

SONGS FROM THE WOOD  
by  
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A THESIS  
IN  
ENGLISH

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of Texas Tech University in  
Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for  
the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Approved

Accepted

May, 1993

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my family for supplying the memories and stories which are the basis for many of the poems in this collection, and for the warmth and support they gave me while I was writing.

I would also like to thank Dr. Doug Crowell for his generous reading of my poetry.

Mostly, I would like to thank Dr. Walter McDonald for his endless patience, honesty, and generosity over the past seven years. His guidance and encouragement on this project have been invaluable.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. "TALES BY FIRELIGHT"	11
A Rare Breed	12
Ice Camping at Glacier View	13
Windows	15
Tales by Firelight	17
Midnight at the Bat Tank	19
Skinny Dipping at Cow Lake	21
Tracking Wildlife	23
III. "COMMUNION"	24
Claiming Residence	25
Aunt Betty's Butter	27
Growing Pains	28
Exiles	30
Fairy Tales	32
Terrible Mike	33
Communion	34
The Luck of the Draw	38
When My Godson Wakes at Night	39
Sunday Games	40
Spring in West Texas	42
LITERATURE CITED	43

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I began my artistic career in the field of music, playing the piano, violin, guitar, and as a singer. As I grew up, I learned to see the world in terms of music. Everything has a natural rhythm and harmony, and so it is with poetry. Words, sounds, images, and meanings all must come together like a song which draws readers into a specific experience, or even an intense moment or picture. Listening to my first poetry reading, I realized that each piece had its own lyrical flow which drew the audience into the poem and into their own inner visions. Now, I complete each poem by reading it aloud, making sure that it sounds as well as looks good.

Although my earliest influences were William Shakespeare and Robert Frost, I model my writing after such contemporary poets as James Dickey, Denise Levertov, Carolyn Forché, and Walter McDonald. I also feel especially influenced by newer writers such as Bruce Weigl and Cathy Smith Bowers. Many Contemporary and Modern poets do not base their poetry on creating orderly rhyme, as much as bringing together other specific sounds with images, thus making their words feel different from prose. In other words, the poem is real to the reader; the reader connects on an emotional level to the experience. Between the opening line and the epiphany, something wonderful and magical happens for both poet and reader. *Welcome to my world*, the poet says, sharing enough specifics to make the trip worthwhile for the reader.

One of my favorite aspects of Contemporary poetry is the metaphor, especially the ones which make possible the epiphany at the end of the poem. As in David Wagoner's "The Poets Agree to be Quiet by the Swamp," we "begin the ancient croaking" because it is the nature of poets to do so. In "For the Last Wolverine," James Dickey says, "I take you as you are/And make of you what I will," meaning that his poetry will not be complacent, but intensely real. Poets confine simple, vivid images to portray larger concepts. We take unlikely parallels to create a new perspective on an ordinary situation. There are few rules in this area. The limits are the boundaries of one's own imagination.

A voice teacher once told me that I was trying too hard to sing, that my vocal cords were tensing up in an effort to hit the notes correctly. I found the same situation in writing poetry. Every year I went faithfully to an isolated place, usually in the mountains, to write. The more extraordinary or scenic the location, the more I anticipated finding new material for poems. On more than one occasion I found myself sitting in the middle of the forest, pen in hand, searching for my muse. Imagine my frustration when she chose to visit me in unlikely places such as my car or a restaurant. I became most inspired during poetry readings or writing workshops. Reading poems or hearing them read aloud pulls me into the "song," or the mood. I was trying to wrestle situations into poetry, but good poetry almost creates itself by literally demanding to be let out.

Finding the natural "song" of a poem is often a long and difficult task. One such piece, "Growing Pains" went through several traumatic changes before the right sounds and rhythm came out. In

the earliest draft, the doctor pulls the necklace from the teacher's brow, and "her smell and taste had gone,/nerves severed, sentencing her/to bland and odorless food/a diabetic would scorn." Showing rather than telling the reader that the teacher's senses of smell and taste were gone became a challenge for me. In the next draft, I approached the senses as though they were pendants suspended inside the body; I tried to make the image correspond to the necklace which had become imbedded in the teacher's head after a car wreck. The lines changed to: "It was as though her senses/were suspended inside her/and the wrong pendant was extracted." Still the line was informative without being very expressive. Dr. McDonald once told me that sometimes putting down a poem or story for a while and letting it sit will help the writer discover a new perspective when he/she picks the work up again. I didn't work on the poem for several weeks. When I began to revise, I wrote: "Suddenly/alcohol, antiseptic, lemon floor cleaner,/and the heady smell of her own blood/vanished as though someone shut a window/and the salt in her mouth lost its spice. Panicked,/she touched her disappearing face." Now the reader can smell and taste along with the teacher, and imagine what it would be like to suddenly lose those abilities.

"Exiles" began as a short image poem without much significant meaning other than the fact that I was trying to contrast the white color of the moon with red lipstick. The ending read, "Some night I'll come down to you,/draw on your cigarette, inhale/and leave a stain like red silk." The ending didn't really justify the theme of the poem, which was a woman who identified with Chang-O, the exiled character from a Chinese folk tale. The reader didn't get a chance to

identify with the persona's loneliness. In the next draft, I expanded the poem to use specific examples of why the woman was lonely, and how this affected her, although the ending read: "I will bake bread/hang the wash/and know I have been unwise on my lonely planet/to think we could both shine/without an eclipse." Still, my wish to perpetuate the moon image "eclipsed" the technique of letting the reader feel the emotion. The last draft became: "I will bake bread, hang the wash,/and walk the beach where tides/have swept back, leaving empty shells/and starfish turning to stone." The images of lifeless shells and fossilized starfish are stronger images, and feel better coming off the tongue.

My earlier drafts came out in large bundles of poetry. Images and emotion simply spilled out in an attempt to reach the epiphany. Consequently, I had to learn to make structure work for me. As I attempted longer works, I pacified myself with writing "chapters." Much later, after working with Dr. McDonald, I began to experiment with stanzas. I found that stanzas opened up my poems for different reasons. Stanzas can indicate a change in thought or a shift in time. Working with different structures opened up a whole new world for me, whereas before, I was content to place the burden of success solely on images and specifics. In addition to cosmetic effects, such breaks allow the reader to accommodate the intensity or full meaning of a poem.

Grappling with stanza breaks also allowed me to explore the full implications of some pieces. "Midnight at the Bat Tank," for instance, went from a poem about watching bats to the dares that younger people challenge each other with, and consequently, brought

the poem closer to the theme of its companion pieces, "Tales by Firelight" and "Skinny Dipping at Cow Lake." All three pieces center around not only location, but now they focus on my earlier rites of passage. "Growing Pains" is another piece which began as a solid stream of thought. On Dr. McDonald's advice, I rewrote the poem with stanza breaks and found that the breaks allowed the reader to move with me from the classroom to the teacher's flashback of a car wreck, and back again. The epiphany of the poem finds the teacher showing the students how to taste the juice from honeysuckles, "and smiled/like a piper leading children/through a forgotten tale." Through the stanza breaks, the feeling of regret intensifies at the end of the poem.

I come from a legacy of natural storytellers and writers. Visiting relatives often means taking journeys into the past, discovering my heritage story by story. Poetry, however, cannot stand on story alone. By its very nature, poetry draws the reader in by the senses; therefore, details must be more than details. They must be sensory experiences that the reader can tap into. Several of my poems dealt with telling stories at some level, but Dr. McDonald gently reminded me that not everyone can see, hear, taste, or feel what I can. My task was to access the reader through specifics. "Ice Camping at Glacier View" allows the reader to experience the woman's isolation by seeing the frost on the window which prevents her from seeing the truth, or feeling the cold of the snow as the husband unsuccessfully tries to manipulate his wife closer to him: "Thin air bites/like a steel trap,/and lumbering like bears/caught

late in the season/we raise the tent/nesting deeply in  
powder,/drowsy beyond hunger or words."

On the other hand, in "Windows," the persona feels the claustrophobic heat of a sickroom, reminding her of a fire she once experienced and the destruction it caused. The initial image is of someone who is comatose and on a respirator. The metaphor, however, makes the image more accessible: "Heat hangs in this room,/trickles down the glass,/and the respirator/keeps you from drowning/in too much hope, your quick mind/hostage in a cocoon which will fail to open and has no season." Sickrooms are, by nature, uncomfortable places, but this one is smotheringly hot as well, hot enough to bring up the memory of a fire which destroyed a mountainside above Santa Fe in the 1970's. My aim was to mimic the reactions in James Dickey's "The Diver," where a diver stays underwater for several stanzas, giving the reader a feeling of breathlessness before the diver finally breaks the surface, allowing the reader to breathe again.

Writing is cathartic, but the trick is to be expressive with images and sounds as well. A poem which has meaning for the poet but excludes the reader defeats the joy of sharing the poem, and indeed of writing it. The three-part poem "Communion" is about my earlier experiences with guns. In the first part, my father attempts to teach me to shoot a rifle when I am only seven years old. I made the lines short because children don't think in complex trains of thought. I also made the sounds fit the sounds of a gun: "He broke the barrel,/fit the shell,/snapped it shut." The choppy lines, combined with the sharp sounds, are designed to make the gun a

a reality for the reader. The lines in the second and third parts are longer because I was older when I had those experiences.

In "Sunday Games," the house appears to become a co-conspirator in my mother's battle for attention from my father and brother on Sundays. The tone of the poem changes as, "the house healed itself/when Daddy died./Drains didn't choke,/garage doors hushed,/and leaves drifted off like mourners." What makes this poem so easy to read out loud is the constant repetition of sounds. In the first part of the poem, the "c" sound is prevalent with words like "decayed," "couch," "Cokes," "chips," and "communion." By the middle of the poem the "s" sound takes over in words like "senses," "smells," "supper," and "plates." Towards the end of the poem, the tone changes and the heavier "m" sound is noticeable in the words "mourners," "more," and "mother," placed very close together.

The most experimental poem, "Terrible Mike" is my first venture into internal rhyme. While the other poems in my collection depend mostly on specific images and personal stories, this poem makes its point primarily with sound. The regimented rhyme pattern reflects Mike's need to have the life that his father had, although that life may cost him happiness and intimacy. He plans his life with the orderliness of a ticking watch. He has a wife and two children on schedule, although they are less important to him than his grand plan: "When he goes to sleep, he looks at his wife,/kisses her cheek, moves the beer bottles/that have gathered all week. There is time/he says, to make it up, take her out/to dinner somewhere, but he doesn't care/as long as he has what his father had." Although this is not one of the longer poems, the epiphany of

Mike's perfectly-timed life backfiring on him is quick and to the point, like the poem: "He folds his glasses and turns out the light,/listens for children already gone as he waits for rest, checking off dreams as they tick/like a watch winding down in his chest." Elaborating on the situation would defeat both the structure and the meaning.

Revision is the key to finding the "song" in any poem. It is the journey, not the destination, which educates us. Dr. McDonald taught me that the life of a poem is in the writing, and not the finished, printed product. The reader enjoys the final product, but the writer relished the journey through the poem's many revisions. I had the chance to attend a workshop by Carolyn Forché, and she mentioned that some of her poems had gone through up to one hundred different revisions. This surprised her audience, most of whom were undergraduate writers. Younger writers tend to settle for one or two drafts. Revision is a maturing process, though. Writers must learn to let go of what doesn't work, even if the words are immediately satisfying, and explore what does work.

One poem, "Claiming Residence," is about the stories that my three great aunts used to tell. Originally, I wanted to present a story that was told by all three women in the poem. I was very intent on writing this story about a man who left his wooden leg in the attic so he could move to New York but still come back to Texas and vote. He claimed that since his leg lived permanently in Texas, he could claim residence there. The story itself is entertaining, but became problematic as I tried to wrestle it into the poem. In an earlier draft, the lines read, " 'Mr. Combes came back from New York.'/Says Willie,

'He was already Yankee strange,/packing his wooden leg in the attic/to claim residence.'/Says Nina, 'He strapped it on,/and stumped to the booth,/leaving open mouths like Sunday choir./Lord, those Republicans die hard.' " The dialogue is confusing not only because the story is too complex for a short piece like this, but also because the reader has a difficult task trying to figure out which lady is talking. The point of the poem wasn't the story anyway, and the whole piece felt bulky. I condensed the words, bringing out the original idea of preserving traditions. I revised the lines to read: "I'd sit on the rope rug, listening to Leda/tell of a man who moved away,/but left his wooden leg in the attic/so he could claim residence, come home,/and vote. *Lord, she'd say,/those Republicans die hard.*" Condensing the words and cutting out the confusing dialogue saved the poem from drowning in my own memories.

Another poem, "Tracking Wildlife," benefited greatly from my condensing words and shifting lines. The poem, which is about a friend of mine who tracks wildlife for a living, has longer lines than I am used to writing. Because I tried to make the length of the lines reflect the main idea of the poem, I included some words which didn't really contribute to the poem, and often repeated what I already said. Omitting some words enhanced the natural rhythm of the poem. In the first stanza I wrote: "For weeks at a time you chase shy cranes." Later, I deleted the words "at a time" and the line felt much smoother. In the second stanza, I wrote: "The female waits, unaffected, turning her back/in a cool surrender until he rises to her like a moon." The word "unaffected" is the same as turning her back in surrender. Dr. McDonald suggested that I omit the article

before "cool," thus placing the emphasis of sound on "cool surrender" and the long vowel sound. In the third stanza, he also suggested that I try moving my last line to the beginning, and end with the image of breath: "Remember, it's just a job./Consider your subtle loss of memory,/that you are anchored in the limbs/of a rootbound plant, and without benefit/of feathers or wax, might lean forward and float/on something lighter than breath." "Breath" is certainly a more vivid image to end with than "job." These subtle changes can give a poem new life and help it to "sing."

The title of my thesis does not come from any title of a poem within the collection, as is customary. As I previously explained, I see poetry as another type of song. Poetry sounds musical to me, and I compose poetry much the same way I used to compose songs. The title, *Songs from the Wood*, also comes from the fact that the earlier poems, which demanded to be let out first, come from my experiences in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The first chapter, "Tales by Firelight," includes poems which were inspired by the mountains and forests there. My childhood and struggle through puberty were spent going to the mountains every summer, and because I am a West Texas girl from an arid climate, I felt that my life was intensified by the teaming forests and streams. Where else, but in a sheltered mountain lake would I dare go skinny dipping? The second chapter, "Communion," also deals with my childhood, although I explore my heritage and background. This chapter showed me that I could look at my past and surroundings and reshape them into new meanings, bringing me to the conclusion that time and poetry are indeed clarifying my life.

CHAPTER II  
"TALES BY FIRELIGHT"

## A Rare Breed

April, and I'm walking the canyon  
with a halter and lead rope,  
following hoofprints over mud  
that dried after the last rain  
too long ago and cracked  
like empty plates. Armageddon  
we named you as a yearling  
when your first rains came  
and pacing the stall  
you challenged the thunder,  
hooves ringing on the boards,  
deep whinnies stirring the mares.  
Every summer we took you out  
to work cattle, breath coming in raspy puffs,  
the sweat on your neck  
the only moisture for miles.  
You'd be the last of us all,  
watching the land die of thirst,  
letting the buzzards feed  
on parched cattle too slow  
to find water. I turn back  
as black clouds devour the sky,  
and the hint of thunder  
rumbles to the west.  
When the storm is over you'll return,

head lowered, hooves matted with mud,  
steam rising from your shoulders  
like wings.

## Ice Camping at Glacier View

Ice camping, you called it,  
leading me through firs  
straining with snow  
to the tree line, the last green.  
Thin air bites  
like a steel trap,  
and lumbering like bears  
caught late in the season  
we raise the tent  
nesting deeply in powder,  
drowsy beyond hunger or words.

We are the stillpoint  
of a globe newly shaken,  
your solution to long nights  
I spent shivering between sheets,  
the mornings you crept home  
quiet as sunrise,  
smelling of scotch and Obsession,  
slipping into bed  
like an alleycat, guilty but cold.  
I began my winter then,  
the long task of fastening windows,  
drawing the shades, allowing  
the frost to lace the glass

and hide whatever truth  
might turn the glass to mirror.

You brought me here  
to mere survival,  
after one day I saw  
an image of ghosts  
which could have been us both  
behind the ice in separate worlds  
and I shattered  
the pane and reached out.

## Windows

Heat hangs in this room,  
trickles down the glass,  
and the respirator  
keeps you from drowning  
in too much hope, your quick mind  
hostage in a cocoon which will fail  
to open and has no season.

I saw your face  
the summer the mountain burned  
above Santa Fe. Behind us, the sky  
was bright from an angle  
where the sun never rose,  
and on the way down the trail,  
wrapped in wet sleeping bags,  
we passed a deer, its ankle snapped,  
kneeling under a pine.

We left him there, knowing that all must end  
in ash or linen graves with tubes.

How slow I've become  
reading your Harlequin romances out loud,  
and if I am to live in this heat,  
must rise and open a window.

*\*A Trilogy from the Santa Fe Mountains*

I. Tales by Firelight

What stories we told,  
the maniac with one hand,  
a ghostly trucker with glowing rig,  
the weeping moss-haired hitchhiker.

What drew us to the flames  
dodging sparks, rosy and panting,  
was the goat man  
who roams this world  
hunting unlucky girls  
with backs to trees.

Matted fur twined around bits  
of spoiled meat,  
razor nails and bloody-eyed,  
he leaves braids and shoelaces.

But you, the oldest,  
with your face half in shadow,  
trailing adolescence like ribbons,  
saw him bare-chested,  
calling you softly,  
gripping your shoulders,

moving you off through darkness,  
your hair shedding sparks from the fire.

## II. Midnight at the Bat Tank

They rise,  
claws catching the updraft  
to soar above the mirrorpond.  
Swooping down,  
they slap the surface  
plucking waterbeetles,  
shattering the moon  
in circles.

After the fire dies,  
there is nothing left  
but the dare itself.  
We've crawled here,  
bellyflat to the waterline,  
chins propped in hands  
below the airshow.

This is more  
than we've done  
in darkness yet,  
more than sneaking out  
with toilet paper, vaseline,  
or daring each other  
to linger in the back seat of a car  
more minutes than we should

with someone who will have  
his own tales in school the next day.

One by one we stand,  
in the echo range of screams,  
feeling the rush of air  
as they swerve past our heads  
to the outstretched limbs  
of trees.

### III. Skinny Dipping at Cow Lake

Each spring as the ground warms  
below the roots, and the yucca blooms,  
we are the first at Cow Lake.  
Before Daddy moves the cattle  
to the mountain pasture,  
we climb like salmon,  
leaping the top rails of fences,  
weaving pine needle chains on the way.

We shed our clothes like skin  
and wade in the ooze where water steams  
too still to wash away hoof holes.  
Cow Lake is no place for city swimmers,  
we decide, lying in sweet grass,  
letting the sun bake the smell  
of bovine in our hair,  
wondering why city people  
prefer chlorine to this.

We laugh at the thought  
of going to a pool,  
stripping off our suits  
and marching on the low board,  
lifeguards frantic like sharks  
around fresh meat,

waving towels and shouting  
*Cover, Cover!* No,  
we'd rather stay in high country  
until shadows prowl across the pasture,  
driving us back to our own skins.

## Tracking Wildlife

Consider your job tracking wildlife.

For weeks you chase shy cranes,  
warblers and waxwings, sharing the rainy season  
perched in maple trees. Your precarious hold  
on dripping branches and leaves is the only reflex  
which keeps you from flight.

Birds mark territory by song, attract mates  
in wanton spectacles. You watch as the male crane  
dips his neck, fans his plume, struts and dances  
shamelessly while you scribble with pen and notebook.  
The female waits, turning her back  
in cool surrender until he rises to her like a moon,  
wings flapping, making them airborne. You write,  
*pair mated successfully.*

Remember, it's just a job.

Consider your subtle loss of memory,  
that you are anchored in the limbs  
of a rootbound plant, and without benefit  
of feathers or wax, might lean forward and float  
on something lighter than breath.

CHAPTER III  
"COMMUNION"

## Claiming Residence

I'm here to sell  
evenings when the sun  
faded the shades  
of my great aunts' parlor  
and the smell of Sunday roast  
crept through the house  
more quiet than a child  
stealing cookies. I'm selling  
three pine rockers  
of Nina, Leda, and Willie,  
three vessels with treasure enough  
to give away nightly to changelings  
lured into Sunday best and spirited here.  
Southern teachers were maiden ladies, then,  
with stories thicker than Johnson grass.  
I'd sit on the rope rug, listening to Leda  
tell of a man who moved away,  
but left his wooden leg in the attic  
so he could claim residence, come home,  
and vote. *Lord, she'd say,*  
*those Republicans die hard.*  
I suppose someone sold his house too,  
but kept the leg. I'm selling it all,  
leaving only stories for my children.  
They will listen as I talk them

into drowsiness each night,  
leaving parts of myself  
they will never sell.

## Aunt Betty's Butter

Good things take longer, she'd say,  
filling the churn with cream.

I'd push and push  
until my shoulders burned,  
arms trembled, water blisters  
plumped like pillows on my hands.

Dumping the churn on cloth,  
she'd wrap tight and squeeze,  
pressing water through fiber holes.

We slabbed white butter into copper molds  
of hearts, rings, and fishes,  
and chilled them into art.

Next morning, we baked leftover lumps  
into sugar rolls  
that slowly browned in the oven  
and rose bubbling over the pan.

*Good things take longer*, she'd say,  
pressing me to her white flour folds.

## Growing Pains

She used to be a witch,  
she said to our fourth-grade class,  
explaining the lump on her nose.  
Finally she told us of her car wreck,  
making us daydream through math,

imagining how she spread her arms  
and burst through the windshield,  
how the doctor found her necklace  
glittering between her brow  
and pulled it out. Suddenly

alcohol, antiseptic, lemon floor cleaner,  
and the heady smell of her own blood  
vanished as though someone shut a window  
and the salt in her mouth lost its spice. Panicked,  
she touched her disappearing face.

We knew, we tested her daily  
with perfume and rotten eggs  
stuffed into desks until spring,  
when one day we believed in the witch  
as she threw open the window, letting the rain  
soak papers and chalk. She reached out,

plucked a handful of honeysuckle vines,  
passed them through class,  
scattering droplets and leaves.

She pulled the stamen, taught us  
to drip clear honey in our mouths,

watched as we drank, and smiled  
like a piper leading children  
through a forgotten tale.

## Exiles

The Chinese say a woman lives  
inside the moon, Chang-O,  
sent by a lover more jealous  
than wise, not knowing she will come nightly  
in white joy to remind him  
of the failures of love.

Tonight I have given up all light.  
Candles melt on the tablecloth,  
pasta grows stiff, the lettuce browns  
and curls into shapes like Asian children  
I know would thrive on this meal.  
How could they know  
food is not enough to survive?

I can see you in a room  
where women hover like stars,  
drinks glittering in their hands,  
leaving red stains as they draw  
on your cigarette.

Tomorrow when I wake  
to uncurled flowers and dew,  
I will bake bread, hang the wash,  
and walk the beach where tides

have swept back, leaving empty shells  
and starfish turning to stone.

## Fairy Tales

My brother taught me  
to count to ten  
before I was that old.

Number one, he said  
pulling his pencil in a line,  
was the beautiful princess  
standing straight and tall.

Number two, his pencil curling  
over into a loop, was the prince  
kneeling before her.

I thought women invented numbers  
until I heard of the girl  
who caught her finger sewing  
and slept for years,  
or the one who slept  
after eating an apple,  
or left her garden  
disgraced and cursed,  
and the one who waited  
for a shoe to fit  
to be happy. I think  
it is we who kneel  
and weave our tales  
and number them  
as they fall.

## Terrible Mike

thinks he has time  
to find a wife and give her love  
of a brand new house with cable tv  
to help her wait when he goes to bars  
and comes in late. There is time for a son  
with coal-black hair, big shoulders like his  
and a haughty air when other boys  
play ball in the yard, but he plays hard  
and wins. There is time for a girl  
who mends his shirts, brings his coffee  
and sweeps the dirt that settles  
in hardwood floors, comes under the doors at night.  
When he goes to sleep, he looks at his wife,  
kisses her cheek, moves the beer bottles  
that have gathered all week. There is time  
he says to make it up, take her out  
to dinner somewhere, but he doesn't care  
as long as he has what his father had.  
He folds his glasses and turns out the light,  
listens for children already gone as he waits  
for rest, checking off dreams as they tick  
like a watch winding down in his chest.

## Communion

I.

Before I could walk to the store alone  
my father decided it was time  
to learn guns. Rubbing my hand  
on each part  
of iron and wood  
he said *safety*  
and *trigger* the way  
I learned *bobbin* and *thread*.  
He broke the barrel,  
fit the shell,  
snapped it shut,  
and like a weightlifter  
I pulled the .410  
between shoulder  
and collarbone, squinting  
at amber beer bottles  
that could fit on my thumb.  
The kick knocked me hard  
to the ground,  
my face smeared with tears  
and gun oil, once more  
his anointed child.

II.

When my brother returned  
from his first hunting trip  
I knew I was anything  
but native, could not imagine  
how to use every part of a deer.  
We cooked stew and froze the rest,  
hide stretched tight  
in the yard, and the antlers  
hung near the snakeskin belt  
on his chest of drawers.

Last summer we scrounged  
in the scrapyard from an old Ford,  
a Pony car like his,  
but lying in its own rust.  
For weeks, he dissected  
what was left,  
extracting cylinders and belts,  
plugs and a carburetor  
he rubbed back to silver,  
and the muffler  
that made the old Pony roar.

We scavenged all night  
like wolves  
stripping flesh and muscle,

antlers and hooves,  
cleaning off grass and leaves.

We grew weary  
of sewing jackets  
soft to the touch,  
bone jewelry we carved  
and polished into stone.

III.

Under our noses  
jackrabbits graze, and imagine  
this is heaven. They lope  
from the scrub  
as my brother loads  
and reloads. Blue clouds  
puff from his barrel,  
shots echo in dark burrows  
as rabbits sleep away the noon.  
Nearby crows claim no kinship  
with our prey, clay pigeons  
without wings, doomed  
in the sky as we launch them,  
aim and fire. Rabbits know  
when we yell *pull*,  
what we really mean is *fly*.

## The Luck of the Draw

Women know they will spend their flesh  
like chips in a casino,  
but you came up lucky with a son,  
the one we laughed about  
as girls with pillows under our blouses.

We tasted pickles and ice cream,  
swore to have babies  
the same times, same number.  
We knew then what earth really was,  
that we were gardens of blossoms and fruit.

I grin over him, watching his face  
break into smiles and wonder  
when he rumbles his own child to sleep  
with rough lullabies, will he think  
this is only miracles  
or luck?

## When My Godson Wakes at Night

Weeping, you raise me from my bed, knowing  
there was one last song  
before you slept, and you rest your palm  
on my throat, as though you can catch the song  
when it rises.

You are like the boy  
who swam the pond behind our house.  
For weeks he lay burning and damp  
like a horse run in from the field  
and left to dry. When the fever broke,

Mother made me visit with puzzles  
and books, but he shook his head,  
lay his hand on my throat,  
reached into a catalog of voices  
he could no longer hear,  
so if years later we met on the street  
he could replay me over and over.

You won't remember this night  
as your eyes slip closed, your hand falls,  
but if you wake in the dark, raise me  
from my bed, we both know  
I'll have one more song.

## Sunday Games

Sundays, our house decayed  
when my father and brother  
moved from pew to couch  
with Cokes and beer,  
chips like communion wafers  
and any game would do.  
If TV's have radiation  
as mothers told us,  
men drank it in weekly,  
senses so ravaged that smells  
of supper and the clatter  
of plates never reached them  
until the final buzzer.  
Mother rose to the challenge  
like any competitor  
with her leaky faucets,  
rusted garage doors, rain gutters  
so clogged with leaves  
she claimed the roof was caving in.  
Like promises  
of a traveling preacher fulfilled,  
the house healed itself  
when Daddy died.  
Drains didn't choke,  
garage doors hushed,

and leaves drifted off  
like mourners. More quiet  
was the face of my mother  
who wore each day  
the quizzical frown  
of a child who has stopped  
on the sidewalk to remember  
the rules of hopscotch, jacks,  
and playing grown-up.

## Spring in West Texas

Fine grains swarm  
in the howling brown wind  
as the ground rises in search of rain.

This is Spring in West Texas  
where girls with pale lips  
and wild hair run for shelter,  
press tissues to their gritty skin,  
open clenched jaws to wet their mouths  
with waxy glosses.

This is the lion who comes  
and stays. Our Springs are violent.  
Crocuses and hyacinths bend  
and stay bent. New leaves snap  
from branches and take wing  
while sparrows shelter in awnings.

We plant crops and trees  
so topsoil won't pick up and leave  
like tourists, but at the end of these red days  
we bathe again, shedding the sand  
that settles beneath us as mud.

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