You Can’t Go Home Again

A Thesis

Presented to

The Honors Tutorial College

Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation

from the Honors Tutorial College

with the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English

by

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June 2010
My love affair with confessional poetry began when my high school English teacher assigned me a poem by Anne Sexton for a poetry project. I did not particularly like or understand poetry at the time. Most of the poetry I had encountered up to that point seemed antiquated or excessively formal and felt irrelevant to my life. As I read Sexton’s work, starting first with “Her Kind,” I began to realize the great joys and possibilities that poetry contains. In a way that a novel or piece of fiction does not, it seems that a poem relies on the reader’s life experiences and requires readers to bring something of their past with them as they read-- whereas, a novel or short story contextually provides that necessary background information. Though the setting of a poem can be anywhere and anytime, like a story, it is also everywhere and every time-- asking readers to apply their emotions and experiences to each word. Because there are so few words in a poem, compared most pieces of fiction, there is a necessary emphasis on each of those words. The many possible meanings of each word become important; the emotional baggage that a word carries for each individual reader affects the overall piece of poetry in a heavier way than it does in a story.

I will never forget the way I felt when I read “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden, the first time anyone put a name to the brand of cold that is and can only be described accurately as “blueblack cold.” What poets did for me was put words to things I had always felt and never been able to accurately or confidently articulate. The best poets give me new names for pain and joy, guilt, desire, compassion, love and envy. They tailor words beautifully to emotions and experiences. They take those intangible, right-brained feelings and pull them, decisively, through pen tips into the left-brain territory of language. By combining words, poets can better
explain and detail the feelings and emotional connotations of objects and experiences. They use words as blocks to build a picture of our world that is more complete and simultaneously more complex; it is thus a richer and truer picture. And because it is more accurate, more complete, it is sometimes harder to look at.

The confessional poets lay themselves out in plain text. They offer themselves and their experiences as a kind of sacrifice. There is something necessarily hopeful in a secondhand heartbreak. And these poets give away their heartbreak to anyone who will read it. Confessional poetry offers every reader the wisdom and benefit of experience, with the safety of distance. Like Sexton’s Ambition Bird, the confessional poet goes around “passing out bits of his heart like hors d’oeuvres” (Sexton, 300).

Sexton’s poem “Her Kind” provides an inventive framework for binding the ideas of madness, loneliness, and femininity. The solitude of the speaker is evident from the first. She is alone in “the black air” and “braver at night” when there is no one to witness her movements. The women who live in the daylight are judgmental of her “nude arms” and her dark thoughts. She admits that she is not alone though, she is one of “her kind.” Presumably, the rest of “her kind” have been institutionalized or have committed suicide by now, because they are “not ashamed to die.” She is haunted and lonely, “twelve fingered” in her strangeness and like the deformed she is feared and misunderstood. The speaker exhibits distaste for domestication through the distorted and dark images of the homemaker. She says that she has “fixed supper for the worms and the elves” grotesque substitutes for husband and children. But it seems that she prefers these “warm caves in the woods” to the reality of her domestication. She has some control here, and can be found “rearranging the disaligned” (Sexton, 16).
Her torture and alienation have led her to a place in life where she is “not ashamed to
die” and, in reality, wishes often for death.

Sexton, though writing as herself and about herself, writes from a once-
removed position. The distance of the speaker offers an intimate look at a world of
madness, while still granting the speaker credibility. Sexton is saying both “I have
done this” and “I am not the only one.” Diane Wood Middlebrook notes this in her
essay *Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell*: “To the witch as persona, Sexton has added
another voice named ‘I.’ Now there are two subjectives, two speakers in the poem:
one who registers a state of loneliness, obsession, fear, lust, social outlawry, and
punishment; and one who comments on her” (17). In this way, in the separation of
poet from speaker and speaker from woman, Sexton grants herself credence to speak
authoritatively and also confess. This format complicates the idea of the
confessionalist poet and challenges the classification of confessionalism as artless or
lacking complexity in the creative process. “[...]the double subjectivity in the poem
insists on a separation between a kind of woman (mad) and a kind of poet (a woman
with a magic craft): a doubleness that expressed the paradox of Sexton’s creativity:
transforming the life by making it into a story” (17).

This idea of persona and presentation seems to permeate the world of
confessionalism. The confessional poem is necessarily first person, however, in order
to address a pain and speak lucidly about it, the poet must first remove herself from it.
Sexton uses the persona as her layer of protection from the original pain, madness, and
insecurity in “Her Kind” as Plath uses a kind of theatrics as her layer of protection in
“Lady Lazarus.”
Plath spent much of her time wishing for death and never was that wish more
blatantly articulated than in “Lady Lazarus.” It seems a difficult task to introduce a
subject like suicide without automatic melodrama, but Plath makes it sound like a
house chore: “I have done it again./ One year in every ten/ I manage it--” (14). She
could have managed to run into the mailbox, or clean out the attic, but it becomes
quickly evident that she is referring to a suicide attempt. The reader soon discovers
that the speaker is a young woman: “I am only thirty” (14), but that she has tried this
many times, and will try many more: “And like the cat I have nine times to die” (14).
Her discussion of suicide becomes a sort of cleaning ritual, like taking the trash out,
cleaning out the emotional build-up of the years: “what a trash/ to annihilate each
decade” (14).

The tone of the poem is so startlingly casual that is makes suicide seem like a
show or an act of some sort: “The peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see/ Them
unwrap me hand and foot--/ The big strip tease./ Gentlemen, ladies” (15). “Tease”
becomes a particularly important word. Each suicide attempt for Plath was a failure,
both outside of and within the poem, a continuation of the torture of life. Though she
wishes often for death, she keeps coming back from the dead, like the biblical Lazarus.
On top of the alienation and isolation that originally drove her to suicide there is the
added alienation of an audience calling her “‘A miracle!’”(16). She has turned her
death and resurrection into a performance. She admits that “Dying/ is an art, like
everything else./ I do it exceptionally well” (15). One cannot help but note the
paradoxical nature of the statement: she does not die well, because she does not die.
So she turns her death into a call for attention: “It’s the theatrical/ Comeback in broad
day/ [...] That knocks me out” (16).

Towards the end of the poem it becomes clear that each attempt takes a little
more out of her. Eventually she is reduced to an ash that the doctor will “poke and stir/
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there--” (17). The only things that remain are domestic:
“A cake of soap,/ A wedding ring,/ A gold filling” (17)-- remembrances of an ill-
fitting life, domestication, marriage, filling of voids with foreign and unnatural
materials, human attempts to stop death and decay. Only in death will she have her
freedom and revenge: “Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air”
(17).

It is no surprise to me that many of the accepted confessional poets were either
suicidal or mad (Plath, Sexton, and Lowell all struggled extensively with mental
illness). I think that part of this madness may stem from their immersion in and
concentration on their craft. It is fundamentally non-normal to think about the world
from a poetic viewpoint all of the time. To be a poet is, partially, to invest small things
with giant meanings, to find “God” in daily interactions. To look at everything as
though it held some fantastic key to life as a whole is unrealistic; this view of the
world requires a slowing down or halting of reality --perhaps, a period of madness.
Middlebrook notes that “the energy of the poet’s obsessional concentration -- on
language; on the strangeness, the uniqueness of things and being-- bore some
resemblance to the behavioral disorganization that marked the onset of illness” (14).
She notes a letter that Lowell wrote to Theodore Roethke, in which he addresses the
seeming correlation between writing and madness:
There is a strange fact about the poets of roughly our age, and one that doesn’t exactly seem to have always been true. It’s this, that to write we seem to have to go at it with such single-minded intensity that we are always on the point of drowning ... I feel it’s something almost unavoidable, some flaw in the motor (14).

Are these poets the victims of or victors over their madness? Middlebrook raises this question about Sexton: “Discussion of the quality of Sexton’s work throughout her career tended to question whether the speaker of her poems was the victim or the moral survivor of her illness” (19). I believe that the confessional poet is the victor of his or her illness, at least for the period he or she is writing. Evidence of this exists in Plath and Sexton’s creation of a persona with which the poets unify the self in lieu of destroying the self.

In her essay “Anne Sexton’s Live or Die: The Poem as the Opposite of Suicide,” Jenny Goodman explains that the action of writing and producing was the impetus for staying alive, and the poem itself was the opposite of death for Sexton. She explains that Sexton found “a wholeness of self gained through the process of writing” (71). Goodman discusses Sexton’s *Live or Die* specifically, but this collection seems to be only the most explicit expression of the larger theme of self-destructive thoughts, suicidal impulses, and writing as their opposite. The creation of a confessional poem demands an intensifying and confronting of the personal demons. It’s as though the demons cannot swallow the poet if she can first write them down.

For Sexton and Plath writing offers an opportunity to order the mismatched and overwhelming emotions. “Sexton herself said in a 1966 article about Sylvia Plath, ‘Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem’” (Goodman, 71). The things one cannot put to words are the ones that can harm. Goodman discusses Sexton’s religious
imagery within *Live or Die* and says that “It is important to note that the negative ritual must take place ‘without words’ because words [...] are necessary for the poet to have spiritual transformation, to create herself” (73). Because the poet creates herself through the poem, through the act of writing itself, it is literally the opposite of suicide. It is creation of the self instead of destruction of the self.

Sylvia Plath wrote the bulk of *Ariel*, considered her greatest work, in the few months preceding her death. In his book *Sylvia Plath A Critical Study*, Tim Kendall notes “her rational, conscious mind in these later poems is subservient to some deeper dictating force” (66). The force Kendall discusses was the onset of the final madness that would lead her to suicide. “During October 1962 she finished at least twenty-five poems, getting up to write at four o’clock each morning before the children woke” (67). “With her marriage disintegrating and two young children to care for (66)” it would seem that she awoke and wrote in a desperate attempt to stay alive.

The suicidal poet unites the two conflicting sides of the mind (the writing self, and the presented self). Sexton’s witch and Plath’s thespian are reunited with the poets themselves, through the act of writing. The confessional poet’s “life vision involves an integration of the self. The healthy poet copes with the pain of the past and celebrates womanhood and birth” (Goodman, 76). The poet is the rational side of the woman, the side that can name the demons and also the joys, the one who is building and creating, who is validated and celebrated. The writer is the side of the woman battling the destructive and suicidal head-on.

Goodman says this of Sexton: “The unification of her self, with a full recognition of all its parts (mind and body, past and present), is only possible through
a grappling with the past” (79), each poem becomes a part of that process of grappling.

Though confessionalism is factually and historically truthful, I return to the emphasis of persona. The act of writing allows the factually mad poet to create a persona in which she is whole, unified, and for the moment, not suicidal.

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This collection of poems is for me, a grappling with the past and a creation of the self through a unified history. I forced myself, throughout this year and this series of poems, to deal with difficult issues from childhood, challenging personal relationships, and fears for an uncertain future. I hope that the collection relays a sense of peace and a kind of settling into the reality of relationships after a stubborn struggle to force them into shapes they could not take.

My poems are written in free verse and most are loosely structured. There is very little rhyme, excepting a few poems that utilize brief end rhyme in the last stanza or couplet (as in *Imagined Night in the House of My Grandmother*). I have found that the effort of rhyme restricts the freedom and natural flow of the words I want to use.

Maxine Kumin discusses Anne Sexton’s feeling on rhyme in her introduction to *The Complete Poems*: “She strove to use rhyme unexpectedly but always aptly. Even the most unusual rhyme, she felt, must never obtrude on the sense of the line, nor must the normal word order, the easy tone of vernacular speech, be wrenched solely to save a rhyme” (Sexton, xxv). I avoid rhyme for much the same reason: I have found in workshop classes that many young writers depend too heavily on rhyme and somehow
believe that a poem cannot be a poem if it does not rhyme. But there are few things more unfortunate in poetry than sacrificing the right word for a rhyming word.

In my own work I have found that the rhythm rhyme provides for many poets can be achieved through alliteration or cadence. An example from my poem Déjà Vu: “so you knew which exit to take/ and that the city signs start miles/ before the actual city.” The alliteration of the “s” sound enhances the hissing tone of bitterness and jealousy set by the poem’s subject-- an ex-boyfriend takes his new girlfriend on the same vacation he and I had taken together a year before.

This collection of poems focuses on the family unit and my childhood experiences and follows my progress to the present-- touching briefly on romantic relationships. The collection addresses a great many of my fears and anxieties, as well as paying homage to positive memories. I spend a few poems relaying my gratitude for having known my grandparents and the privilege of having nursed them in their dying days.

However, as the title says, the home of my youth is a disappearing thing and some days I wonder if it was ever real --or only an embellished collection of the partial pieces of my childhood view of the way things were. From the distance of 21 years, that first dollhouse memory seems so strange and almost too vivid to be real; the yellows too yellow and the doorbell so soft and tinkling. But what is memory if it is not biased and constantly reconstructed. Every time a memory is summoned, it gains a new layer of connotation. I believe that many of my memories have become burnished and technicolored and lovelier with time. While others have taken new and more difficult meanings. When I fell off my bike, it may have just been an accident,
but the subsequent development of my relationship with my father makes me question
the incident from a much more critical perspective. Every day since then has colored
the way I view the incident.

Middlebrook notes, in her discussion of Sexton and Lowell, that
“psychoanalysis [...] focuses on the childhood origins of adult behavior, penetrating to
that level of consciousness, founded in infancy, where each person has magnified
parents and siblings to a gigantic scale,” but “the memory of living among giants
lingers in readers, and can be evoked with authority by the poetic image” (7). I think
that much of this collection deals with my adult realizations about the true ‘size’ of
parents, grandparents, and partners. And, in some ways, traces the painful and eye-
opening destruction of childhood imagoes. I hope to emerge on the other side of this
collection, healthy and whole, and able to live in a world without giants.
Works Cited


You Can’t Go Home Again

Original poems

By

Ami M. Iannone
For Tootsie

“*I’ll see you on the radio*”
Gemini

I. Dollhouse
My very first memory
is your one eye peering through
the upstairs window of my
yellow dollhouse--
illuminated by the sun
through the real window like buttermilk--
and the soft ringing of the
miniature doorbell:
a polite request for me to let you in.
II. Pasta
I am so eager to help you
knead the eggs into the flour and
pump the thick dough through
a thin setting on the Pasta Queen.
You down to your undershirt
under the kitchen light and
if only your heart could mimic
the deliberate motions of your hands.
But I am overzealous or
perhaps
I put my hands in the flour--
sending the soft powder up into
the air to leave a fine dust on everything
around us.
III. Alphabet
When I am two, perhaps, you sharpen a pack of Crayola colored pencils
to write on each of a stack of index cards and round the corners of every card
with scissors-- making a deck of flash cards with letters and small words which
we sound out together at the kitchen table for more nights than I can count.
And when I move from sharing the bunk bed with Bernie into my own room with
new blue carpet, you spend several afternoons tracing the letters of the alphabet
around the border of the room in the loveliest pastels, maybe the same pack of pencils,
encircling me with all the tools I will need in life.
IV. Spirographs
When we went to the park a few September days before my birthday --I am trying to remember, but it exists in that file of memories that are Technicolor and incomplete--

did I play along when you created a game where you kicked the soccer ball at the spokes of my tires while I drove my pink bike in loping circles?

Did I know then that it would end in disaster-- and so began to pedal harder and faster to escape? Did I do something to provoke you?

Thinking back I seem much older, but I was only six--my limited understanding of you beginning to form along with the scabs on my cheek and eye fresh from crashing to the asphalt, and the training wheels recently removed

meant that there were only two wheels to leave skids on the church parking lot. Loops that seem so chaotic in the making, but form a pattern impossibly intricate.
King of the Jungle

At six years old I am not aware of the exact implications of the word stroke.
And when you sit me on the bottom of the oak staircase with the wrought iron banister
I can see that you have been sobbing and your fear at 32 is more intense than any of mine.
I do not know exactly what was said during that phone call, only that it was spoken by my grandmother from an emergency room somewhere and heard in front of a glowing kitchen window on a phone old enough to have a curly cord and that it is the hottest part of the summer and we’ve just been to the zoo to ride the carousel and see the lions. And that when it is finally relayed to me I do not understand the change of life it will imply or how unfair it is to keep a lion in a Midwestern zoo confined to a glass enclosure, pacing the same worn spots, gawked at, its majesty doctored and forgotten.
Playhouse

Big men came in the morning
with hammers and trucks
and pulled the garage
down. I watch from
the upstairs window
as they tug at the slanting
foundation-- the rotted
white boards and roof shingles
fall. But I am too young to be sad,
to miss the old structure-- or mourn
its passing. I have only excitement
for the wet concrete of the new foundation,
where we get to place our handprints.
They tear down
the picket fence that ran behind
the old garage. I watch them,
the first jackhammer
I’ve seen, in the late afternoon sun
blazing orange behind their shoulders.
Daddy will build us a playhouse
with the old fence rails.
He spends much of that day
building up, while everyone
else is tearing down.
For Posterity

Now, when I have words for things I cannot say them to you--
and I want to tell you that I remember your tape recorder
and the little interviews you would give me on the
brown shag carpet of the brick duplex where you--
newly married--began this family.
I want to tell you that I found those recordings the
other night, stayed up well after the date had changed,
listened to each of them in succession. Years of my life
mimeographed onto magnetic tape.

*It is December 21, 1989. Ami is 15 months old today.*

*Christmas is coming!*

I want to tell you that I heard my voice there
through twenty years and my tiny heart had enough room,
my small vocabulary had enough language to explain that I
loved the dogs that I heard barking next door and the baby doll
I held in my arms and most of all I loved you. But even then
I could not say everything I needed to you and towards the end
of the tape I asked for my coat.
I wanted to leave.
Leafhouse

In autumn the leaves fall
yellow and orange and brown
and gather on the small front lawn.
Daddy wants to rake them to the
curb before it rains and they get
all soggy and kill big spots
of grass, or the snow starts
and they’re frozen over.
But first they are ours.
My brother and sister and I
sweep the leaves into the thin
straight lines of a blueprint:
a labyrinth of leaves that forms
a perfect house in our little eyes,
an autumn mess to everyone else.
We include the necessary: kitchen
living room and bathroom.
But revel in the imaginary:
a room with trampoline floors,
and at the very edge of the yard
where the sidewalk looms to the
street, a half-moon balcony where
anyone could stand, high above,
and see the imaginary world
stretched out before them-- vibrant,
limitless, pulsing with promise.
We will beg our parents to come
out and tour, playing realtors
to this model home: a leafhouse
of our own design.
It will last until the wind picks
up at night. And next year we
will reconstruct it. Exactly the
same way.
In this photo, you look a little strained under my weight, because you are aging and I am asleep and growing fast. You stand in front of the lace curtains with me, asleep in your arms. Each year we will help granny wash those same curtains and hang them on the line. The rocking chair sits in the corner shouldering your big blue work coat, and the cross of St. Brigid hangs on the door— but they will not be enough to spare you from your fate. Death will not bend to hard work or faith. I cannot know then, in my infancy, that one day I will administer your breathing treatments; pour thick brown liquids through your feeding tube, witness the atrophy of the strongest man I know. I wish that I could wake the infant in this photo and tell her to remember you just as you are there in flannel and suspenders thick glasses and white hair.
Everything

Everything for you
she says, making
separate dinners
from no recipe
for each child

two vegetarians
steak for daddy
the baby won’t eat peas

Everything for you
she says, sweeping
floors she wishes away
in secret, guiding crumbs

from dinners the
children have eaten
all through the house

Everything for you
she says, with every
move of her hand,
sweep of a strand
of hair from the face
of a crying child

Everything for you
because my life is
half over, and yours
is just beginning.

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I sit at the
table reading
lift my feet
as she whisks
the broom
under them

when everyone
goes to bed,
I will put down
my book and
do all of
the dishes
Static

I wonder how you feel,
around 6:15
when you come home from work and

enter this hectic kitchen
full of children flinging stories and jokes
at one another -- squeals ricocheting
off the cupboards and walls
a barrage of voices too immediate and loud
for you-- under fire

And our enthusiasm sends you
into the living room, battered,
to sit for the rest of the night
in front of the three-channeled television.

Like the strange failure of waves from the
broadcasting networks to the flimsy
antennae of the tv,

your signals are never strong enough
to decipher. A little fuzzier as the night
goes on, until they are entirely scrambled.

You switch off and lock yourself behind a
bedroom door. One thought runs in my
head, already in syndication:

One day you will drop dead,
and I won’t know a
Goddamn thing about you.
**Sounds that piss you off**

1. dishes clanging together in cupboards (and/or dishwashers)
2. teenagers stomping their feet
3. slamming doors
4. a child squealing (in delight, or pain)
5. eccentric daughters
6. How was work?
7. What would you like for dinner? (for better or worse)
8. vows made before an altar (for better or worse)
9. worse
10. better
Boiled Eggs

I am realizing a great many things these days like the should have dealt with this differently feelings of unsophistication that accompany the filling of voids with drunken desperate fucks on late lonely Saturday nights and hazy early Sunday mornings rife with ulterior motives and hiding true feelings with a thin veil of Cool Hand Luke indifference slipping through the floor boards when the warden ain't lookin' the "i don't want anything serious" lies told when you know you have failed and been cast aside thrown away

the unwanted wanting so much

having no idea what we really want at all

wishing we could eat 50 boiled eggs to prove our worth

ain't nobody can eat 50 eggs.
Déjà Vu

I could never say out loud
what happened to my insides
when I heard that you had neatly
packed up the car with her neatly
packed bags and drove through Mexican-town
in Detroit and past border control
with both of your birth certificates
across that blue steel bridge and out
of the country.
Knowing the conversion rates better
this time and holding her hand in
the car when you drove and
assuredly stopping for gas,
that you no doubt paid for.
Buying coffee and maybe even donuts
and this time you had a map
so you knew which exit to take
and that the city signs start miles
before the actual city and
you parked in the same lot
on Spadina right behind the same
hostel and probably walked to
the basement cafe for Lavazza
in the morning -- stopped at the
gas station for a pack of Peter
Jackson's with a bleeding brain
on the wrapper and I'm sure
my brain looked something like
that when I heard --
A pulpy bloody mess.
Worst Fear

Remember the summer
I swam to the end of the dock?

Worked my way up, life jacket-less,
despite my crippling fear of water.

Went out every day with
someone to watch from the pier.

Swam a few more feet each time
until I reached open water-

a place where I could no longer
touch bottom, and the dock ended

so no one dry could grab me
if I slipped under.

I waded there a moment or two
in suspended animation
a fantastic combination of
buoyancy and bravery.
Do you remember?

But this is not that summer
and the moxy I worked up
is gone I discover as I jump
in from the end of the dock

skipping all the shallow parts
near shore, the slow start that
gave me courage before

and here I am screaming,
flailing, struggling hard
no reachable sand beneath me

and in their panic
drowning people often
pull rescuers down with them.
Last night was hard
there was no moon to speak of
and the room was dark enough
to hide crying, only one soft
sound gave you away

and when I woke this
morning the sun was on
fire red and drippy like it
had been up all night
crying for us

the city billowed a smoke
made more ominous with
the cold, proof that progress
won't stop for us

the car still frosted over
and in my hurry to leave for
a job that would not wait
I neglected to clear the
windshield

drove the morning streets
peering through a slit in
the frost hoping not to hit
anything - the sun on fire
glaring in the rear view

we have failed in our
honest attempts to
remain the same. We are
no exception to the rule
that everything changes;
nothing will hold still
for us.

And now it is winter, the
windshield too frosty to
show what is ahead of me
as I drive away -- from you
still in a dream.
Imagined Night In the House of My Grandmother

Now that you are gone,
I am graduating and my
nightmares bear no resemblance
to the ones you may have consoled
me from in youth.
I am fleeing the tangible and
mundane terror of a bleak and
open future, the specter of
failure moaning in my ears,
the ghost of debt creaking the
floorboards and rattling chains.
I go to spend the night in
your home, hoping the memory
of you may be enough to console
me to sleep-- which only comes
now with a struggle.
I drink tea on your floral couch
and eat a peppermint from the
bowl on the table and my lids
begin to grow heavy, a wash of
sleep calmer than any I’ve known
lately. I climb the stairs of your warm
blue house to the bedroom you
shared with Papa for fifty some
years.

All night the golden anniversary clock
chimes to mock my awakeness, singing
at the hour and the half
you should have known
you should have known
you’d be awake here
and alone.
Blessing

Child, I am writing to apologize,
though you cannot yet read,
for every moment I have been rough with you.

Seventeen years your senior,
I know too well the moments that
life will be rough with you. Without apology.

For the preschool rush, the hastiness
on with the shoes and out the door
for snatching you up and snapping you
into your booster seat, your little feet
swung from their spot before you could
examine the cicada in the driveway that scared you.

No doubt the largest insect you had ever seen,
it glistened holographic on the asphalt in the near-noon sun.

When I hurried you into the car and drove away,
dismissing your curiosity with a sharp lie:
"it’s just a big bug"
I failed to explain that fantastic root dweller
who emerges only once every seventeen years
to molt its skin and begin its adult life.

May you always have time and forgiveness.
May you surround yourself with people
willing and worthy to explain the trivial and fantastic--
ready to revel with you in the smallest wonders.
May you blossom, emerging from this home
brilliant and beautiful to rise high above this asphalt.
Abel
My mother recounts her
Childhood to me, saying:

“Every night Daddy would
light a cigar and watch the
CBS news or Lawrence Welk
in his rocking chair,
laughing a little.

And every morning he would
wake next to Mama, read
the paper in his undershirt and
suspenders and drive his
dump truck down the street,
throw bread crumbs off the
porch, saying ‘The birds gotta
eat too, Mama.’
Sometimes on Sundays
Roguey Tom would turn up
smelling like booze
and passing out 20 dollar bills
to all the kids

Drifting through the state
like a man with no ties
his own children no doubt
home and worried, his
nieces reveling in the novelty
of his visit.

Mama would make him
dinner and a cup of coffee
before Daddy collected back
his brother’s money from the kids and
drove him to the bus stop, saying
‘go on back to your family, Tom’--

and I wonder, now, if he ever wanted
to buy a case of beer and get on that bus too?
Duty

When Roguey Tom got sick, 
came down to his last days, 
his body no longer able to shoulder 
the brunt of his alcoholism--
his girls took him in and nursed him 
let him back like they did every time 
he would reappear on a greyhound 
sock-less and pifficated.

When Papa's stroke robbed him 
so violently of the ability to walk and talk 
and eat, my mother would wake early 
and stay late each of those four years 
filling feeding tubes and 
changing diapers, wiping the crust 
from the roof of his mouth 
with a warm wash rag

and I am your daughter 
even though we barely speak 
and when you are dying 
I will be the first there.