The Seven Incarnations of a Debutante

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Master of Arts

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This thesis titled

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Abstract

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The Seven Incarnations of a Debutante

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We have a tendency to take for granted that wherever a boundary is drawn a wild frontier is formed. Because even keeping house was an act of primitive human survival, for Anne Bradstreet, her poetry is there to remind us that meaning occurs at the borderland, or frontier, overlapping designated poetic spheres. In this thesis collection of poetry, I set out to explore the formation of identity as a boundary event where a sense of self is established through the construction of borders. In this collection, identity presents its own frontier, where boundaries of the body, of gender, class, and race intersect and overlap. This collection explores not just the frontier spaces between wilderness and domesticity, girlhood and womanhood, but also explores the possibility of reshaping borderlands to construct a sense of unity across boundary lines that would overlap the spheres or domains bounded and fragmented by the construction of borders.
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Dedication

To the girls who wear red cowboy boots with ballet tutus
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Critical Introduction

Wild Domesticities:

Frontiers and Borderlands across the Spheres of American Poetry

American poetry was built upon a crossroads of wilderness and domesticity, a foundation laid by Anne Bradstreet, who struggled through the harsh New England climate and the starvation and disease it imposed while attempting to build a new home in an unwelcoming new place. Acts of survival, faith, and a brave acceptance of the risks of colonial life defined her daily routine and her poetry, even in the domestic sphere. Expecting a newborn child, she faced the great likelihood of her own death during childbirth head on in her poem “Before the Birth of One of Her Children.” Bradstreet writes:

A common thing, yet oh, inevitable.

How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,

How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend,

We both are ignorant, yet love bids me

These farewell lines to recommend to thee,

That when the knot's untied that made us one,

I may seem thine, who in effect am none. (6-12)

This poem explores the boundary event occurring between the intersections of life and death, each “a common thing,” but written in a historic context in which death must have felt all the more common than life. What I am interested in exploring in this essay is the poetic borderland: the points of intersection between spheres, between life and death as in
Bradstreet’s poem, between domesticity and wilderness, between our internal turmoil and the external environment, as well as between spheres of identity, such as gender. Our understanding of spaces and spheres relies upon our perception of the borders that demarcate distinct spaces. But surrounding those borders, those lines we’d like to think of as neatly drawn, we encounter the wildness of a borderland, a place as much defined by what it is meant to divide or keep out as by what it contains.

In this poem, Bradstreet acknowledges that the child who is at the moment contained within her womb, her own body, will become distinctly separate from her, “That when the knot’s untied that made us one, / I may seem thine, who in effect am none” (10-12). Here, the mother’s body becomes a point of intersection, birth becomes the boundary event of two distinct lives and bodies, forming a boundary where before there was unity. Considering that we, at an early point in our lives, could make no distinction between ourselves and the external environment or the other objects it contains, an understanding of the borders of our bodies lends special significance to our perception of boundaries between poetic spheres.

Robert Bly correlates writing poetry to an infant’s exploratory play of its own body and the sensations experienced through that body: movement, sound, and sensuality. Bly writes, “There are two pulls. The playful form pulls the reader back toward infancy; the complicated meaning pulls the reader forward into adult states of mind” (Bly 286). As Bly points out in his essay, “A Playful Look at Form,” the infant learns through this exploratory play how it is separate from other physical objects, such as its crib, or its mother’s breast or bottle. This play leads to an understanding of self and
of space through establishing borders and exploring the contact that occurs at those border points.

When my family moved to the desert of Eastern Washington, we came to inhabit a borderland of sorts. Our house was on the furthest edge of the suburban development, with a distinct line indicating where the property ended, with its irrigated green lawn, and the brown and brittle desert began. From the comfort of my living room, I could look out on the desert and see birds of prey swooping down to catch field mice. Once, a neighbor recounted how he saw a single coyote pretending to be injured, lure a small dog out into the desert where the rest of the coyote pack was waiting hidden within a grove of olive trees to ambush the small dog. This was the borderland between the desert and suburbia. I lost not one but a few pets to those coyotes, but then there was that strange summer where several of the neighbors’ pets, namely cats, turned up in their owners’ driveways with their necks slit and blood smeared across the garage doors. Borderlands are so much messier than the tidy lines denoted on maps.

The poem “At First Rain” came out of an exploration of this suburban-desert borderland. Using the extended metaphor of coyotes to represent teenage youth, I bring a typical suburban experience of teenagers assuming calculated risks, such as drinking, out of its suburban sphere, a perceived safe space, into the poetic domain of the desert:

We were vultures there among the sage, 
coyotes who hunted neighborhood pets in packs.
We made nests there among the broken glass 
and grove of Russian olives. (1-4)
In this poem, the metaphor relies upon the poetic borderland where a perceived safe space reaches its edge and encounters its wilderness counterpart, a space perceived of as dangerous or threatening, a space so well suited for the harshness and cruelty of which teenagers are capable:

We smiled at the sun.
Our teeth were made of magnifying glass.
Under the moon, moths bounced in headlights,
the stereo howled, and empty bottles
scraped across truck beds. (5-10)

As Bradstreet’s poetry demonstrates, the struggle to survive bare and harsh living conditions occurs as much within the domestic sphere as within the external, but with the comforts of modern living, the risks present within the perceived safe space of the domestic sphere are easily taken for granted, and wildness is something perceived as outside, beyond.

One of the wildest spaces of my childhood was a large sinkhole near a limestone quarry about a mile along a trail through the woods near my house in rural Alabama. What would present for most adults a great eyesore was for us kids, my sister, my brother, and myself, a playground. The lake at the bottom of the sinkhole had been utilized as a backwoods dumping ground long before we’d discovered the place for ourselves. As the water levels fluctuated with the amount of rain and the flow of groundwater, so changed the wreckage, the treasures, we could spot emerging from the surface of the water; we weren’t allowed to swim in the water, only to stand on the edge
of the shore and look in. Old refrigerators, ovens, blown out washers and dryers, even a large truck after a few weeks of drought had brought the water table way down. What made this place so curious was how this environment transgressed borders by positioning objects normally contained within the domestic sphere out in the wild. This transgression, like metaphor, defamiliarized the familiar, made strange the everyday. This wild space was a museum of artifacts of domestic spaces, of the lives that inhabited those spaces and had at one time a use for those rusted old appliances.

Regarding the inspiration she found for writing poetry through studying paintings, Eavan Boland shows in her essay “Domestic Violence” how painterly representations of the domestic sphere had managed to accomplish something that her own poetic representation had not yet:

[This painterly chronicling of interiors] rolled back the boundaries of spatial meaning and revealed the intimacy of the attachment between the body and its immediate horizon. It said that this attachment doesn’t only happen when nature instructs the soul, or art elevates the mind. But when a table is laid, a skirt folded, a door opened into an ordinary evening.

(Boland 105).

My poem “Family Bones” utilizes this immediate horizon of the body to represent the loss of loved ones and the memory of them recalled through the poetic representation of the household objects, appliances, and spaces they utilized or inhabited:

She comes to rest with the family bones:

grandmother faucet, auntie bookshelf and
little cousin knickknacks,

grandfather floorboard and papa armchair. (9-10)

Here, the boundaries of the human body are redrawn, reverting back to an infantile understanding of external objects as being one with the self. The baby in the poem becomes the candy dish its hand was always reaching into, the papa becomes the armchair in which he could always be found sitting. Adult understanding of the boundaries that define and distinguish objects, one from another, knows that by the fact of a baby being a baby, it can’t also be a candy dish. Adult understanding perceives and accepts the boundary the infant cannot, the boundary that through poetic imagining can be crossed, can be transgressed, and can even be redrawn. As Bly shows, the playfulness of the poem pulls back towards the infantile, but the meaning of the poem pulls towards an adult consciousness. In this poem, the adult consciousness is aware of what isn’t contained in these objects, the lives that once inhabited real bodies. But once those bodies are no longer physically present, the loss or lack of those bodies requires the boundaries that designate distinct objects from one another to be redrawn.

When we speak of poetic spheres as internal or external, as within the domestic sphere or out amongst society, our perspective tends to be unilateral, rather than upon the borderland or boundary event. It isn’t enough, therefore, to say “domestic space” as if nature would never creep in through cracks in the windows or doors, or as if the coldest winter landscape, like Bradstreet’s New England, didn’t by its harsh existence recall a longing for the comfort of a warm fireplace and a kettle of tea waiting ready on the stove. We can move inwards, breaking spaces or objects with distinct boundaries down further
and further into more elemental components, each with its own defining boundaries capable of being crossed, at the same time that we can move outwards, exploring the borderland from both sides.

In the poem “Learn to Sail with Your Dad,” the child comes into contact with the wildness of the external world through the controlled experience facilitated by the father. The perceived risk the lake poses for the child, a lake in which there may or may not be alligators, is countered by the father’s confidence and careful instruction, as well as the safety precautions they both take, including the use of life jackets and the child’s tendency to duck her head “regardless of the command” her father gives because she’s not quite yet learned what causes the boom to swing across the cockpit of the boat.

The reader knows, as does the child, that there is danger present. The tell is in the father’s voice: “Try to remember when your father raises his voice, he is not yelling at you. He’s getting excited at you.” The reader encounters the urgency in the father’s raised voice first in the sailboat, but then again within the safety of the home after the child has wet the bed and the father loses his temper. In this poem sailing represents the negotiation of the boundary between the safety and risk, between the borderland of safe and unsafe spaces. The boat, as well as an understanding of how to operate it, represents the weighed risk assumed in negotiating the in-between space of the lake where risk is manageable, even if the perceived risk is inflated by the child’s imagination. The child’s imagination and curiosity about how the world works, however, is what keeps her fear in check and allows for the exploration of this borderland.
When the poem turns in stanza seven, the setting has moved from the wilderness of Gulf Shores into the domestic sphere, into the familiar territory of the child’s home. In this space the child also encounters the unknown, but this time in a context uncontrolled by the father’s skill or know-how like on the sailboat:

He and your mother will sit you down and try to explain words like tumor and lumpectomy while pointing to human anatomy illustrations in a World Book Encyclopedia. These words will not convey ideas like sand dollar, or horseshoe crab and you will already have learned to read signs even if you can’t understand their words.

Facing the threat of the mother’s potentially terminal illness, the child must now reconcile her own fear, uncertainty, and the need for a safe space, with her father’s own fear, uncertainty, and impatience with the child’s bed wetting, which is a very common physical response children have to the emotional experience of instability or trauma within the home. When boundaries are drawn to designate safe spaces from unsafe spaces, the crossing of those boundaries and the violation of that perceived safe space is all the more traumatizing simply because of the violation of the perception or illusion of those safe spaces. The poem also crosses boundaries of perspective and consciousness, moving between the perspectives of the child and the adult, the conscious understanding (or misunderstanding) of the girl who internalizes her father’s anger and the consciousness of the woman, the speaker of the poem, who can empathize with the father through her more adult understanding of fear, as well as with the young girl in need of protection and safe space.
We have a tendency to take for granted that wherever a boundary is drawn, a wild frontier is formed. For Bradstreet even keeping house was an act of primitive human survival, and her work is there to remind us that meaning occurs at the borderland, or frontier, overlapping designated poetic spheres. In this thesis collection, I set out to explore the formation of identity as a boundary event where a sense of self is established through the construction of borders. In this collection, identity presents its own frontier, where boundaries of the body, of gender, class, and race intersect and overlap. This collection explores not just the frontier spaces between wilderness and domesticity, girlhood and womanhood, but also explores the possibility of reshaping borderlands to construct a sense of unity across boundary lines that would overlap the spheres or domains bounded and fragmented by the construction of borders.
Works Cited


First Incarnation

“Life to the normal girl is full of song and laughter”
—Beautiful Girlhood by Mabel Hale
Girls Named for Flowers

*Arum*

What could we daughters understand
of the corsages tied to our wrists?
Give us the names of these gardens,
of the flowers, the birds, and these simple ceremonies.

*Begonia*

No one can recall where it began, if we were named
we for their blossoms,
or they for our constitutions.

*Carnation*

No, not a rose,
but that other sort

*Caladium*

from grocery store cooler beside yesterday’s muffins.
Give us the name of that which is tied to our wrists.

*Dahlia*

Give us the names like vocabulary lessons,
spelling bees. We will sing them
like rope jumping songs. We wild things
will discipline our tongues with the names
of the flowers, the birds, and our bodies
—a running stitch; to baste; *Eglantine*;

*Ipomoea*

Give us the names of the gardens
we will keep on our tongues.
They will be there when you find need for them
and then you will come to us
for what you cannot recall by name,
by the name which you had given them.

*Larkspur*

Still there like honey, our tongues will know them
forever, until our tongues
grow fat with the remembrance of
that which you gave us to tend
and swell and seal our throats.

*Oleander*

Our calcite teeth will still remain
to scrape for grains our mouths kept
crumbs of like bread baskets.

*Wisteria*

There will still be crystals of honey
on the tips of our finger bones,
but it will be centuries, again,
before they find the drawings
we painted with our tongues
on the cavern walls of our cheekbones.

*Zephyranthes*

By then the names of those gardens,
the names of the flowers, the birds,
and what became of our bodies will be hieroglyphs
excavated from our fingernails.

*Zinnia*

And by then, their tongues will have to learn
their own sounds for these wild things.
But slowly, they will begin
with whispers to name them.
(Mansion Apartment Shack or House)

Count through the list of futures.
Wherever you land
when you count high enough--
scratch it off.
With the right boy you wouldn’t
mind much the shack,
with what wonders one can work
with ramen noodles or rice and beans,
a couch from the Salvation Army.
Never mind the added cost of running
a window-unit a.c. to your electric bill,
you imagine the shack an open bungalow
on the beaches of Thailand,
the topic on which you write
a seventh grade geography report.
With the wrong boy,
always the same boy
on each of your friends’ lists too,
you hold out hope for the mansion
until that too is scratched off
and you have to reconcile the weight
of romance against a mortgage,
without an acquired appreciation
for the smaller things, such as a good bar
within walking distance, someone (anyone)
singing from the kitchen, and the luxury
of running the baseboard heaters on high
in early spring. You are still in love
with the idea of love
as it pertains to mermaids.
You adorn yourself with clover necklaces,
friendship bracelets, and glitter
in all its forms—eyeshadows, nail polish, lip gloss,
remnants from art class.
And everything you’d hoped for,
you tell yourself, you’d give up
to live in the shack with the boy
for whom you are keeping
your fingers crossed, hidden
beneath the desk.
So you crumple the paper
and start over again. Pick five
new boys, five new cars, five
new jobs and all those mansions
scratched off each list--
crumpled up and tossed away
to try again.
Second Incarnation

how come the birds
and small animals don’t come
to me when I sing?
OPHELIA: When we were children Laertes yanked at my braids and the only time I went crying to mother, she told me that’s just how boys play. Without locks of his own, he never had to sit for the nurse to tug at the tangles with a comb. He does not know how the skin of my scalp thickened against the sharp strain.

Laertes, who chased and grabbed at our braids thought they pulled with such a force, not knowing how our mothers, how our nurses, made rite of combing, of pulling at the knots. Tearing at the rats’ nests of last night’s sweat and tumbled sleep. And we with our tangled curls our tough and hardened scalps know love is braided tautly—at once sharp and soothing—to hold and not let loose.

---

1 In 1899, Sarah Bernhardt produced and played the title role in a prose production of Hamlet
Bernhardt's Hamlet to Laertes, Graveside after the Service

*Enter HAMLET and LAERTES, holding each a black umbrella*

HAMLET: Just last week I saw the shadow of you, riding up an escalator as I rode down.

LAERTES: But it wasn't me.

HAMLET: No, of course it wasn't you.

LAERTES: Of course it wasn't me.

HAMLET: How could it have been you? You're in France.

LAERTES: I was in France.
Third Incarnation

What a girl waits to grow into:

her teeth
her mother’s heels
her sister’s bras
What I Know about Girlhood through the History of the Parsnip

Parsnip, you bald, blanched ugly baby you.
Old wives used to warn against you, that if plucked too early,
before the first frost, or plucked too late after,
you could be poisonous. And you are,
in part. Your stems and leaves burning skin,
so you all must lie there like bald newborns
next to the carrots and turnips, each with their full heads of hair.

Parsnip, you plain girl of the produce aisle,
you wallflower disappearing against the backdrop of the chicken broth.
At a certain point in human history, you
shared your name and your pale whiteness with the carrot,
which had yet to come into its brilliant orange self,
like two sisters everyone mistakes for twins at such a young age.
Even the pommes de terres, the apples of the earth—the potatoes—
carry a sheen to them when scrubbed clean.
You, parsnip, carry brown earth in every crease.

Oh parsnip, I’m sure someone’s told you how
it doesn’t matter that you aren’t pretty like the carrot.
That you are so much sweeter.
But the longer you are left overlooked,
the more your sweet-on-the-inside starts to taste
like the bark of a tree. Oh parsnip.

Left to your own wild self, parsnip,
you’d take to resembling the hemlock.
So how is it you aren’t bothered by that beautiful carrot
with which you’ve been thrown into the stock?
Sestina for a Blue Dress

It wasn’t enough to say blue
as if the color carried the weight of the notion
of a dress itself. To speak of the color was to forsake the drape
of the cloth and the cut and the shape into which it’d be sewn.
And what of the decision one must make between buttons
or a zipper to fasten to one’s form the fabric?

Running her hands over the reams, she paused to consider taffeta—
crisp and smooth like a robin’s egg, blue
and broken beneath a tree, small as a button.
Such a dress called for notions
of boning to be sewn
into the bodice, a full skirt draping

her hips like keeping a secret. She felt the textile between her fingers, draped
it across her shoulders and torso. Moved on to chiffon,
a slick and evasive cloth that eluded her sewing
abilities. But she could imagine how such a dress might blow
and catch the wind. Such a silly notion
to think herself capable of such a dress, but on

the bolt it felt like glossy magazine, calling for buttons
down the back, unconcerned with practicalities. Draping
someone’s shoulders softly—but not on
her square, stiff shoulders. Her gabardine-
jacket shoulders. Her shoulders of a blue
collar father form, and a mother who took on sewing
and laundry to cover the extra expenses of so many children growing so quickly buttons were constantly flying off coats and always a pair of blue jeans in need of patching. Even the drapes might have to come down to keep them clothed. Muslin cloth could always be dyed to give the notion of a finer fabric, with decorative lace notions or a clever embroidery across the hem, sewn to trick the eye into believing in a sturdy elegance like brocade. Scrap cloth could cover the mismatched buttons salvaged from a jar. To turn a shapeless drape into a dress with so many possibilities of blue.

She’d hold close the notion that one day she’d sew the perfect dress of blue, of delicate fabric with gentle drape and down the back, a row of buttons.
Fourth Incarnation

What a girl waits to grow out of:

her bobbed haircut resembling Peter Pan
her sister’s hand-me-down dresses
her habit of chewing her nails
A Girl’s Guide to Going it Alone

“Says she wants to do right but not right now”
--Gillian Welch

On a couple of occasions I’d taken to him a broken heart.
The first was unintended (but what heartbreak, or its means of healing, ever is?)
there in the bar above Jimmy’s Italian Kitchen--
the only bar in the Tibetan village of Dharamsala, India
passing a large bottle of Kingfisher beer
amongst the members of the foreign press,

me with my big-girl internship so far from home,
pretending this is where I should be
with or without heartbreak as impetus for flight,
and he who is home in so many places.
He with his yellow motorcycle helmet, which he’d give me
to wear on rides through the village as a courtesy,
like opening my car door,
though it was too big and, in the event of a collision,
would fly right off my head,
and me with a bad habit of boys with motorcycles

The second time heartbreak was reason enough
to make the fourteen-hour drive from Seattle
to meet him in San Francisco,
spending the day alone with a pot of chai
and a laminated map of the city
he’d left on the table as he slipped off to work
because he knows I am not in the habit of fixing things
for myself and have difficulty finding my way
or asking strangers for directions.

But everyone has a story about how they end up in Ohio
by way of India, by way of San Francisco
or Seattle in a U-Haul with houseplants
filling the passenger seat and floorboard,
by way of long stretches of road and sky
so open it’s almost overbearing to a girl
between lives and alone,
but with good intentions
of doing right by herself.
Gone by Way

The thirteenth daughter born of kudzu thatch,
of trailer home, of thunderstorm,
unnamed, unnumbered wounded strays,
of beer breath nights and those who’d kiss
in parking lots of corner stores.

The thirteenth daughter donning combat boots
and dusted freckles, freckled dust
upon her shoes and ripened shins.
With sundress, backpack, barbed-wire hair,
with coin purse, comb, one change of clothes.

By night, by gravel road, by rusting truck,
the thirteenth daughter, gone. By way
of briar brambles, gone. By way
of summer storm, her dusted tracks
would mix with mud and wash away.
At First Rain

We were vultures there among the sage,  
coyotes who hunted neighborhood pets in packs.  
We made nests there among the broken glass  
and groves of Russian olives.

We smiled at the sun.  
Our teeth were made of magnifying glass.  
Under the moon, moths bounced in headlights,  
the stereo howled,  
and empty bottles  
scraped across truck beds.

I taste the film of him on my teeth.  
His mouth was a rain barrel—  
damp dust on his tongue,  
dried salt in the corner of his mouth.

This late afternoon the wind whispers rumors  
across wheat grass that the pack  
runs just over the ridge,  
their shadows cast down on the valley.

Far off across the landscape, the clouds  
stretch like grey hide  
from the earth to the sky. I can smell him—  
his hair brought down with the dust.
Early Morning Arrival, Bellingham Bay Greyhound Bus and Ferry Terminal

Before there was sun there was
lamp light and a street slick with morning rain.
She kept solemn company—torn out pages
of Sudoku puzzles from newspapers
scraped thin by repeated erasures.
Here rain hardly falls but somehow
still manages to melt away what’s outside
the bus terminal window. Here the rain
is such a subtlety, she could walk a mile
and it’d hardly soak through—
the fuzzy cotton of a hooded sweatshirt
glistening as brilliant as a far-away city.
cotillion is not
the name of
a flower or a bird.
it will always be a word
clumsy, awkward
on your tongue.
The Belvedere Building

Yellow police tape hung like a pageant sash
across the door. Her picture ran in the morning paper.
You think, you'd had to have seen her
at least once or twice, by the mailboxes
or down in the laundry room,
but her face is as dark as the surveillance tape
that tracked her ex-husband from the parking lot
to her apartment door, a sawed-off shotgun
tucked into the sleeve of his jacket.
Eyes closed, you roll the film.
Roll it back and play it through again. And again
as your head rests on its pillow. You want
that you'd seen her alive. That you’d baked cookies
she would have smelled through the vent you shared
and known you were someone to come to in a pinch
for an egg or two, or a cup of milk.
That this was the type of building where
people did such things for their neighbors.
Everyone at the bar holds in their pockets
tickets stamped with departure times,
most already come and gone.

Here the clock runs
on a twelve-year cycle.
That old man at the end there
came in to get
out of the rain while waiting
to catch the ferry to Alaska
where someone was waiting
to take him in
amongst his crew to fish.
He never heard the foghorn’s last call
to come aboard over the jukebox
that’s been stuck on Loretta Lynn.
For twelve years he’s been waiting
with those who come with pockets full of coins
to buy scratch tickets and wait
for the next boat to come in.

Here closing time only comes
after someone’s fallen asleep
sitting upright on a stool
and the moon’s tucked itself in
beneath the warehouses and smokestacks,
pulling the waves of the bay up to its chin.
Here the help wanted sign
neither stays in nor out
of the window for long.
Sixth Incarnation

When the nurse calls you with your results,
she’ll say her name is “Bonnie,”
in case it’s a parent
who answers the phone.
Swim Lesson

“You have to be ready to jump,” my mother never said,
“from the roof when the flood gates open,
from train trestles, or even the interstate bridge
across the Columbia River,” except once in a dream.

When she’d asked, “Do you want to leave?”
she’d stopped herself short, before saying, him.
How unfair of me to have expected her to know.

When I was small and learning to swim,
I'd stood out on the diving board.
My mother was where I'd fall to,
treading water. What she said was
that she was there. There it was never dark,
and there was another means to come down
by the ladder at the other end.

Here it is night, and here is only a dream
where you are on the train
at the same time you are beside me in the tunnel,
then beside me as we step out onto the trestle.
You are beside me in all these places at once.

The water is somehow blacker than the sky.
You'd said, “It's going to be ok”
as we stepped out onto the trestle.
I'd not considered the possibility we'd have to jump
until I saw the light of the oncoming train
and the water coming up at us.
The light of the train through the fog was all
I had to grab on to, so I grabbed hold
and pulled it down with me.

“And when you hit the water, you
have to be prepared to swim to the surface.
And if you make it even that far,
to keep swimming towards the shore,”
I heard her voice say, knowing somehow
I'd make it to the surface.
Then with my first breath scream your name.
With my second, then my third.
Then in silence, I'd start swimming.
White Oak Tree beside the Old Asylum Children’s Cemetery

The oak tree’s belly is knotted,
swollen with the strain of birthing us
still, shading us, offering
still her arms to carry us
numbered but unnamed.
Someone somewhere turning over

and over the same record of German folk
songs in her grief. Her daughters will
try to recall were we brother or yet
another sister, recall where they gave us
burial and whether mother took time
enough to give us secret names.

Only the rings of the oak tree would know
only the white tailed deer who feed
around the gray and crumpled knuckles
of our headstones would know what the family
Bible will not say, what hospital records
will not say, what the needle
whispers when the record has played through.
Learn to Sail with Your Dad

_Gulf Shores, Alabama_

1. Just because the sign beside the boat launch cautions to beware of alligators does not mean there are alligators in the water for certain. Even though you are four and can’t yet read the words on the sign, you can pick up on the significance of the bright red lettering and the black silhouette in the shape of an alligator with wide, gaping mouth just the right size for swallowing four year olds whole. But just because your father tells you there are no alligators does not mean there are no alligators for certain. Fathers have a tendency to say these things with confidence because they think that is what is required of them.

2. When it is your turn to steer the tiller, pick a point on the shore and aim the bow of the boat at that spot. Do not pick for your point of reference your mother, who is at this very moment standing on the shore waving. Instead of remaining a fixed point, she will soon resume pushing your little brother in his stroller up and down the shore.

3. When it is time, your father will take the tiller from your hands and say, either, “We’re coming about” or “We’re going to jibe,” and because you don’t yet understand the difference, you will duck your head regardless of the command in order to avoid getting hit by the boom.

4. But your father won’t settle for this. He will want you to learn the difference between jibing and tacking, when and why either is called for, as well as the principles of physics that move the wind through the jib and main sails to make it possible for a boat to sail both up and downwind. He is, of course, taking for granted that you are four. But for years to come he will hold you to these same high standards of the full comprehension of principles governing science and mathematics--like when you will be cramming for your Advanced Placement exams in chemistry and calculus and he will be dissatisfied that you can tell him the answer is A but cannot articulate why.
5. Try to remember when your father raises his voice, he is not *yelling* at you. He’s getting *excited* at you. He holds firm that there is a difference. That he does it because he doesn’t want you to get hurt, especially not by the boom that can suddenly and violently swing across the cockpit of the boat if there’s a change in the direction of the wind.

6. Today you are four years old. You are learning to sail, learning about tidal currents and sandbars. You believe what he says about the moon pulling the tides. You want to believe him when he says there are no alligators, but you know he has plenty of practice saying with confidence things even he is uncertain of.

7. In a few months he and your mother will sit you down and try to explain words like *tumor* and *lumpectomy* while pointing to human anatomy illustrations in a *World Book Encyclopedia*. These words will not convey ideas like *sand dollar*, or *horseshoe crab* and you will already have learned to read signs even if you can’t understand their words. Still, you will try to be reassured by him telling you everything’s going to be ok, as hard as he’s trying to be reassured himself.

8. So on the night of your mother’s surgery when you will find her side of the bed empty and have to tiptoe across to his side of the room to wake him to tell him you’ve wet the bed, remember that he is not yelling at you.

9. Remember today, how after the small boat capsized, he managed to right the boat while you, in your Sesame-Street life jacket, grasped at his neck and screamed at the tops of your lungs, and how, as scared and vulnerable as you might have felt there in the water, there weren’t any alligators.
Her ashes scatter to the top of the banister,
into the brick ledges of the hearth.
Her ashes gather on the glass of framed family portraits
stretching up the stairs.
The soft specks dance in the morning sun
through the parted shades.
She comes to rest with the family bones:
grandmother faucet, auntie bookshelf and
little cousin knickknacks,
grandfather floorboard and papa armchair.
Great uncle trunk up in the attic,
little baby candy dish, brother coal cellar.
They’re in every crack of the wallpaper
like Sunday dinner
above door frames and under bed skirts.
I fold my body into her
window drape arms.
A Scarf with a Story

There’s a scarf just red enough to mistake flirtation
for desire, or desire for flirtation.
There’s a scarf that resembles a slip of fortune from a cookie.

There’s a scarf that suggests a pot of tea
is already brewing on the stove.
There were garden party scarves, but those went quickly.

There’s a scarf that catches the wind and suggests
a sense of urgency. Perchance a train in close call
of being missed, a penultimate-scene scarf.

There’s a batiste scarf for days
when the air weighs heavy.
There’s a first-frost scarf and a last-frost scarf.

There’s a scarf that takes up as little room
in a suitcase as possible. A scarf for a sister’s wedding.
A scarf to be borrowed. To be passed between hands.

There’s a scarf for a finished chapter.
There’s a scarf so long it sweeps the floor descending stairs
There’s a scarf to wear into a sacred space.

There’s a scarf printed with the map of a city:
the perfect scarf for a woman
as much in love with a place as with anyone else.
The teacher had warned against us kids reading
too far above our fifth grade reading level.
We could get ideas, she'd said,
we weren't yet mature enough to handle.
So reading *Jane Eyre* on the school bus,
I tried not to see the boy force his hand
up the girl's skirt in the seat across the aisle.
I tried not to hear her whisper at him to
*stop it.*
Steubenville, Ohio

after Anne Sexton

“and before their strange hands
there was always this hand that formed”
---Anne Sexton, “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman”

Young Romans prepare yourselves
for high noon. Ready your armor,
your helmets, your pads, your varsity letters
against the ghosts of high noon,
those limp and lifeless ghosts
of that same noon hour as you.
Defend yourselves, young Romans,
against those ghosts who’d come
so scantily clad, who’d come
from across the tracks, from across
the West Virginia state line,
as it is you who are made for the noon hour,
young Romans, and rightfully so.
You poor Romans of high noon,

charged with the protection
of your Roman sisters’ sanctity
against those soldiers who would come themselves
at high noon. So your mother tells you,
every room you enter the sun will shine through.
So your father tells you, your future is as bright
as noon hour. We will sing your praises:
praise to the hour of your rising,
praise to your might, your potential, young Romans.
Praise to the hour you rise up as men,
praise to your sword, what defenseless soft flesh
it might penetrate, what ghostly bodies
you might pillage. Young Romans,
under this, your hour, your sun,
your bright day, pray

that you go forth from the gates
and be as Romans are wont to be,
as boys are wont to be,
partaking long into the night,
well into the midnight hour
without concern for what might find its way
into your drink at the moment you look away,
or what even trusted friends might do to you
were you to drop your guard.
Pray that you might walk through even the darkest hour
without fear of the sound of hard steps
on the sidewalk behind you, you poor, poor Romans.
“I'm in Calgary, Actually”

In Calgary it is always night and always cold
how she imagines it. So she pictures
his white breath against black air.

She's never had reason to imagine Calgary
as anything real or concrete before,
so she has no idea
how to picture the license plates
on the backs of all the cars
in the parking lot of the truck stop diner
where he's stopped for supper
and a cup of black coffee, most of all.

On either side of them both,
he in a truck stop,
she in an airport bar,
there are strangers on stools.

She'd not expected to hear from him again,
but insulated by two years and six hundred miles
he calls her from Calgary.

It is easy to imagine an airport terminal
bar in which she would sit. There would be
a salad in front of her, and a drink.
She doesn't want to eat the salad—
only to earn her place at the bar.
Just one drink doesn’t seem enough,
not when her suitcase takes up space as well.

The fog has set in over the runway.
In airports she always keeps an eye out
for famous people, or people from past lives,
but none of these strangers
carry faces she can place.

It is just as easy to imagine the truck stop.
There would be a bowl of beef stew he doesn't want to eat—
only to earn his place at the counter.
Just one cup of coffee doesn’t seem enough,
the more of these diners he finds himself in.

His voice over the phone
makes Calgary something real.
But even from the warmth of
a truck stop diner his words
keep drawing from his mouth
white clouds into black air.
How to Uncork a Bottle of Wine with Your Shoe

Let there be a beach within walking distance,
just near the edge of town and midway
between his apartment and yours.
Let the beach be rocky. Let there be
a jetty of concrete rubble.
Let you both come in your nice clothes
straight from work because the days are still too short
to allow for going home to change.
And let there be a bottle of wine to pass
between the two of you, but of course
there should be no corkscrew.
So let him take off his shoe,
a shoe with a nice sole, and to say
how he saw this once on YouTube,
and it is almost spring enough
you think anything might be possible
as he takes the bottle of wine and places it
inside the heel of his shoe, and then takes the shoe,
holding the bottle in place in the heel, and
drives the shoe against a concrete slab,
letting the force of the blow
drive out the cork while the rubber sole
absorbs the impact to keep the glass from shattering.
Let yourself be impressed by such gallantry.
Let the day carry just the right amount of sun
and the air the right amount of spring.
I Fear the Kitchen Shrinking

I fear the kitchen shrinking,
unable to accommodate both our bodies
where for a summer we stood shoulder to shoulder
slicing vegetables, tossing a salad while in the oven
chicken roasted, tucked in with carrots, parsnips, and onion.
Try as it might, the fan in the window couldn’t keep up
with the oven, let alone the presence of our two bodies
flush with summer evening and a bottle of rosé.

I fear one of us getting under foot of the other,
taking to the kitchen in shifts.
One to cook, the other to follow after the meal
with the dishes, because the kitchen would be hot enough
with the oven on and only a window fan to cool the house
the extra body would add only that much more heat.
The waitress writes about a little girl
staring up at a flagpole,
noting how it was so tall and she so small,
the two formed an angle
so it seemed
the flagpole was slowly falling down on her.
The little girl would stare up at the flagpole
until dizzy, then look down at her feet
to stop the flagpole
from falling any further.

She writes this poem on the back of her guest check
tablet while waiting tables in a restaurant.
She loses the first draft when she forgets and leaves
the guest’s check at the table for her customers to pay.

So she begins it again on the back of a coaster,
but the condensation from a pint glass of beer
causes the purple ink to run,
which causes her to remember

how it wasn’t just the angle
of the child’s gaze anchored low to the ground
and directed high up to the top of the flagpole
that created the illusion of the flagpole falling down on her,
but the clouds moving across the sky as well.
Neither flagpoles nor clouds
nor a dependable waitress
appear to be moving much
when looked at from a level horizon.
Only when seen from a steep angle below do things
such as flagpoles seem to be falling
towards little girls.

And that is when she has to look away from the coaster
on which she’s writing, the plane across which
the purple ink is bleeding, down at her feet resting on the rung
of the bar stool to keep from making herself dizzy,
which is also what happens when she looks up
and across the bar
where her co-workers are getting drunk
and growing more difficult to tune out,
in such a way that she is reminded

of all the other bars and restaurants in addition to this one
in which she took the opportunity
to get drunk when the lull in customers
would allow it.

And she is reminded of all the poems she’d scribbled
onto the backs of guest check tablets only to misplace them—
the poems and her affections—in the hands of the customers,
the bartender, or maybe even a cook a time or two,
which left her wondering

why it is how it is with flagpoles,
always creating the illusion of falling
on the vulnerable person who stands at its base
and stares up, but why it is less so this way with, say, a tall oak tree. Unless it has to do with the power of suggestion of a root system and the appearance of branches like spindly fingers maintaining an illusion of an ability to grasp and to hold.
An Aubade

The way she awakes with an assertion--
Yes, it’s time. And yawns, stretches,
and then jumps from the bed to the floor,
which is all her routine of awakening requires. That,
and me to awaken also.

She awakens with a yes, and
the chance at chasing a squirrel,
a ride in the car with the window rolled down,
even if it means turning the heat on high
and assurance I will follow in leaving the bed.

Yes, my bare feet will be cold across the wood floor.
And yes to the time it will take to match a pair of socks
from the bundled clothes in the dryer
and yes to the pot of coffee I will always regret
not readying the night before

and yes, I am still in my bare feet searching for socks and
as she paces in front of the door
and yes to a short walk and to the warm steam
from the shower and your voice, rising with it in song--
a song being made up as you go along.

The greater part of our day, you and I,
we are making up as we go along, saying all right,
ok to the dog who insists it is time to get up
but she asks nothing of our plans and demands
so little of our day, just that we say yes
to the early morning, to the cold floor,
and upon dressing, take up the leash
hanging readily by the door.