To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Julie Ann Predny entitled "Orchids on a Windowsill." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Arthur Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet

B. J. Leggett

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor and Dean of Graduate Studies

Orchids on a Windowsill

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

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Abstract

"Orchids on a Windowsill" is a collection of poems presented for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English, with Concentration in Writing. An introduction is provided to name major influences on the poems and a general philosophy on writing.

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Introduction

I have always felt that while writing is something that has always been with me in the form of grade school short stories, stacks of journals, and (more recently) novella-length e-mails, poetry and I came to know one another only a short four years ago. Yet, the timing could not have been more perfect; as my relationship with writing poetry was just beginning another key relationship (that of my father and I) was floundering, and my struggles with this relationship provided me with an endless supply of welcome, albeit painful, inspiration. Since that point poetry, for me, has developed into not only a source of healing but a method for discovering, revealing, and ultimately understanding truths about myself and the world that we inhabit through the recollection of memories, both those that are personal and those of the people around us. Simultaneously, poetry is a way to reinvent the otherwise mundane moments of daily life and to experience them anew through the use of precise and powerfully detailed imagery.

In order to further explain these ideas, it may be helpful for me to recall one of the first poems that drew me toward poetry. Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" is chockfull of the sort of precise imagery that I'm speaking of and that I try to emulate in my own work. In this particular passage, Bishop moves from a wider perspective of the fish (that of his "sullen face") and draws the reader inward, as though with a magnifying glass, where on the lip:

> hung five old pieces of fish-line,
> or four and a wire leader
> with the swivel still attached,
> with all their five big hooks
> grown firmly in his mouth.
> A green line, frayed at the end
> where he broke it, two heavier lines,
> and a fine black thread
> still crimped from the strain and snapped
> when it broke and he got away. (96)

The power of recounting these minute images in such precise detail is more than mere observation. The speaker's ability and desire to place such a focus on these details tells the reader that the poem is not just a reporting of facts, but that it is trying to convey the power in connecting with and celebrating the natural world, in this case represented by the life of the fish. The occurrence itself may have, in reality, lasted only a few moments

but it is prolonged for the purpose of emphasis through Bishop's delightful dallying with the details of the experience.

In discussing this poem, Mary Oliver describes these details as being "texture [that] is vital to all poetry" (94). Other images in the poem delve into the slightly more abstract, describing the skin like "ancient wallpaper" and the body studded with "fine rosettes of lime"; these metaphors and similes, though simply constructed, carry powerful weight. The reader sees not only a fish, but sees the fish as Bishop sees it. As the imagery and details deepen, the reader's connection to the experience of catching the fish is heightened so that by the end of the poem the experience of the release is all the more intense.

Like Bishop, Oliver's poetry is also intent on using precise imagery in order to help the reader become more aware of the world around us and, more importantly, our connection to it. Because I've always been drawn to the natural world as a subject for my own writing it comes as no surprise that Oliver's poetry on the subject would serve as a model from which to draw upon. However, while I strive for the same depth of detail that she achieves so beautifully in her poetry, I find that the tone she injects differs from my own. When she describes a school of bluefish as:

> The angels
> I have seen
> coming up
> out of the water! (79)

the reader is immediately affected by the strong praise in her tone, a sense of true celebration, which is ascertained from several things. The metaphor of bluefish as angels is perhaps the most immediate and powerful, intensified by the way in which the poem's extremely short lines quicken the pace, urging the reader excitedly to the emphatic punctuation at the phrase's end. While I adopt similar tones in a few of my poems, others tend to take on a more melancholy or ironic bent ("A Moment" or "Eagle Sanctuary"). Yet, my aim is the same: to recreate my experience and to try to discover the reason for recalling it at all through precise choices of imagery and descriptive details.

As I said earlier, my main source of inspiration for much of my poetry has risen from the difficulties of my relationship with my father and my experiences with his

sudden illness and subsequent death. Even when I am not writing with that subject consciously in mind, my poetry seems tinted by those experiences and so the themes of death, grief, and isolation occur repeatedly in my work. But through my efforts to come to terms with the idea and actual experience of death, I have used Oliver's model to keep me conscious of the opposite concept: life. Oliver's attention to detail and lyrically constructed images are at the base of my own attempts to write about my experiences with a world that I am still very actively in and a part of (and grateful to be so).

Additionally, in recreating the textures of my own experiences in my poems I am hopeful that the imagery I use will aid readers in appreciating not only the experience contained within the text, but also the experience of reading the poem itself. As Billy Collins describes in "Introduction to Poetry," readers often seem to want to "tie the poem to a chair with a rope and torture a confession out of it" (16) but as both Bishop and Oliver show, poetry should be as much about sensation, the experience of the poem outside of the message it conveys, as it should be about finding out the meaning. Imagery (and the precision exercised in describing that imagery) appears to be the most palpable way in which to accomplish that.

However, this attention to detail is also an attempt at something more; it is an effort in understanding and seeking truth through the examinations of the memories recalled by certain events and images that occur in the present day. For example, in my poem "While Shopping for Flowers" I draw the connection between an otherwise mundane task of buying flowers at the grocery store to the much more emotional experience of cutting flowers from the yard while visiting my father during the last weeks of his illness. The "meat" of the poem's emotion is obviously grounded in my attempts to deal with the loss of him but, I think, is further exemplified by juxtaposing it with an image that is not only conversely trivial by itself, but that is associated with an opposing concept (natural beauty and life).

Because so much of my work deals with this subject I was immediately drawn to the poems of Sharon Olds and Marie Howe. Olds' collection of poems entitled *The Father* does what I have tried to do in many of my poems on the subject: to chronicle and examine in spectacular detail her father's illness, death, and the aftermath. While the

details that she recounts are brutal in their specificity, the power of these images is apparent, as in her poem "The Last Day":

> I could see a flake, upright, a limbless
> figure, on his tongue, shudder with each
> breath. The sides of his tongue were dotted with
> ovals of mucus like discs of soft ivory,
> I sat and gazed into his mouth, I had
> never understood and I did not
> understand it now, the body and the spirit. (32-33)

The slightly longer lines force the reader to stay awhile with these images and in this instance Olds reconstructs these details gently in order to evoke in the reader the same sense of awe that the speaker seems to feel at noticing these details for the first time. Simultaneously, the reader appreciates the fact that the quiet vitality of these images is painfully, as the title states, paired with the fact that this is also the last time.

Marie Howe also addresses the subject of losing a loved one (her brother) in her book *What the Living Do*. Like Oliver and Olds she pays great attention to the most miniscule of details, crafting them in such a tactile way so that the reader is carried along by the experience of not only what is in the poem, but the poem itself. Additionally, she utilizes simple events to trigger memory and natural images in order to further underscore the more somber or melancholy tones in her poetry. In her poem "Tulips" she describes how:

> And when I say: Look how the gold from the stamen has fallen
> to the inside of the purple petal, so the petal holds it,
>
> he says, Yeah, I see that. But he's sad.
>
> I think of my father and my brothers. I look at the tulips.
> And James holds his head in his hands. (65)

Like Olds, who also utilizes this same flower imagery in her poems recounting the sexual abuse by her mother in *The Unswept Room*, Howe seems to set both natural and beautifully simple images against the background of painful memories or events, which in this case are deaths. These images then serve as a greater metaphor not just for beauty but for an appreciation of the cycle of life and death.

Once again, poetry serves as a method of revelation through the examination of the images associated with such memories. Despite the brutal detail revealed by Olds or Howe, poems like these are not just acting as confessions; the implied meaning of that word seems to speak more of an act that the speaker wishes to be over and done with, not one that they wish to be visited over and over by themselves or the reader (which, in the case of good poems, should be what happens). They are an attempt at discovery and a greater understanding of the self.

It is perhaps through that concept that the power of poetry to heal both reader and speaker emerges. Lucille Clifton's poem "Night Vision" shows clearly that through the medium of poetry memories, however painful, do not have to fester and remain unproductive, but can instead be transformed into something useful. The girl in Clifton's poem vows that despite the violent and subversive acts committed upon her "she will remember to make something human with it" (44). While I cannot compare the loss of loved one with the sort of experiences that both Clifton and Olds have undergone, there still appears to be a similarity in the need to use poetry as a way of gleaning some sort of truth or useful tool for living from these experiences.

Also, I imagine that many writers, like myself, are drawn to the sheer challenge that poetry presents: the careful precision of containing intense emotion, experience, and memory into a small space. With shorter line formats this is more difficult to do but even when moving toward longer lines, this tension of containment remains with even more focus on the increased intensity of the images that recalled the memory and the details used in describing it. My recent exposure to the poems of Jack Gilbert marries well my desire to write about those things that I see around me each day in connection to my memories of childhood, family, and loss with the desire to do so using precise imagery and details in order to magnify the moment of recollection. These desires actually seem best expressed by his poem "Highlights and Interstices", in which he says that

> the best is often when nothing is happening.
> The way a mother picks up the child almost without
> noticing and carries her across Waller Street
> while talking with the other woman. What if she
> could keep all of that? Our lives happen between
> the memorable... (56)

Regarding the poem as a whole, the focus is on the seemingly commonplace and daily life events that, with the right imagery, are magnified in intensity. Also present is the issue of memory and how a seemingly simple instant of occurrence triggers it into a poem. Within the poem itself, the interesting key is the single image of a mother carrying her child that is deepened by the specific name of the street she crosses.

As a growing poet I find myself still experimenting with form and style, however it is already apparent to me that my work has been influenced by a number of writers who have come before me and who continue to write today. In the beginning, as a writer, I struggled with my temptation to stock my poetry with floriferous imagery and nothing more. I quickly recognized that this desire to "load up" on well-worded details was not enough; connections must be made and vehicles must be apparent. Still, the power of precisely selected images remains; in the same way that the reader uses imagery to get inside the poem, so does the poet. Without focus on certain images triggering memory, I would not have been able to broach many of the experiences or emotions that are contained in my poetry.

Part I

Fishing Book

Daddy's got a fishing book.
It's all torn but
when I was born it was new,
as new as being
Daddy's girl was.

We would sit together,
me just over three and he
would tell me all the names
of all the things that swam
in our waters, or crawled,
crept along the shores
--this was our time.

I could tell him fish from fish,
which from which
his hand over the names;
we made mommy laugh
because I was better at the game.

The fishing book's
leaves are yellowed,
the fish and birds faded.
I play the game but it's
not the same alone; my brain
can't remember all the pictures -
except that funny-looking fish
called "cod"; Daddy said
it was the one I always got right.

The pages smell like cigarettes, salt air,
and old like being three
the fishing book spread over me
and Daddy
pointing out sea bass and sailfin like stars.

Sexing

My grandmother, who had been three-quarters deaf for
the longest time, was suddenly hovering around my mother
and I as we discussed the latest gossip in our circle:

someone's 16 year-old daughter, recently knocked up.

Her rapt blue eyes focused on mine as I patiently yelled
the details, translated into her Slovakish speak. She digested
a moment before telling her own sordid tale:

a girl in her village disappeared one spring after spending

the winter "sexing" with some seemingly reputable suitor.
She'd never actually caught them but could tell they were
up to some kind of "mahnkee beezness."

I tried to look serious and disapproving as I listened
even while I was thinking of the Trojan in my purse, just in case.
Then she put her hand on my arm and told me how sad it was

that the girl had given herself up to one who hadn't wanted
her heart. "Foolish," she said, going back to her borscht
on the stove, "Stupid to vaste sahch good hart."

Virgin in July

When she looked down finally, she discovered the rusty blood stain on the back of her mother's old satin robe.

Years later she's not sure what surprised her more: that it matched the one on her daisy sheets or that there was not

more of it; it had hurt so bad. She remembers how hot it was in that ruffle-curtained room, no one home, no one

to stop a boy from extracting one last reluctant gift from this girl, his girl. She wonders now if she hadn't

been his first would things have been different. Someone should have taught him, that a kiss should

be shared, a caress should be lingering, a hand down his pants not forced by the wrist. Yes, someone should have

taught him. He was only 15 though, and she was so shy and it probably flattered him that she believed

he was her only, as he said, only one who'd ever want her anyway. In the bathroom, on the toilet,

she shuddered in ceramic solitude wondering what she'd just done, allowed him to do after the first

'please stop' was brushed aside while he called his friends from her princess phone to tell them he had scored.

Finding Freedom

Being skinny was fine but I hated
the way men stared at me, so hard
and long that I could just feel the
unwanted fingers creeping up my

inner thigh, fingering the waistband
of my skirt, reaching past the buttons
on my shirt to the clasp behind with
C'mon baby, you know you want to.

The funny thing about being
officially overweight is that I don't
mind my body unless I'm trying
to force it into some unnatural

shape designed by somebody
else. 12 and 14 are just numbers.
I really don't see what makes one
so much better than another.

My generous arms, breasts, belly
seem to keep those eyes at bay so
I'm free to walk across the street a
woman, not another piece of meat.

Sometimes I feel like a seal, safe in
my round, sleek suit, soft to the
squeeze, touch, fine flaxen fur
covering my body face to feet,

emerging from the water, rivulets roll
over the pure curve of me, stretching
like liquid glass across my skin.
Beautiful.

Hiding Place

In the yard's far corner
under a leafy bush I never
knew the name of,
I scrape my full name in the dirt
the way they will call it out
from the sliding glass door.
If I crouch down enough
they will think I'm not there.
Years later, when I try this,
the dead branches crackle against my limbs,
the green switches bend and then spring
into my spine, urging me out toward the open yard.

Grandfather

Four sets of wheels
worn off the buggy;
he was really burning
rubber, they said,
especially if it rained;
he tore up sidewalks,
coat thrown over me,
trying to reach home,

back when we had lilac
in the corner yard,
the purple sweet scent of
starry petals in cluster,
but what did he do to it?
Made it die somehow,
slow, leaves turning yellow,
the great bush fading
with his mind.

Already Devious at 13

The cool grain of cement prickled against my thighs
as I sat on the steps watching our hated neighbor's
daughter leave for her wedding in a taffeta-draped
carriage, and my best friend flushed and snickered
at my quip of how the horse wore white a bit better
than she did. Weeks later we got some of the neighbor's
bills by mistake - florist or caterer - and forgot
to bring them right over. If only he hadn't complained
about my stereo, or when our dog barked, or hadn't stared
so strange and hard when our guests weren't straight or white,
I'd have felt almost bad finally slipping those three-week-old
bills into his mailbox after dark.

The Talk

Today we walk on cracked ice not far from the lot
where I taught her to drive, just six blocks

from the house of the first boy I caught giving her
a hickey. I wanted to put him through a wall, to split

the coolly curled lips that dared to touch my daughter.
But I didn't. Instead I talked to him about women

and respect; sure, I gave hickeys as good as I got
at his age but I wasn't about to tell him that

as he half-slouched, half-cowered in my hallway
while her mother said I don't know what to her

in her room. Come to think of it, I barely heard
her mother--my daughter did all the talking,

still feverish from being discovered but confidant
in her ability to win. Like me. My wife never

really opened her mouth except to nag or stammer
with insecurity, which, I think, is what brings me here

today, walking stiffly with my daughter in the cold air
of the park, the sound of old glazed snow crushing

beneath us. It's never a good thing when a woman
wants to "talk." Even worse when it's your daughter.

She eyes me coolly from just over her scarf. She has
my eyes and she's trying to pierce me somehow,

to make me say that I've made a mistake. She wants
more than I'm sorry; her ears strain for the start

of a sigh, the breath that should catch in my throat
as I form the words I love and the ending she wants

is your mother but that isn't what comes. Instead,
she hears Don't you want me to be happy?

The question pounds down on her, defensive and yet
pleading; at once her hands flex and withdraw

into fists; does she want to hit me? Silently, she turns
to walk toward the water, whispers It's cold.

She pulls a ragged tissue from her pocket. Her gaze
closes in on a salty ice floe while her palms push

against the thick sea-worn ropes that link the pilings;
right now they are the only thing holding her up.

Katerina

She was permitted to attend school until the sixth grade. A girl's mind served better in the house and field but she had mastered those already. Awake at dawn, cooked breakfast for eleven after leading the big bull out to pasture; never panicked at the bloody kiss of a blade and a chicken's neck. When her brother shied away, pleaded in her bare feet to wield her father's axe, *Let me do it, Tato, let me*.

On the cement steps of our split-level she sat fingering her worn apron and told me of the day in first grade, when she raised her hand. The teacher took her outstretched arm by the wrist and struck her open palm until it glowed and stung. I never know I could not learn, only sit at my desk like not there.

For a report on traditions I quizzed her in the kitchen while she shaped Mandel bread. She recalled Easter when the boys would braid willow switches--barbarically accustomed, they ambled through farm gates demanding fresh eggs. They didn't see the thick branch behind her adolescent back as they threatened to strike, until she was waving it over her head, *You'll not whip me, I said*, then lower, chanting as they ran, *You can't whip me*.

At 85, she would crow about herself in youth, her small solid frame, strong bones that healed quickly, familiar with breaking; flaunt the deep calluses on her hands earned scrubbing floors in a Manhattan apartment for a nice Jewish family. Only once, she admitted to crying on her last day of school, thinking of whatever there was to do at home, waiting.

A Divorce

I know the new owners are going to gut
that old place where I grew up. You can't
exactly blame them what with the pencil
scratched into the molding

of the hall closet marking off the years,
red marker on the ceiling (they told me
not to draw on walls, but who leaves
out a stepladder? I mean, really.)

It might be the burnt orange carpet
that offends, caked with dust and dog hair,
enough to make you want to follow the
damn animals around with a vacuum.

I told him a coat of white latex would
do a lot for so little but he couldn't be
bothered, how fast he wanted to get out
of there. I imagine, though she'd left,

he still smelled her; after 20 years the walls
must have reeked of marriage to a woman
who was nothing but a mistake except for
the child he never asked for. Put that way,

it's easy to understand the sight of him
at night dragging boxes and furniture out
to the curb, gladly shedding each drop of
sweat, closer to his escape.

The Nipples I Knew

My mother's nipples are still tender
twenty-four years later, rosy drops of
flesh set in round pink frames, burnished
darker with age and empty veins that pulsed
nourishment for only two weeks--
you were too hungry she says, pausing,
again recalling the crackling pain of sore breasts
crusted at the tips while my greedy
infant lips suckled hourly, furiously absorbing
whatever she could give,
milk, blood, I took it all.

I imagine she went bra-less for a time after that,
her breasts too delicate for silk, abrasive lace, even
the cotton of her shirts clinging as they healed.
Sometimes she looked at her child, safely gnawing
on formula-filled bottles, and cringed at the sight of
the moist little mouth, violent tug of toothless
gums, and Jagger's can't get no satisfaction
ran through her head, pulling her back--

seventeen in '65. Surely nipples poked through
Dacron then as now, bullets of flesh, steeled and
ready to embarrass and excite in heated turns
but my mother, I'm certain, only flushed with
shame or, maybe, guilt
for having the kind of breasts
that her own mother did not.
A victim of deformity, coarsely called

chicken-bone, her sternum protruded like
a proud dictator conquering her already
small army of two.

My mother must have winced in those aching
weeks, unable to imagine filling four little bellies
from that paltry pair, when here my seven-pound
self would drain her happily and then, as she
gingerly parted my lips from herself, have the nerve
to wail for more, to later feel hurt when she says
she thinks she was never eager to nurse, still flinching
from an image of her nipples cracked open,
the infection like dew on the terrible rose.

Preparing for Grandmother's Death

I did it by hanging onto a tattered piece of newspaper.
It was from a Dear Abby column; some little
verse that someone asked to be reprinted. At the time she
wasn't ill, but I knew I would need it someday.

Intuition is an elusive marksman, with elaborately random aim;
imagine being blindsided by a silly little poem that
now nestles in frame behind a picture she kept on her dresser
of the two of us, my toothy grin, her somber stare.

I wonder about her frown in an otherwise happy photo; it's
the same in her wedding portrait, sienna eyes staring
seriously, the cream white of the roses seeming to tell me of
bones, old bones that would burn from the inside out.

Thoughts on a Gold Scarab Beetle

Would you sit on her breast
though she is not Egyptian?
You were probably dreaming
the day they chipped you

out of stone, woke you up
from a granite sleep,
and made you into what
you are. Other bugs are lowly

but they gave you higher
meaning; you became
a symbol of life though you
never took that first breath.

So here you rest in
an invisible cage and wonder
if you'll ever take that trip
to the other side of the river.

Will some spirit ever utter
sacred prayers from your
belly? Probably not.
She won't need your prayers.

Her heart was weighed each
day she lived and never
came up short. So rest easy
without her. Be the only one.

Part II

A Letter From His Daughter as He Lay Dying

Father, if you die
I will never forgive you;

and yet I know you will.
How I wish you would
swing your legs out of bed
and stand instead of
clinging to the doorframes,
your shoulders slumped
in defeat, exhaustion.

Ignore the nurse, and her
pitying eyes and six week
predictions, and fight.
Put on your khaki shirt
and take your fishing poles
from the closet.

We'll go down to the bay
where the seals lounge
on the floating docks
until March. We'll drink
Cabernet with cheeseburgers
at the local pub. The waitress
will bring a tumbler of ice
for your wine while the men
at the bar smile, seeing
a father and his daughter.

Ode to a Seven-Pound Fluke

Invisible under a thin
veil of mottled sand, you
rested, aloof and
distant unlike
the greedy crabs, thieving
chunks of minnows,
or sea-robins snapping
at the slightest wiggle of bait,
spreading their red veined
wing-fins as they break the surface,
barking for their release, their
narrow escape from the Chinese man
at boat's bow
who says in halting English
I take, I take anything, his bucket
full of skates, baby bluefish, and
a not-so-swift spider crab.

Two hours fishing the same
span of bay, you watched your
young brothers
gulp steel and shiners
clumsily, eagerly, yanked
from the warm muck
of the bay bed while instead
you waited
for a slick strip of squid,
hung just so,
the pearly white flesh

extended as an arm draped
with Indian silk, hiding the
toothy barb of
the hook beneath. Once,
twice, you tested, wary,
but hungry, having
stalked the seafloor since
dawn, your only giveaway
a pair of inky glass
eyes rolling left,
right, two animated pebbles
among the dull flecks
of sand and glacial silt.

How your shape
appeared from the
murky depths, a living
mat of sideways lips,
fin spines rippling,
body unfurling as a
speckled brown flag,
defiantly undulating with
the rock of the
Atlantic, eliciting
enraptured cries from
the deckhands:
A doormat! I would have
liked to have said that I
let you go,
so your body could continue

to expand, to creep
across the ocean bottom
like beautiful mold,
but you were already too
beautiful,
your still-sweet
flesh too promising,
so it was with a
fleeting regret that I
slid you into my bucket
as the Chinaman ogled you,
your eyes glazing over,
gills still pulsing.

A Moment

Snow suspended in air like time;
never seen the south coated

neither has the hare who races
out from the brush to stand on

a soil mound, his bushy brown
suddenly out of place, naked,

laid bare against the stark
landscape, we regard each other

a moment before he darts off to
the next hiding place and I must

admit I envy his knowing where
to go to hole up until the passing

of such lonely cold.

Funeral Silk

Madagascans wrapped their dead in funeral shrouds,
raw silk dyed red, black, striped with white,
billowing bolts of cloth to cover the head and body.
The last silk we gave him was finished with green and blue
sheen, delicate fish-scale pattern that made it seem alive.
We murmured by his casket, how small his throat
appeared or maybe it was the looseness of his collar
(although buttoned it left a gap of three fingers) that made
him look wrong, out of place with that nice navy blazer.
During the wake, everyone marveled at how well they'd
done his face, jaundice barely visible under layers of
peach and pink, how nicely the rosary draped over the bones
in his fingers, but I knew that something didn't look right,
so when I looked him over one last time I said
He needs a tie. A friend hesitated before slipping his own off
and pressing it into my palm. I did my best to arrange it
under the collar though I couldn't lift the head--dead weight--
but, he was himself again as they lowered the lid.

Dreaming of My Father

Awakened by sound, movement,
people scurrying below, I descend
the narrow staircase to find you
packing your bags.

I can still smell the roses at your grave,
freshly churned earth baking
in the sun as we prayed. I know
you should not be here.

It was a fantastic lie, you say
you faked it all to get away,
thinking death would be
easier on me than goodbye.

I don't get to ask where you're going;
whether it's somewhere real
with a house for you and your new wife,
or an ethereal plane with pools

that I filled with overstuffed goldfish,
fields I filled with fireflies grateful
for miles of air. Yet, when you leave,
you're alive, and I wake up smiling.

A Missed Appointment

One by one the counselors
swoop into the waiting room
collecting their clients
like mothers repossessing
children at the bus stop.

They greet their patients
with an air of hope--today
could be the breakthrough,
the tears you've felt all year
that finally come in fat
bulging drops at first,
then the salty streaming relief.

Looking up from my book,
I realize the room is empty.
Today no one comes for me.

Rude Awakening

The infant wakes up sputtering with full-mouthed screams
to accent and vary the pitiful whines, hiccups. Her body tenses,
sensing the moment the car slows and trundles off the highway
then carries her out of the shaded night toward the neon

humming under glaring flood lights at the gas station.
It is like forgetting that someone has died, and then remembering
again, the body trembling at the onset of memory
and the mind cries in protest: Why did you wake me?

Grief

Enters my body, mind; the seething
apparition breathes blood into stone,
closes hard finger bones around my heart,

asks it to pump on in spite
of the granite grip. When all it can muster
is a pathetic crimson drip, the phantom laughs,

lover-like, caresses my cheek
at night, withholds my dreams of seeing him,
heats my flesh to enhance my waking from

nightmares, waking from
encounters so real the smell of leather,
aftershave, sensation of what I lost remains,

even after I realize reality.
The spirit haunts me through the day, sure
to remind me of a million moments past,

worse, a million yet to come
to me alone, yet leads my leaden feet quickly
past deeply dug ditches, the earth teasing me,

able to embrace what I cannot.
Someday, it will have to leave, yet for now
it stays, constant companion at my side

always silent, unassuming,

wondering why I never cry, whispering in my ear,
to remind me I'm alive, though not why.

Why I Told the Therapist It Was a Good Week

I remembered this year there would be
no flowers
no card
no awkward call
wishing me happy birthday in tight-bright tones
because he's still angry I didn't bless the wedding.

Last week I didn't dream I'm on that same city sidewalk
gray concrete grating my heels
as I piroutte-spin
toward the voice, familiar,
see that it's him
and scream bloody murder;

didn't once curse him for dying
even though, dead,
he's everywhere.

The Real Mermaids

The chill of autumn turning winter
soothes me like no warm mist ever will,
urging me inside myself, to dig for warm

recollections long forgotten amidst
painful shards of memory, to spread
them out before me like bits of colored

cellophane. Summer rarely frees me;
having to bare my body makes me all the
more secretive about the thorns in my

mind - I only reveal the rose. Grinning,
I can show someone as far as the surface
and if they're quick they'll catch some ripples

within but never really get a clear view of
what's down there. If that's shocking just
remember that the sailors mistook sea

cows for mermaids for centuries and
those sly manatees never once came up
to correct them.

Giving In

My barefoot soles take in
the contrast of sharp
sand marbling grass
on the shore of our bay -
you've promised to
go swimming.

My eyes anxiously
follow dark shadows--
sharks slicing the waves
--hesitant, grateful,
I slide slowly in knowing
you hate to swim.

At once up to my neck--
the once brackish
brown is blue, the sharks
present yet unseen--
I stretch my limbs out
like wings.

I never seem to reach
you, floating
on waves marked
by sinister fins,
a burst of spray:
you disappear.

You left me to those

creatures.

You knew I'd survive.

I turn on my back,

spread my arms,

close my eyes.

Eagle Sanctuary

The lone eagle shuffles his feathers
like a deck of worn playing cards.
They have brought him down
from the aerial enclosure

where the other birds perch, all
too wounded to return to their aeries
on mountain or cliff-side, so that here
they hide high in their habitat;

the tourists push quarters into viewers
to see them. But our eagle is placed
in the center of the park, closed
in chicken wire--his week to stare

and be stared at. The light ripples
across tautly clenched talons, the onyx claws,
and diamond eye piercing white cap. But the child
in my arms sees the feeder rat, slung limp and damp

over the rough hewn branch. Why was this one
rejected unlike the others? The rain-mussed fur
and supine drape do not invite the appetite,
yet perhaps the eagle purposely left one behind;

perhaps in such solitude, even the dead
can give company.

Part III

A Year Ago on November 8th

You were 53, saying,
This is the first day of
the rest of my life,
and thinking me
an ingrate for not
loving the new wife;

my anger so tangible
you could bottle the stuff,
so I hastily left
a message
you didn't get, never sent
the card, and considered

you repaid for a
year of pain, family
destroyed, and
the tuition you said
you'd help with
but didn't;

all so you could
save for your new life
with the woman
who told me
she had waited for you
twenty years or so.

I've imagined her marking

off calendars, while I
wish they didn't exist,
more so today
when each
date seems big, holidays

huge, hanging
over my head
what I didn't do
or say last year
like dried,
crumbling mistletoe.

Instance of Understanding

for Hannah

For a moment tonight she was my child,
her head lolling on my arm; I felt her
spread herself across my lap,

against my stomach and breasts.
Her chin tipped back in a way
that had finality to it, as if she so needed

a place to lay herself down and
had found it in me. I pressed down
on my toes and rocked our chair,

brushed my fingers against the skin
of her cool bare ankles exposed
in a sleeper one month too small

and was amazed: she did not stir.
The rice paper nightlight glowed warm
on her cheeks while light from outside

threw pearl-shine on her lips as they
parted, then fell open. As I scooped
her closer to rise toward the crib

she obliged me by nestling her face
toward my breast, curling her legs
in the crook of my elbow, her fingers

searching, grasping the cloth over my heart.
So these are the hands that penetrate,
I thought, that begin the pain of letting go.

Interstate

The shards of glass on the shoulder
play the late sun off of each other
like children tossing a rubber ball.
The shudders of trailers and minivans

racing past make them tremble with
delight; at night they form concentric
circles or geometric shapes, each
vibration seeming to bring them closer

to becoming one, drawing them back together
as the thing they once were.

January Walk

Bunched-up balls of
feather-yarn, rusted
breasts, brown down:
about 30 robins
gathered under shrubs,
feathers simply inflated
against the cold.

What called them
together at a time
like this when they'd
be wiser to hole up in
trees, nests, not down
on the ground
frozen, pathetic,
their regality stolen by
20-degree weather and
at least one passerby
paying attention?

A Child Learns Why Her Mother Said to Never Touch Butterflies

Across the sun-baked lot a fleck of orange sputters over the cracked pavement. As a child I often caught Monarchs in the schoolyard, in my driveway, and thought myself lucky, even though the only ones I could catch were already dying. You've seen them on TV, perhaps some nature show; thousands of them clinging to a tree in South America, exhausted from their journey. I'd examine them closely in the cradle of my hand, turning them over to find the miniscule barbs on their feet that they use to hook onto each other so that they hang from the trees in flags made of wings. The dark belly would sigh and the legs would fold in until all I held was this inanimate thing. They are beautiful up close, and if you rub their wings gently the color comes away. The wing is translucent; you can see right through it.

Fear Before Leaving

Seven couches and as many tables
...and among the wooden flagons
were honey cakes for the young.
--Alkman, "Wedding Feast"

You must realize that there will not
even be one table if you walk away from this,
and even if there is you will sit at it alone,
your fingers musing about the fragile stem
of a half-empty wine glass, the bottle nearby
half-empty as well, while you imagine
your life stretched out in front of you
like a wash of merlot spilled across white linen,
the stark rose stain seeping gently
through the fibers in unexpected patterns.

Paying Homage to Sunflowers

for Marilyn

The damp cold earth is alive
tonight beneath my feet, amidst
gold-headed giants, witness to my ritual.
Vein-thickened leaves thrash in the
night wind that streaks through solid stems,
slips into Marilyn's hair, erupts, spreading
it across her face in sable bands.

Smooth stones nestle around
the rim of an amber dream-catcher,
fine strands of web glisten across its open
face, soft brown feathers dance
over my hand. I tell her I'm going to pull out
several strands of my hair, throw them into
the catcher; *It's like ridding yourself*

of bad spirits, I say, feeling I have
many as I raise the wooden frame to the
sky. She appears to my right, catching my eye,
her voice a murmuring wind, as she
points to where she stands, the earth spread
with fallen giants where I can see many
have stood before. *Here*, she coaxes,

calling me to the seemingly sacred
spot. I decline, preferring to have the
sunflowers towering like gods of vegetation

over a humble human. Now, at my
left, she whispers gently *This won't work.*
Louder, lightly *You can't throw these away;*
they are a part of you, us, always.

She draws back her hair, tempts my reply:
People think so but, really, it's us or them.
And I want to go on. My lips drift to her tender
cheek, warm and maternally inviting, a kiss.
She smiles understanding, steps back as filaments
of me escape my fingers, flutter toward the web.
It snares three strands; they tremble with

the breeze. These are the pieces of me I can keep.

An Otherwise Unremarkable Afternoon

Evil is the man who got on the bus
that day at the cancer center
and got off three blocks before me;
his throat muscles strained and protruding,
stem fibers in a plant thirsty for rain,
beneath a barely 40 year old face.
The ungainly torso balancing
on emaciated legs that wavered as he crept
down the steps, his aluminum cane bridging
the chasm of doorway and curb,
reminded me of my father three weeks
before he died. I imagine they gave him
a good prognosis, too.

An Accident

The bristly black dog cowered
behind the back door--
he hadn't meant it:
the ashen-faced child sat on the rug

and I watched the scratch bloom
across her tender cheek
into tiny fissures of swelling
that, on closer inspection, were fringed

by papery bits of skin that might
heal back smooth, might die
and fall away. Her tears ran down free,
except for the moment they paused

in the scratch. As I drew closer
I saw how they magnified the thing,
made that small happenstance
appear bloated and raw,

each salty drop rinsing in new pain,
bringing on fresh tears.

While Shopping for Flowers

A tiger lily fondled me in the store
yesterday as I bent to examine ferns,

cacti, and freesia. The orange petals
caught by my hip parted, and left

a dusty stain of mahogany pollen.
Rinsing it out tonight, the monotonous wring

and scrub and stream of water across
my hands, the rising steam that strokes

my forehead makes me sweat, like standing
in my father's kitchen in July; I was trying

to wash out the stain of 20 daylilies
from the yard, pulled out from behind

the garage; no one knew they were there.
My second day of knowing just how long

he had drove me out of the house anywhere
I could get to on foot; the drugstore, pizza

place, and finally the yard in mid-afternoon
sun where I stepped off the back steps

as if I meant to not come back, but I did,
for a pair of scissors and glass pitcher.

My father pushed himself out of his chair
and leaned heavy on the doorjamb

to watch as I slid the sheaf of stems
into the vase on the too clean table,

and tried to arrange them, the crimson
with the pink, white, copper.

I could not know then how he saw them;
like it was the first and last time altogether.

A Warm Spell in November

The stinking gingko cherries
lie pale under a carpet
of buttery leaves, while the heat
creates pockets of odor
across the lawn as wide piles
of umber, red, and orange
break down into something sweet

As I crush through foliage
the scent curls up, wraps around
my ankles. I remember
diving headfirst into leaves
gathered by my grandmother,
her burying me under,
the weight like the nothingness

of what I have lost and gained.

Eight AM on Sunday

For M.

Glancing over my shoulder, the smooth line of your hip
rises just beside my own, your legs bent slightly

to nestle in the crook of mine. I'm thinking you're
beautiful long before I say it; the shutter-muted light

on the cusp of your hip catches my eye unexpectedly.
Through the bedroom doorway, the sun glints off of

crystal wine glasses on the kitchen counter. When you
fall back to sleep I wait for you turn on your side toward me

so I can fight the urge to kiss your shaded eyes,
to resist it with abandon again and again.

Recurrent Dream

In the dream I'm writing again,
scribbling some lines on the page
next to the final lines of a good poem
by somebody else.

But it's always the same: the curve
of the letters never form words
I can read so that when I wake and
try to remember, I can't,

and something grieves a little for that loss
like missing a child's first steps
while reading the paper or a loved one's
last breath because you just let it ring.

We are all trying to remember something
we never knew in the first place.

Dream of Being Eight Months Pregnant

You are instantly conceived,
simply, without pain or
sticky fumbling--yes,

my child, already
there is love.
My womb warms
around you, blood
rushing to introduce
itself to your intricately
infant veins, and I can't
believe you are only
a month away.

I stare at my belly, no
rounder than before;
the disbelief stings you.
You flex your feet
kicking out at the
confused flesh, as if to
scream Yes! I'm here!
As if my refusal to believe
could make you disappear.

Instinctively my hand
hovers over the spot,
my fingers test the firm
flesh spread tight
over your foot stretching

to meet me. I trace my
way up your leg, feeling
knobs of knees, elbows,
a beautiful head, round
and hard,
alive.

Orchids on the Windowsill

After he hung himself in the courtyard from the third floor window I refused
to open the blinds.

my unspoken expectation that if I ever peered through the aluminum slats
I would see him still dangling

from the orange utility cord, the screens missing, his wrists glistening red
in the glare of the floodlights.

Even when I was alone, no amount of curiosity could move me toward the windows.
At night, as I went to bed,

I felt like he was in the room anyway; I told friends that an act like that left a stain
on a place, that it crept

across the courtyard like moss and weed, in through the window and next to my bed,
where it settled and watched me,

waiting for a reaction. Then, in the spring I bought some orchids in bloom,
placed them on the bookshelf

at the far end of the room. Buds on the 'Orange Glow' blasted and shriveled,
dropping off one by one.

When the temperature hit 70, I carried them to the windowsill, and yanked up
the blinds, cracked the window,

and marveled each day after at the fat bulging buds, the flower spikes twisting
toward the third floor and sky.

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Vita

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