yelling at me to get down
off the clothesline supports
where I talk to her, watch her.
A moment of her slapping my fingers,
telling me again to watch out,
that wasps have made their home
in the hollow ends of the supports.
It’s of her telling me to go inside,
quit complaining, that eventually
I’ll get used to the smell.

The moment in my memory is one that has become highly idealized. The summer just beginning, a time to be with my family, my mother. It speaks to me
now as a time that I miss because I don't know how I'd recapture this with my mother, the simple moments I had with her as she went through her daily routine. I have always wanted to know my mother better. How well can a child know her parent? One of my drives to write stems from the desire to know the people around me, though I didn't recognize this desire as a child. When I hang from the clothesline in my memory (and in my poem), I watch my mother more than I talk to her, watch how she overlaps each piece of laundry a little bit so that they share a clothespin. I watch how quickly she works, even with my interruptions. I watch but get seldom closer to discovering who she is.

But am I being true to the person she is in my memory and the person she still is today in my representations of her in my writing? In real life, she may not have actually slapped my fingers as she does in this poem. How does this "false" detail further effect my representation of my mother? Can memories ever be authentically represented? What do we mean by authentic? What is the connection between images and memories?

***

Before I explore the idea of representation, and specifically the representation of my own mother, I want to try to define the concept of image. What are images? What makes an image created by words different from a visual image, like a photograph of my mother? William Greenway believes that there is an intelligence to images, and an inherent power to those formed in a reader's
mind from words. While at first it may appear that words by their nature
distance themselves from the original image, that writers intentionally work to
diminish the original image for clarity, Greenway believes that it is actually the
opposite. After posing the question of whether poetry is a diminution of the
image, he answers,

Yes, it would be if all poetry was an interpretation or duplication of the
image; but it is a direct presentation of it, not an introduction of the image
to the mind, but an induction, an inducing of the image in the mind. The
mind doesn't interpret or replicate the image; it creates it. And it is this
creation of image by language that gives it its primary power. The
intelligence comes not from the outside, but from the inside. Therefore
language can tap the dream reservoir more directly than the visual image
can.¹

The written image, the poetic image, becomes a source of possibility. Every
reader who reads a descriptive passage will naturally create a picture in her
mind, individually different from that of all others who read the same passage.
Poetry becomes an opportunity for creative expression not just on the part of the
poet, but on the part of the reader as well.

It is probable that each person who reads a poem I've written about my
mother will create a completely new image of her, in all likelihood getting
further and further away from the truth, the physical human being. Anxieties
arise, then, with the idea that these images of my mother in my writing may

replace the actual woman. The extent of my control over her image is limited to the texts I create; she loses her independent dimensionality as the words settle together on the page. She is in danger of becoming a caricature because I cannot possibly capture every nuance of her being.

What else are images? French philosopher Jacques Rancière\(^2\) questions the role images play in the subsuming of reality in this way: "What is being spoken about, and what precisely are we being told, when it is said that there is no longer any reality, only images? Or conversely, that there are no more images but only a reality incessantly representing itself to itself?" (1). Though these two discourses seem to be of different strains, Rancière sees them fundamentally as one and the same: If we are presented with only images, then there is nothing more than an ever-increasing cache of images to go on, and with this "overabundance," images have lost their meaning. So, does my desire to represent my mother on the page unintentionally bring about the distortion of meaning of her images to the reader? Where does reality end and the realm of image begin?

In response to the abundance of images in today’s culture, we feel the need to identify what we really mean when we talk about "images" and "reality." By looking closely at films, Rancière identifies the concept of "imageness," which is the "regime of relations between elements and between functions" (4). He

elaborates that in film, imageness refers to the "operations that couple and uncouple the visible and its signification or speech and its effect, which create and frustrate expectations" (4-5). The effect is fragmentary, breaking actions down to their basic parts, a separation between what is seen and what is heard. This happens not only in film, but also in written works.

In my poetry, my mother (and my memories of events with my mother) get broken into pieces. In “My Beautiful Mother at the Clothesline,” the moments where my mother is embodied in the poem are separated by other details. The poem begins with the description of the smell of beer hops, then moves to my mother standing at the clothesline, the laundry basket catching on her hip. The reader sees the water dripping off the laundry onto the grass, then sees the sheets spread over the clothesline, though my mother is not shown actually hanging the laundry. The next moment in which she appears, she is yelling at the daughter to get down off the clothesline supports and quit complaining about the smell. This moment is made real, authenticated, by the admission by the speaker that the "beautiful" preceding memory, the one of the mother clipping a clothespin on the child’s nose, did not happen. The formula of the perfect or desired mother-daughter relationship is complicated by the actuality of the situation: the mother wanting to just get her work done, not be bothered by petty complaints about something that is ultimately out of her control, and to protect her child (and perhaps herself) from the possibility of angry wasps. The complication of the
expected relationship brings about frustration in the reader, who looks for
certain things to happen, but instead gets something else. The fragmentary
presentation of the images along with the anaphoric use of "beautiful" slows the
event down, allows the twist in the poem and its ending to come to the reader
gradually, giving his expectations time to change. He begins to focus on what is
truly "beautiful" about this moment: What is beautiful about the smell of rotten
beer hops? What is beautiful about a woman hanging laundry on a clothesline?
What is beautiful about the adult speaker realizing that as a girl she wanted a
certain ideal relationship to come true, but instead received a more practical
response from her mother about her complaints?

***

The nature of the formulas, including mother-daughter relationships and
the busy housewife/mother, interests me, too, because formulas seem to have
close ties to images. As I write about her, I have to be aware that I am writing her
into certain formulas, certain expectations: she is a Midwestern farm housewife.
Hard work is part of her character. The stress from working so hard could explain
why she yells at her child instead of patiently explaining how the smell will
eventually fade into the background and warning her not to climb on the
clothesline supports. It is absolutely in character for her to keep working past
exhaustion, as I picture her in my poem about her canning:
My Mom at 50

Continues to work with gas flames in the middle of summer. She stares at pureed tomatoes as they boil in that same black kettle she’s used for thirty years. She must hold the pages of her Ball Canning book flat, smooth out the creases caused by years of exposure to the pressure cooker’s steam. She’s scrubbed the Ball jars, sterilized them in hot water, she’s set them upside down, their mouths kissing the hot skillet’s surface, water droplets popping, hissing, burning away, until the embrace is broken, and she whisks them away. She clamps them shut with rusted fasteners, used over and over until their surfaces corrode through. She places the freshly canned goods underneath the large kitchen window to cool for awhile. She’s done this for thirty years. Now she leans against the huge white porcelain sink, her hands wrinkled, skin shrunk tight, stained red against her bones. A light hits her as she stands there, and it’s clear from her roots that she’s dyed her hair. A breeze through the open window turns the pages of her novel about Queen Elizabeth, and she grabs a butter knife to keep her place. In her T-shirt she notices small holes that reveal her belly skin, so she fingers them until she hears the pop of a seal taking hold. She crosses the kitchen, strikes the tops of the jars lightly with her ring finger as she’s done a thousand times before.

Though this is poetry and not non-fiction, where the facts should be true, the facts I present to the reader about my mother—that’s she is a ceaselessly hard
worker, that she is often alone, that she has her routines-- versus the feeling implied by the poetry--that she is bored and perhaps very lonely--complicate the formulas she naturally falls into within the poem. What does my mother do that does not more easily and naturally fit into a formula? Perhaps it is fact that she reads historical fiction, that she dyes her hair instead of letting it go gray naturally, that she's aging, that she is not merely the work she does but a bodied person as well. Nevertheless, I'm still not sure if it's a good thing or not for me to receive the comment, "This seems so much like a Midwestern mom!" in response to my poems. While I appreciate that readers may be able to identify her within the context I've written her into, I believe that it is also important for readers to be able to say, "It's interesting that she's reading a novel about Queen Elizabeth. What does this say about her character?" Despite her adherence to some aspects of the formulas, her eccentricities shows readers how she slips away from them at times.

***

Just as my mother doesn't perfectly fit into her formulas, other family members I write about also defy their molds. My grandfather, a curmudgeonly old man, shows his more sympathetic side in my poem "Emmelhainz's Cats." The poem depicts what happens every time my grandfather drives his diesel-engine truck onto the family farm's driveway:

from the barn [the cats] trot numberless,
follow the crunch of tires on gravel,
then his footsteps, every time
he pulls up the driveway,
even when he doesn’t have food (5-9).

The way in which he acts toward the cats -- if they get in his way, he won't hesitate to kick them, and he actually does feed them out of a used (but clean) litter pan-- gives the impression that he doesn't like them. Even as he feeds them "steak bones, chicken skins, / corn and mashed potatoes" (20-21), he mumbles to himself " I’m gonna kill you and you,' / points to each cat in turn" (23-24). Yet, by the end of the poem, as "A grey tabby circles his legs" (34), he carefully, and perhaps painfully stoops down to scratch between the cats' ears. He challenges his formula of the grumpy old farmer by doing what is contrary to his words, showing affection for these animals.

***

But it is in these formulas that I might be able to determine who my potential audience may be. As I write about my mother, I can't help but wonder who else would be interested in reading about her. The short list of possible readers include my father, my siblings, my grandparents (both her parents and my father's parents), her sister and brother (my aunt and uncle), cousins, as well as both her friends and my friends. Even this list, though, is merely speculative. Who's to say that what is fundamentally my view of my own mother would interest even these people? But who else would possibly want to read about her?
By looking at the various formulas that frame many of the people I write about -- Mid-Western farm wife and mother, old grumpy farmer--I can see that potentially my readership may include people of similar backgrounds, those interested in people from these backgrounds, or, for certain poems, daughters and mothers in general. Would knowing my intended readership change how I write? Would I be more likely to censor myself with what details I include, or what memories I write about? Or would this knowledge allow me to portray my family members in a more authentic way, one that captures their eccentricities which identify them a unique individuals?

***

One of the complications that develops in my own writing is that my mother is still alive. Readers may question my sincerity because of this fact. How might this influence my poetry, my representation of my mother and other family members who are still living? To remain objective, I find that it is helpful to foster a sense of detachment with my poetry, to simply be the writer of the poem and its subject matter, not the daughter or granddaughter or sister of the parents, siblings, and grandparents who appear in the poems. To achieve a sense of detachment, I usually stick to writing about events that have happened years ago and that are about everyday happenings. The memories of my mother pregnant with my youngest brother, and after giving birth; my memories of my grandfather feeding the barn cats: I try to focus on the memories rather than the
person in the memories, though their images take on presence and meaning. The images of my family become steeped in personal conflict as these individuals go about their lives and routines.

***

Rancière asks a similar question, "Under what circumstances might it be said that certain events cannot be represented?" (109). He says that the answer lies in the fact that it is "impossible to make the essential character of the thing in question present" (109-110). Peter Handke, in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams. A Life Story*, a memoir dealing with his mother's suicide, seems to realize the impossibility to make what was the essential character of his mother completely representable to his readers, which is why he starts with the formulas and works to sift through the facts of his mother's life to find the ones relevant to this story.

He explains his methods and reasons in this way:

I first took the facts as my starting point and looked for ways of formulating them. But I soon noticed that in looking for formulations I was moving away from the facts. I then adopted a new approach--starting not with the facts but with the already available formulations, the linguistic deposit of man's social experience. From my mother's life, I sifted out the elements that were already foreseen in these formulas, for only with the help of ready-made public language was it possible to single out from among all the irrelevant facts of this life the few that cried out to be made public. (32)

Telling about the suicide itself may also be walking the line of what is impossible to represent, but again Handke seems in control of this as he states right before
the actual story of the suicide, "From this point on, I shall have to be careful to keep my story from telling itself" (61). Handke realizes that he could lose his objective stance in the writing at this moment by merely relating what happened and not focusing only on the facts that "cry out" to be made public. I want to look at the ordinary events of my own mother's everyday life and find places where she steps out of the formulas. However, I must also acknowledge the fact that these glimpses of the individual might remain only that, glimpses, as the formulas fall into place around her despite the moments in which she moves out of them.

For Handke and perhaps for many writers, the notion that an event or person may be completely unknowable, unrepresentable is appealing. In this light, only in the unknowable can the reality of the event or person be felt:

My sense of horror makes me feel better: at last my boredom is gone; an unresisting body, no more exhausting distances, a painless passage of time. I need the feeling that what I am going through is incomprehensible and incommunicable; only then does the horror seem meaningful and real. (Handke 4)

Ultimately, what makes Handke's writing so enveloping is his ability to make his mother and her death so real to the reader. This happened, the text screams. It is Handke's acknowledgement of the horror of the reality of his mother's death that permeates the text, and it does so because he admits he cannot understand it, and it does so because he admits he cannot understand it.
Sharon Olds, in her poetry collection *The Father*, also painfully acknowledges the reality of her parent’s death, in this case from cancer. Like Handke, Olds seems to be drawn to the unknowability of her father. In his death, he becomes a figure for Olds to carry within her, to shape in the image she chooses. In "Nullipara," Olds writes that her father "will live in me / after he is dead, I will carry him like a mother. / I do not know if I will ever deliver" (16-18). Unlike Handke, Olds does not seem to want the experiences to be "incomprehensible and incommunicable;" she probes every aspect of his deterioration and death for her poetry. But does Olds' choice of the subject matter of her father and his death alienate her readership? As Rika Lesser notes in her 1992 review of the book in *The Nation*, "there is so much pain in *The Father*, all of it strictly personal." Because of the personal nature of the poems, Lesser raises the question of who might be the audience for the collection. While "the book as a whole will speak directly to those who have survived abuse," Lesser believes that "it will not appeal to us all."

The poem "The Glass" is certainly a personal glimpse into the death of the speaker's father, but it is in her attempt at making the "essential character" of the situation real that she can write a poem that captures the attention of a larger audience. In the poem, she focuses on the mucus her father coughs up as a result of the tumor in his throat. After the father's death, the speaker can "think of it

---

with wonder now / the glass of mucus that stood on the table" (1-2). The glass stops being a product of the death, and instead becomes something mythic. As the father's tumor grows, it "sends out pus / like the sun sending out flares, those pouring / tongues" (5-7). The father's dying becomes elemental, something of the larger universe. Olds even compares him to a god at one point: "he is like a god producing food from his own mouth" (18). Yet he remains human as he goes through the final stage of life like any other person would. He must cough up the mucus "every ten minutes or so" (9), he continually "gargles and / coughs and reaches for it again / and gets the heavy sputum out" (14-16). He also "can eat nothing anymore / just a swallow of milk, sometimes, / cut with water" (19-21). Olds' father becomes a man who dies on the page, and though she often compares him and his mucus to greater cosmic bodies, he remains essentially a man, a human, one the speaker wants to know but cannot. Regardless of the personal nature of the poem, because death is a universal experience, all readers can come to a poem like this and connect with its humanity.

***

Ultimately, I must deal with the fact that I am just one person in charge of the memories of my mother, and that those memories might be drastically different from her responses to her lived experiences. I want to be true to the real person as I have known her and to the person I know today; furthermore, I want my images of her to ring authentic to my readers. She is more than just a formula
on the page, a way of writing about people that is easy and expected. She is more than just a Midwestern farm wife and mother. However, I must also realize the fact that as she appears to readers, she becomes more like a collection of events and moments, and that these are what create her in the mind of readers. I must be vigilant, much like Handke, to remain objective and to give myself the distance I need to leave enough space in the poems to make her feel real.
Stone Baby

_In Moroccan culture, it is believed that a baby can sleep inside the mother to protect her honor._

1. The Mother

I carried you in me for 46 years. 
A young woman, I was afraid 
of doctors, their knives. 
I did not let them take you; 
I ran, waited for the pains 
of birth to stop. You stayed put. 
You curled up, went to sleep, 
sat like a stone in my belly. 
When they finally cut you 
out of me, my body cried for you. 
I had known no life without you. 
Only the heaviness of truth: 
I am an eternal mother.

2. The Child

Oh mother, what am I 
without you? So long tucked inside 
your life, myself never born, never died. 
Outside, if I had been your girl/boy, 
what would my life have been? 
Do you imagine me running 
between your legs, hiding under 
your bed, helping you plant 
sweet potatoes in the field? 
Do we step together along the rows 
pushing potatoes into the ground, 
dirt between our toes settling in the cracks 
of our feet? Do you take me inside 
to wash me? Am I dirt-stained, 
earth-worn perpetually?
My Mother at 20

Her belly is flat, smooth
like the dining room table
she polishes every Tuesday
after she gets off work
from Zeitler’s hardware store.
She polishes it now
still wearing her work clothes,
a blue polo and jeans,
watches her hands make circles
over red maple, the polish residue
vanishing into the rings of a long dead tree.
She thinks about the best way
to tell him when he gets back
from fixing the mower and the seeder,
from mowing off the grazing lots
where the grass has gotten too tall,
and from helping his father
get the field corn sown. Soon,

she will fill out
like a slow-building bubble
in the kettle of boiling water
she will put on the stove
later that night for their dinner,
homemade egg noodles and beef,
a recipe she got from his grandmother.

After dinner, while listening to the news report,
with its threat of an April frost, Dad will cradle
her tiny feet in his hands, use his thumbs
to rub tiny circles into her soles.
Neither will say how afraid they are of change.
My Mother at 29

She sits in the upstairs bathroom, a September afternoon, walnut trees push a breeze through the window, through her brown hair grown long in a bob, a summer without a haircut. She rests her porcelain skin against the porcelain body of the sink, stares through brown eyes streaked with small red blood vessels, irritation from her contact lenses, stares at a tiny white plastic strip which she turns over and over in her hands. From my spot by the door, I watch her check her watch for the time. A pink line: “This means I’m going to have another baby.”

Another day, this time the bathroom downstairs. My mother sits on the toilet, the baby bulge in her belly covered up with clothes. I watch her from my spot by the door, watch her looking down between her legs. “The baby’s comin’ today! My water just broke.” I hesitate, hear my sister yell the school bus is here. “Well, go on, catch the bus. I can’t drive you today.”

My mother sits in a yellow recliner chair in a corner of her hospital room. Sheer white curtains cover her, the new baby in yellow light. Even her brown hair looks yellow. She cradles William in her arms. My siblings and I crowd around her, hug her, stare at the new baby, small, wrinkled with squinty blue eyes. My father leans against the recliner, puts his arm around her. Everything tinged yellow; they look happy. I learn that day: My parents are happy and young.
My Mother at 50

Continues to work with gas flames  
in the middle of summer. She stares  
at pureed tomatoes as they boil  
in that same black kettle she’s used  
for thirty years. She must hold  
the pages of her Ball Canning book flat,  
smooth out the creases caused by years  
of exposure to the pressure cooker’s steam.  
She’s scrubbed the Ball jars,  
sterilized them in hot water,  
she’s set them upside down, their mouths kissing  
the hot skillet’s surface, water droplets  
popping, hissing, burning away, until  
the embrace is broken, and she whisks them away.  
She clamps them shut  
with rusted fasteners, used over and over  
until their surfaces corrode through.  
She places the freshly canned goods underneath  
the large kitchen window to cool for awhile.  
She’s done this for thirty years. Now she leans  
against the huge white porcelain sink,  
her hands wrinkled, skin shrunk tight,  
stained red against her bones. A light hits her  
as she stands there, and it’s clear from her roots  
that she’s dyed her hair. A breeze through the open window  
turns the pages of her novel about Queen Elizabeth,  
and she grabs a butter knife to keep her place.  
In her T-shirt she notices small holes  
that reveal her belly skin,  
so she fingers them until she hears the pop  
of a seal taking hold. She crosses the kitchen,  
strikes the tops of the jars lightly  
with her ring finger as she’s done  
a thousand times before.
My Mother, a Villanelle

My Mom bikes her way into her fifties
on her stationary bike. Its digital
screen tracks each heartbeat, every calorie

she burns, her feet snug in pedals, gears greased
with something other than her sweat. She calls
me as she bikes her way to her fifties,

ten years for her already filled, hefty
in expectation. She leans forward, pulls
the screen closer, sees heartbeats, calories

adding up. She says, “A little increase
in the incline will help.” For her, it all
helps to push her quicker to her fifties,

when she’ll finish college, watch Will go free
into the world, her youngest, still so small
to her. Mom, listen: your heart beats. Calories

are such small things. Go back outside, Mom, please,
to your garden, to your greenhouse, to all
the farm: Your life, a bike, time, your fifties.
Count your own heartbeats, forget calories.
My Beautiful Mother at the Clothesline

Beautiful, the smell of beer hops
dumped in a neighbor’s field,
rotted down into earth by the sun.
Beautiful, my mother at the clothesline
at eight in the morning,
laundry basket hipped,
water dripping from it,
landing on the dewy grass.
Beautiful, the spread of clean sheets
across green plastic wires.
Beautiful, a moment in my memory
of my mother clipping a clothespin on my nose
to ward off the smell. But this didn’t happen.
Instead, it’s her yelling at me to get down
off the clothesline supports
where I talk to her, watch her.
A moment of her slapping my fingers,
telling me again to watch out,
that wasps have made their home
in the hollow ends of the supports.
It’s of her telling me to go inside,
quit complaining, that eventually
I’ll get used to the smell.
Superstition

Spring, Mother reads to me:
"Clover protects people from spells of magicians, the wiles of fairies."
"Clover brings good luck to those who keep it in the house."
"Pluck a four-leaf clover at first dew, rub it on your freckles."
Right before sunrise the next morning,
sparrows peck their way over the gravel drive,
search for breakfast, for bugs.
The paper waits for me at the end of the drive.
So does the clover bed, dew-drizzled, cold, slimy.
Pajamas drag damp earth along to the search for the perfect clover that will wipe my face clean.
But it's not there. Instead,
two regular clovers clumped together, swept over my nose, cheeks.
Mother watches me from the kitchen.
I do not know she was there.
She blames red cheeks on chilly air.
My Father After My Mother Dies

He will be like this: he will still plant
a vegetable garden from seedlings he’ll start
in the house in February, his nursery taking up
the entire space of the back kitchen counter.
When they’re ready for planting, he’ll till and hoe
mounds of earth for pumpkins and gourds, room
for their spindly arms to snake across the ground.
He’ll stake the tomatoes, he’ll shake out some straw
to help keep the weeds out. Every morning, he’ll water
or just walk through the rows to watch the plants grow.

In the evenings, he’ll sit in one of the two chairs
on the front porch. He’ll watch the cars drive by,
he’ll watch dusk come on. He’ll wait for one of us
to drop by to talk about his garden. He might mention
the volunteer sunflowers that will grow by the stream
and the white block building. My mind will create this imagery:
orange swirls against staunch brown cattails;
yellow fire against white stone. But I won’t say this to him.
We’ll just sit there, he will pet one of her cats
and talk to himself as he always has, wondering
out loud if the garden will grow any more this year,
if his efforts are worth it anymore. I will tell him yes,
but still he will sigh because it’s not the answer he wants.
Sunday Afternoon Gunslingers

Dust falls at sundown
through windows, orange flecks
static-cling to the box
television where
The Man With No Name
begins his walk across
90 miles of desert,
his punishment
for double-crossing
Tuco—*il cattivo*—
The Ugly,
I learn from Italian
titles, dramatically
sketched across the screen
at the beginning
as each character
shows his namesake
characteristic
through his behavior.
I am ten, I watch
my dad’s favorite
movie with him on
Sunday afternoon,
the one that even
my mother doesn’t
mind me watching
though it is violent.
*The Good, The Bad and The Ugly.*
And Tuco is ugly
up on his horse,
shading himself with
a frilly pink umbrella,
laughing as Blondie
struggles through heat,
no hat, no water.
And the tension builds
with Morricone’s music:
gravelly bassoon,
trembling strings—-
I know the instruments, the composer now, but then, there was no separation between song and screen--
And the tension builds until Blondie tumbles down the hill, collapses, lips chapped, peeling. But there’s hope, the trumpets signal it: Run-away carriage, *Carson, Bill Carson,* stolen gold, a secret, a cemetery, a name on a grave, a showdown, 3 hours waiting for this scene--my dad’s told me it’s famous. He won’t let me leave until after its over, and I want to see it--the showdown, extreme close-ups of faces cracked like the ground, caked in with sweat, dust, the hands, the guns, the quick draw, no more *il brutto,* the bad falls into his grave. The ending: I learn
*There are two kinds of people in this world.* Blondie’s stoic wisdom that dad agrees with nodding his head. That Tuco will always be *Poor Tuco,* noose around his neck. That gunslingers ride into the sunset
with their fair share.
To laugh with my father
when Tuco screams
that Blondie is a
Dirty son of a –
but gets cut off by
the final blasts of the theme
though I don’t think it’s funny.
I learn that the good
always get the final
say even when they
don’t say very much.
I tell myself
this is my father,
though later I learn
that he loves the film
for the story, the music,
not because he thinks
he’s like The Good.
Apparition

I watch the barn burn down, orange light
billows out from its center, splintered flames jump
and fall from the roof, suicidal though born
from the fire. I think: this reminds me
of how shards of stray straw looked
caught in sunlight
as they floated down
from the mows during bailing
summers ago. I then think:
this is the color of my father’s hair.
He's not around, and the barn still burns.
I run inside to get my brother who does nothing
but gape. As in most of my dreams,
there is the sense of inability
to stop things, to help things,
and I find myself distracted,
looking for a pair of matching boots,
and by the discussion I have with the 911 operator
who tells me she has her horse stabled in our barn.
I run to the smoking rumble, see the charred beams.
I don’t see the horse but know it’s dead,
and when I turn to yell at my father
who walks and picks through the remains of the barn,
randomly picking up charred bits of bailing wire,
smoldering chunks of rubber tires, horse shoes,
he doesn't hear me. Instead, he walks away
to get the tractor to start cleaning up the rubble.
Snow

Flakes make a sound as they hit the window, soft thuds like pads on a cat’s paws. I watch the snow as school children do, waiting for it to pile up, clog the streets. Snow isn’t the hassle it is to the young that it is for the old. What was it then? An excuse for sleeping in late, not doing homework the night before. Snow is suspension for some, for school children, for people who stare out windows.

Tomorrow, I’ll have to shovel the snow, something I never did as a kid. Instead, snow days always broke with my father dressed in a blue snow suit, black rubber boots, and the sound of the shovel scraping over cement, like an old man clearing his throat perpetually. The sound of a snow day. I’d watch him from my bedroom window throw the snow into chunky piles on either side of the walk. When it was clear, he’d grip a yellow bag of salt, toss grains around him as if he were feeding chickens. Wherever the salt fell, it burned black holes and no more snow would collect on the spots.

Snow, temporary annoyance, one we melt away, scrape into dirty piles children don’t want to play in.
Misdiagnosis

For one week you suffered your sickness: a burst appendix, a misdiagnosis.
You became a shade, your skin faded, stretched over your bones, like a stocking on a mannequin, your eyes two stones dropped in oil, swallowed up slowly.

Five days you went to school: I watched you go and come back less each time. At night, you’d drool into a cup, cough up pools of phlegm, and stare past the television at the wall. On the seventh day, Mom and Dad took you to the hospital. I don’t know, but

I believe they carried you to the car. From the hospital, Dad called that night, told me how the infection had curdled in your stomach like cottage cheese, how the doctors had to cut you open, lift up your insides, clean out your body.

One more day and you would have died in your bed at home. Now, I can imagine your body nothing more than a whisper of air caught under the covers, the cloth brought up, settled in between your ribs, those valleys shadowed under the peaks of your collar bones.
For Matthew on His 21st Birthday

I have known from the time
you were seven that your drink
of choice would be beer. It was you
that thought up the pioneer game
as kids, the one where we’d dig up walnuts,
their skins black, rotted, peeling, bleeding
juices after a year of being buried under leaves,
just right, you knew, for making walnut beer.
Our hands and clothes stained brown-green,
we’d gather up as much as we could carry,
dump them all in a bucket of water to ferment
in the sun on the front porch.
We didn’t know alcohol then,
only had an idea of the smell
of beer in aluminum cans
and the color in the bottom of a glass.
With our walnut beer water a pale-gold
we’d dare each other to drink though
we never drank a drop; instead
we dumped the water into the flowerbed,
letting the walnut skins dry
onto the bottom of the bucket.
Some Things I Want to Ask You

for Matthew

What are your memories of the pools
mom and dad used to buy us every summer?
I remember blue linings that tore by August,
individual blades of grass pressed down
by gallons of water, their imprints,
the way the ground was never completely smooth
no matter how long Dad looked for the perfect spot.
We would run our hands along the bottom
to feel the bumps, slightly ragged outcroppings
of stray rocks from the gravel drive, the slime.
Do you remember when Mom got tired of us
tracking dirt into the pool? She set out a small black tray
with water in it for us to step in before we got in.
Do you remember the orange and blue Playskool slide?
I remember the feel of the 3:00 sun on its seat,
slight static kisses on my legs as I slid down into the water.
I remember how you would be a shark, chase Bethany and me
around, around, around the pool. We would stay in
until dusk cooled the water. Do you remember
playing pioneers in the meadow? We would build
teepees with fallen branches around sapling trunks,
use pieces of discarded fabric to mark our paths
in the tiny forest. We’d count impressions in the tall grass
left by sleeping deer, say where the mom slept,
where her fawns slept. It feels like late September
in these memories. Do you understand what I mean?
I want to ask you if you remember when we knocked the beehive
out of the tree near the sheep pen in the meadow,
the sounds of bees caught in our hair,
the feel of their bodies as we swatted them away?
Do you remember being scared when your stings
swelled up, when Mom had to call the doctor,
when she removed the stinger from your arm
with tweezers? Do you remember being afraid
of bees for the rest of the summer? I need you
to remember these times with fondness,
to share these moments with me again
because the meadow is gone, farmed over,
the deer sleep in other patches of grass,
and summers no longer come with blue plastic liners.
William in the Garden

The lines on his palms are faint, difficult to see, but he doesn’t think about this, he doesn’t mind as he sits in the garden surrounded by rusted tomato cages, last year’s vines still clinging to the wires, and remnants of black plastic used to keep the weeds away. He pushes his green John Deere toy tractors around, speckled in the mud he has spent the entire morning digging up. The lines he does have are filled in with red-black earth, and he continues to scoop out handfuls, piling it neatly, carefully along the sides of the hole as if he was building his own wall of China. If you could read your palm lines, (I want to ask him) what would you want them to say and if you placed your hands on a map which way would those lines lead you?

I walk over to him, ask him instead where he is digging to. He looks up at me, squints, avoids my eyes, and throws the tractors in the hole, and begins to scoop the mud back in quickly.
My Sister

When she was four and I was seven, my sister split open her head on a hubcap in the back of our father’s pick-up truck. She bled, her brown hair matted, our mother cradled her. Before the accident, we’d ride in the truck bed with mom because we liked the feel of the uninterrupted air around us. After, we all rode crammed together in the cab, our skin sticking to the seats and each other.

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Tiny sister curls up in a ball, rests herself on the cradle of my feet, asks me to rocket her across the couch. I spring-load my knees to chest, and off she goes, past the lamps, cushions, the moon. Another memory: we roll, tumble, head-to-head-heels-to-heels, across the living room, partially deflated kick ball, lumpy, side-wa...
A visit to my sister at her dorm, freshman year, a quad she shares with three other girls. Small, cramped, the beds in one room, stacked on one another, clothes spilling out of shallow closets like pillow stuffing spewing from a split seam. It looks dark in there. I read the agreement between the girls: “No smoking. Clean up your own mess. Sex okay, just close bedroom door and leave a note.” I notice she has cigarettes in her purse. They aren’t hers, she says they belong to a friend.

She visits me for my birthday, helps me make a birthday cake, helps me make the frosting, stays in my apartment, camps out on the sofa, makes blueberry pancakes for breakfast, reads a book while I do homework, goes to the grocery with me.

We talk about our family, our house-bound grandmother, ailing grandfather, our mother. My sister doesn’t remember our tumble across the living room, but she agrees that mom always watched us like a crouched cat. Why are you always thinking? She wants to know. I want to know how she doesn’t think about these things. When she leaves after two days, I want to cry.
Silences

There’s a suburban quiet
to your neighborhood
that always catches me
off guard, no matter how many times
we’ve taken walks together.
Country silence is never really quiet,
sounds of barn swallows,
mocking birds, orioles, leaves,
the tiller in the far patch of the garden.
This all creeps in
on the periphery. But our footfalls
land dead on the sidewalk.
It’s all artificial. I look to you
to break it. You talk about the woman
who lives across the street,
her five children who refuse to play
in their backyard. Instead they take
to the streets to play freeze tag.
You talk about your neighbors
who refuse to do any yard work.
The wife's elderly mother
trims the grass, stacks bricks
along an empty flowerbed.
You talk about work.
You talk about shopping.
You talk, and in the pauses, I hear
our ghosts scrape by us.
The talk continues on another walk
we've taken before. I listen,
you speak. I wonder what I've missed
hearing about you, what you slip
into conversations, small clues
about who you are that I'm meant to
pick up, roll around in my hands,
classify as something new,
until recently undiscovered
by someone so close
who only wants to ask,
Who were you when
I last saw you?
How to Freeze Corn

Age-spots dance over Grandpa's hands
as he tears away corn husks,
as he cracks off the left-over stems.
We sit on the front porch, clean ears,
throw them into trash cans filled
with ice water so they can be frozen.
Doing this, he becomes a child
again, one who watched his father
strip away husks then cut
the kernels off the cobs after the ears
had been chilled in the water.
This is how his father froze corn for winter.
This is how he teaches me to do the same.
He finishes the ear in his hand,
takes out his red handkerchief,
wipes his brow.
I imagine him as a child
running through corn fields,
their stalks towering above him
like treetops growing out of his reach.
I imagine him a young man
sitting on an old John Deere,
the Model A his father bought,
placing his hands on the wheel,
deciding to start in the north field
to plant row after row of field corn in early Spring,
to shape the land into his chosen image.
He will never tell me any of this;
when we’re on the porch, he husks corn.
Emmelhainz’s Cats

My grandfather’s diesel engine calls the cats
from their sleeping nooks--
nested, matted straw, old tires,
empty boxes of TomCat’s rat poison--
from the barn they trot numberless,
follow the crunch of tires on gravel,
then his footsteps, every time
he pulls up the driveway,
even when he doesn’t have food,
scraps from last night’s supper.
They could be another expenditure
He includes on the government's farm census,
but he's said to hell with the census,
"Let the gov'ment call me themselves
so I can bitch them out in person."
Right now, he sets out
an old litter pan, used but clean,
their new feeding trough,
throws in steak bones, chicken skins,
corn and mashed potatoes.
He watches them eat, mumbles,
“I’m gonna kill you and you,”
points to each cat in turn.
Another empty threat,
like the ones he uses on his grandkids
during holiday dinners when one of us
deliberately turns the channel
to CNN. "Now, you turn that back
to Fox or I'll throw my plate at you.
Don't you kids have no sense?"
He grumbles, but, looking up from his plate,
smiles smally at us.
A grey tabby circles his legs, waits
for my grandpa’s slow stoop downward,
for the careful scratch between the ears.
He loves them, the barn cats.
Burning Off the Hay Fields

My father has done this only once: piled up dead hay in long rows the length of the field and burned it so the field would yield better next year. His grandfather's tradition now too dangerous with busy streets, houses as fire hazards. I remember it was nighttime, Indian summer, I was eleven. Cars stopped on the road, drivers' faces pressed to windows to watch the fires fan like waves down the field. It's what an acre of sunflowers must look like from the sky. I wanted to run between the burning rows, so I did. The heat pressed on me like a body of water, ebbing with the wind. Strict orders from my father not to go near the field made it more exciting. But he saw me, caught me by the back of my shirt, told me to get back to the house, this was nowhere for a child. I sat at the edge of the field, the heat kept the dew from settling. The top of my legs burned, my bottom chilled from cool grass, earth. I don't remember when the fires went out. But the rows smoldered the next morning.
5th Grade Talent Show

Young girl sits in a bathtub
the night before the talent show,
dances her fingers across the edge
to practice the fingerings.
Piano music for the intermediate player.
She imagines the next day: the buzz
of the elementary school gymnasium
as hundreds of other children sit down
crisscross-applesauce-hands-in-your lap,
talking, laughing with friends, teachers hover
on the outer edges of the lines,
some talk to one another, others scan
over the rows like hawks,
wait for that one bad boy-or-girl
to make a move. And there will be
that one bad boy, bad girl
in each row, the kind that pulls pigtails,
gives wedgies, or throws fake punches
that land real on the quiet children's arms.
The dim of the lights
brings about a tense silence,
as if everyone has done something wrong.
There will be the walk across the stage
to the piano, the moment before the beginning
of the piece, a gaping pause where everyone
might hear her breathe. Then what?
In the safety of the tub, she imagines playing the piano,
imagines each note, its sound,
sees herself misplace her fingers once,
in the middle, but recovers.
She imagines this. Now I don't remember
much about the talent show,
experience replaced by a screen
memory. All I remember is the bathtub
the feel of cold, wet porcelain,
and the one mistake I destined for myself.
Kitchen Cupboards

Kitchen cupboards look the same at any age,
their dark corners cluttered with crumbs.
I’m ten, cleaning out my grandmother’s kitchen cupboards
on my parents’ insistence. She’s old;
she can’t bend down. Her knees pop.
She stands behind me, watches me pull
out dusty canned goods. The shelf liner sticks
from the phantom weight of too much food.
I go in, head first, wet rag in hand. She says,
“Don’t forget to get into the corners,”
a line that my mother will parody often
after I tell her how mad it makes me.
But in my grandmother’s cupboards
I push my rage into a can of green beans,
tuck my index finger into the rag,
finger the corners clean.

I’m twenty-six now, cleaning out my own kitchen cupboards
in a new apartment. I don’t fit as well here:
My shoulders get stuck
in the doorframe. The edge of the door finds my back.
My arms can’t reach the dark back. But Grandma’s not here,
and no cans can hold my anger.
Daily Routine

Stare out the window.
What's out there?
Nothing right now.
Walk around.
Everything's always the same.
Except out the windows.
Watch the birds fly. Run
from window to window until
it's time to sleep. Eat.
Do it all again. Never feel guilty
for too much sleep,
for eating two meals in one.
Sometimes keep company
with the others who stay here too.
Talk to them. They don't talk back.
Walk away. Sit on the ground.
Stare at them.
Feel something warm about them.
Don't know what--feels like
a full belly. Warm blankets. Sleep in sunbeams.
Sleep with them at night.
Feel them breathing.
Stare out the window
when they leave.
Dreams of Her Mother

I like to think when my cat sleeps
she often dreams of her mother.
Asleep on my lap, she begins
to meow softly, sometimes trill,
my palm on her head calms her
for a time, but when I move
my hand, she again begins to cry
out, as she did as a kitten,
call-and-response to her mother.
I imagine in her dreams
she runs, kitten gallops, to her.
Alley, the mother, licks her head
both to clean and tell her she's loved.
When Alley lies down to let her
nurse, she closes her eyes,
presses her paws into mom's belly.
She kneads her as instinct tells her.
She falls asleep nursing, she purrs,
she breathes in time with Alley.
I like to think my cat remembers
the taste of her mother's milk,
that it lingers still as does her compulsion
to knead me before she lies down.
I like to believe she remembers
this kind of love.