

CAMPING AT THE EDGE OF THE YARD:

A COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL POEMS

by

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## CHAPTER I

### POSTCARDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: AN INTRODUCTION

Finished with this last batch of poems for a final manuscript, I sit back in my brick of a chair exhausted. Writing poetry defines laborious exhilaration. Running in 10Ks and half-marathons never left my body aching with the physical and mental fatigue that has often accompanied me during long-distance writing sessions. I often avoid writing even when I feel the compelling need to write. Still, at times I choose to dodge the mud and flying debris from the cyclone of memory, the nuts and bolts of line breaks and syllables, and the unavoidable pain that is often necessitated by a continual excavation of old tribulations and trials. And yet lately, I wake up to discover that this lonely activity of poetry replaces running as my favorite obsession.

I confess my affair with words to few. I stand in front of a mirror each morning to brush my hair and hear the silent accusation of my reflection remind me that, "You don't look like a poet." It is this fear of exposure, the fear that I am indeed just a fraud, that continuously breathes down my neck during the writing process, as well as in the sharing of my final drafts. Perhaps one day I will be able to say "I am a poet," and believe the words as they leave my lips; but for today, I stay satisfied with my roles of mother, daughter, wife, teacher, and student as I enter

this apprenticeship into the complex craft of poetics.

Thirty-two seemed too old to start learning the venerable craft of poetry. Now, at age thirty-five, I have barely learned to crawl in and out of sonnets, sestinas, blank verse, and all the formalities of the craft. If I had started playing baseball when my middle son did, I would just now be graduating from T-ball to machine pitch, and yet I am reminded that professional athletes retire from their careers at my age. I learn a lot about baseball and poetry from my sons. My thirteen-year-old has worked for five years on his fast ball, perfecting to the inch the speed and location of each pitch; still there are games lost by that one pitch that slips a little too high or inside. I see this same precision in good poems. I understand now that many times it is that one misplaced word or awkward line break that slips a poem into mediocrity.

Often I have sat for hours in front of the computer's blank screen and waited. Someone once told me waiting is not passive. I understand that, now. Of course, others don't wait. The boys run in and out of the house screaming that someone is cheating in basketball, or they'll die if they don't have nachos or peanut butter sandwiches, or could I come quick--Charlie's bleeding and they think he needs stitches--again. My husband walks through the door and wants his uniform laundered, a letter faxed, a back rub. Even the dog, anxious for attention, wraps around my feet as

I try to craft words into poems. My family senses this new child of mine, and they find themselves jealous of the time I spend pampering its needs.

Dr. William Wenthe's advice of "stealing time" to write poetry is important advice. Days go by, and there is no free time, only time available to steal away from baking cookies, pulling weeds, or sleep. Those hours from ten at night until seven in the morning have been gifts of time for my writing. Many of my poems speak of the dark, the moonless nights, beds--natural subjects in late night or early morning writing. The genesis of creativity seems to germinate in darkness: moist black earth incubates bulbs for our spring flower beds, babies develop in the dark womb, and even God starts His frenzy of creation with darkness and chaos. When faced with creating a new poem, I am reminded of Kate Chopin's words in *The Awakening* that "the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning!" (14).

And as I carpool boys to school, tutor students in the intricacies of the comma splice, and unload sixteen sacks of groceries from the car, I worry whether I will ever begin or finish another poem. Perhaps it is the writer's nights, both literally and metaphorically, that ultimately create poems. As my family of men sleeps through the night, I become empowered with words, my words, and I hear a voice



that often goes unheard during the day. For me, the art of poetry is more than lyrical beauty and rhetorical expression set to music; poetry provides a map for future generations; poetry is a voice that whispers and sings to those who may stumble upon our boxes of dusty journals one day.

In the poem "In Case of a Daughter," I write about this absence of a traditional map for females in the art of language. Although not considered a diehard feminist, I often reflect that the *Bible* is a male text. Women do not share in most of the sacred stories of our biblical tradition. Luke wrote, "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). The mother of Christ, Mary, is not empowered with voice. Where are her words, her stories, her poems? In traditional literature and poetry, women must read between the lines, create stories from the words of men, translate the foreign language of maleness, and then--women must write.

As a student of contemporary poetry, I continue to search my literary heritage for mentors--female and male. I will always remember the excitement of studying John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Sappho's verse, the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning, the "Goblin Market" of Christina Rossetti, and T. S. Eliot's endearing voice of J. Alfred Prufrock. In some sense, I feel connected to these giants cemented in our literary canon. Yet, it is not just the obvious giants whose verse I retrieve and anxiously

study, but also the more contemporary voices of Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke (despite his complaint that women poets delve in the "embroidering of trivial themes"), Adrienne Rich, James Dickey, Sharon Olds, Andrew Hudgins, Rita Dove, and my mentor--Walter McDonald. These poets seduce with their strong verbs, vivid nouns, intense images. Their poems encapsulate the strength and energy of real voices--voices of our friends, ancestors, sons and daughters.

We do not have to inherit just our grandfather's venerable verse or our nineteenth-century grandmother's reputation for verse of ribbons and bows; we can claim as our inheritance the validation of intellect, the "volumes of pages blank" available to daughters to fill with "indelible ink." I reserve the right to inherit all of the songs of my literary ancestors, to stand on the shoulders of men and women alike. I don't discriminate as I take apart the words of great works and piece them back together again, trying to understand the mechanics that make them work. Perhaps the most obvious difference between my male and female ancestors simply lies in the number of years that separate their poetic histories.

As I struggle with poetic ancestry and poetic technique, I have discovered my desire to be as *La Loba*, to "collect bones, preserve that which is in danger of being lost" to my world (Estes, 27). I am in the process of

connections, of attempting to know certain people in my life twice. My writing resurrects the howl of the family--not always my own, as my poetry may suggest, but the loneliness and faraway cry of all who are connected by history and blood. In a world of e-mail, supersonic jets, the satellite dish, I see an evaporation of the summer nights my sister and I shared while skipping rope, sculpting clay dolls from a creek bed, catching fireflies for a nightlight by our bed. My father and I fax notes to and from Taiwan, my sister and I chat late at night between Texas and Georgia, my husband spends fifteen nights each month flying others across the country, and my mom and I leave messages each day on each other's answering machines. Often our voices never truly connect.

It was in trying to make the connections that many of my poems were conceived. In "August Drought Near Killeen," I try to connect my experiences on my husband's family ranch with the experiences of my mother-in-law. In "A Divorced Mother of Two Returns to School," I try to connect my experiences as a teacher of nontraditional students, and as a daughter of a divorced mother who returned to school. Almost all of my poetry attempts to connect the voices of my world--whether it is the obnoxious Little League mother at my son's baseball game or the voice of a mother who watches a neighbor's daughter wrap trees with toilet paper. Mine is not a confessional poetry, but a poetry hopefully made

personal to my reader. My fathers in the poems are compilations of a religious father, a literary father, and of course a personal father. My voices emerge not from personal narrative or from conventions in a textbook, but by stealing language from family reunions, classrooms, baseball stadiums, check-out lines in the grocery store, a Pittsburgh taxicab.

I remember buying postcards as a child, searching through the racks of musty souvenir stores for just the right picture of a mountain or stream. I was never quite satisfied with my choice, but I signed my name to its back, licked a stamp, and sent it to a friend or relative. When we finally returned home, Mom or Dad would take the film from our cameras to the Kodak store to be developed, and after a few days we gathered around the table to view our photographs. Many times we had a family photo by the same landscape portrayed in the sent postcard, and yet the difference between the two was like the difference between a good and bad poem. It was the photograph taken by the mother, or father, or sister, or son, or lover--the individual voice--that vividly described our world. I want a poetry that moves from postcard to photograph, that comes from the individual voice and speaks as if the words chosen were special gifts selected from a panoramic landscape and passed to one another; and as I pull my words across a page, I want a voice to touch an ear.

With such a brief literary "past" to draw upon, I have predominately depended on the expertise of Dr. William Wenthe and Dr. Walter McDonald to guide me through the labyrinth of poetic technique. They have substantiated Richard Hugo's attitude that "all truth must conform to music." Their own poetry sings of hawks and hardscrabble and truth; their poems ring sincere with voices from their own unique worlds. In working with my poems, both poets have gone about ". . . pruning/what isn't required, soaking them/over and over with water/pumped from our own deep well"--words that Dr. McDonald writes in his poem "Setting Out Oaks In Winter." And indeed it is those deep wells of knowledge and the encouragement of my friends and family that have made all the difference in my poetry these last few years.

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CHAPTER II  
LEARNING TO SMOKE

Entering the Tower

We think back through our mothers, if we are  
women.

Virginia Wolfe, *A Room of One's Own*

I leave no footprints  
in my carpeted tower, my path  
so easy to extract with a secondhand  
Hoover. I've learned to whitewash  
walls, steal color from bread,  
bleach blood, ink, and mud  
from baskets of white thread.

At birth, Grandmother insisted  
I was not me, told Mama's nurse  
no grandchild of hers grew hair  
of dark molasses, and skin  
so close to the border  
of *salsa de mole* and pralines.  
And did they call themselves doctors,  
she wanted to know,  
letting blond, blue-eyed parents  
swaddle an immigrant home?

(continued, without stanza break)



For years she swore  
the pale infant trapped behind glass  
should be I, instead of me.

Each birthday, Grandmother mailed  
three pairs of white gloves,  
bonnets, wide-brimmed straws,  
gauzy long-sleeves and skirts  
to hide my skin from sun.

Only hands that glowed white  
as the magnolia blossoms  
she floated in crystal bowls  
could be aristocracy.

Vacations she'd squeeze lemons  
on my curls, fade charcoal brows  
with dollops of peroxide  
and *Oil of Olay*. She taught  
me to iron white linen  
and thin cotton sheets without scorch.  
And long afternoons, I slipped  
off my shoes, read Tennyson, sipped  
sparkling water, and floated

(continued, without stanza break)

on Grandmother's feather bed  
robed in white waves of terrycloth.

Always I drifted face down  
towards castles of Camelot.  
After hours bloated in sleep,  
I believed I'd finally washed ashore--  
Grandmother's ivory lady.

In Case of A Daughter

We had no girl names waiting  
before labor, so I practice  
between contractions  
the syllabic drawls  
and drips of *Isis, Persephone,*  
*Vera Louise,* taste  
the history of names  
draped in curls and curves.

With each breath I push  
for a rhythm, sponge  
my lips with chips of ice,  
listen for lyrics  
to connect the past  
of goddesses to my own  
sculpted shapes  
of husband, father and sons.

Only sons dig permanent names  
in our family Bible, drink  
from tarnished silver goblets

(continued, without stanza break)

engraved with names  
identical to their own.

With each trip  
to the delivery room,  
I drag this leather bag  
behind my back.  
Hidden beneath my robes  
and cotton gowns  
are gifts still packed  
for a daughter, not pink  
pacifiers or bows, but boxes  
of indelible ink,  
volumes of pages blank  
as if each  
contained stories  
now erased, perhaps never told.

## Returns

You know men love fishing poles,  
boomerangs, balls.

Retrieval always intrigues.

Early evenings, watch as you walk  
the beach, the crowded park--

no leash. Only a throw connects man  
to dog, father to daughter or son  
in this game of fetch. For years  
they toss and catch, cast and reel,  
practice with one another, again

and again I write you words overdue,  
little sister. Remember to re-read  
the story of the lost;  
our names do not appear  
next to Father's--  
it was the youngest son,  
not the youngest daughter,  
welcomed back with sandals and calf.  
Girls who yearned to return

(continued, without stanza break)

for one more glimpse, vanished  
into pillars of salt.

Still, you insist Dad wants  
us back. You say proof blooms  
in jotted notes, calls  
that paddle across oceans  
and drip his sandy voice  
across our recorders.

You know the slipperiness  
of landscapes, the dull gloss  
of negatives. Yes, Dad sent  
me that photo last week.  
See how he leans,  
his old boat  
propped on its side  
against a mended wire fence.  
Weeds hide his feet,  
but still he plays the game  
  
throws his net of gray hair  
our way, creel and reel in hand.  
He waits for retrieval,

(continued, without stanza break)

for that which his hand cast  
years ago--for us  
two daughters of salt.

## Learning to Smoke

At fourteen, I peered  
from a tepee of hair,  
war-painted cheeks.  
Simon and Garfunkel  
I trusted,  
my stereo beached  
in canary waves of shag.  
My bed sagged,  
crowded with beasts  
Dad won tossing balls  
at the county fair,  
and mounds of clothes  
rejected  
like my mother's advice.

We snagged a pack of Camels,  
Joan and I,  
checked for spies  
in gabardine suits,  
and brothers  
who microfilmed diaries  
and bugged the phones.

(continued, without stanza break)



But Chuckie played ball,  
so we locked the door,  
cracked windows,  
shouted "Wanna drag?" to old Mr. Carlton  
reading his mail,  
and fell on all fours to the floor,  
like the druggies  
busted each night on TV,  
cheeks flattened  
like the pink pancakes  
Mom made Valentine's Day,  
as we peered for boots  
that might knock at the door.

*Toss me a cigarette we'd sing,*  
flipping the Bic's plastic flame  
to our lips  
blotted with Mama's fuschia.  
Smoke teased our hair,  
burned our eyes  
as we scoured  
a floor-length mirror  
for images of Twiggy,  
pouts like Raquel's,  
as we vowed to blow halos,  
but settled for clouds.

## Camping at the Edge of the Yard

She phones late, and I remind  
my sister that it is one a.m.  
by her clock, but still she talks...  
and it's as if we were once again

eight and ten, lying elbow to hip  
in camouflage sleeping bags  
zipped to our chins  
like sheets of the almost dead.

Before nodding off  
we practiced trapping whispers  
like fireflies, catching secrets  
with cupped palms into glass  
jars, the lids screwed tight.

But sometimes after midnight,  
we needed more than each other's voices,  
like stars that couldn't fall,  
or hardback books we could keep  
longer than three weeks without fines.

(continued, with stanza break)

Under the cool moon,  
when the light from our house  
turned grey, we dug holes  
with fingernails and twigs, buried  
plastic flashlights--two at our feet,  
two by our heads--as if four  
stubby pillars of glow

could hold the dark  
above our chests; only light,  
we thought, kept our beds  
from sinking into shadows  
of shallow graves.

Now, as I pull this spiral cord  
across my cheek, her voice  
warms my face like a campfire,  
and I burrow deep in sheets,  
feel the cold of summer nights,  
the hardness of our old yard,

and I wonder if she knows  
of the rows of broken jars  
I've filled for weeks with crushed

(continued, without stanza break)

plastic flashlights, dead batteries,  
and rusted echoes of Mama's voice--  
*Girls, it's late; get some sleep.*

Letter to Dad, Draft #98

Each time you ask if I've published,  
stamps spill from my purse,  
an editor's address slips  
behind old files, and stacks  
of poems that bear your name,  
as I do, beg for titles, closure.

You spent years teaching  
me how to squeeze the brakes  
on my bike, board doors  
and windows of our summer cabin,  
switch off lights before sleep.

You said to accept the dark  
of a shut door, the periods  
after sentences. End punctuation,  
you noted, functions like roses  
tossed on fresh graves.

And you, my father, the pilot  
who measures days by take-offs  
and landings, now worries

(continued, without stanza break)

over words always delayed,  
from this daughter who never obeyed  
bedtimes, rules of curfew.

I still wander at night  
between pews and altar,  
wear a necklace of names  
strung with the letters  
you loaned between the name  
you gave and the name I chose,

afraid one day this gold  
and emerald clasp may snap,  
sever my orbit of pearls.

## Moving Daddy's Ark

My sister and I skulked  
among stacks of boxes: *Goodwill*  
*Garage Sale, Texas, Cessna.*  
At night, after a last sip of water  
and prayers, we unwrapped  
what Mother had packed--  
stuffed zebras and bears, teacups,  
our soccer trophies--  
as if holding the old could keep  
us landlocked in Atlanta.

Daddy said no  
to moving our iguana, goldfish,  
parakeets, and dog. *Do I look*  
*six hundred?* he asked  
as we hauled bottled water  
and maps to his flying ark--  
no three hundred cubits to float  
on air, just a single engine,  
four seats, fixed gear.  
We knew Noah and his sons  
docked years ago, that Daddy's pairs

(continued, without stanza break)

came in daughters and wheel chocks  
that we kicked like rusted cans  
across the airport's asphalt.

Neighbors puzzled at our escape  
to small-town Texas, claimed  
riots and drugs drifted  
ashore after any storm,  
like dead fish and tar.  
Daddy unchained his plane,  
anyway, flew west  
between crests of thunderheads.

Later we landed in puddles  
of bluebonnets and granite,  
this new world where my sister  
and I learned to tread water  
among bass, to avoid low-water crossings  
after flash floods, to float  
on our backs as we balanced  
olives between our teeth.



CHAPTER III  
LUNCH MONEY

## My Husband Stocks the Bar

For years, bottles of cheap  
chablis, six-packs of Coors  
and Miller Lite mingled  
with our butter, ketchup, leftover  
jars of an infant's rice cereal.

But today, you yank a grey hair  
from my scalp, tell me to move  
my books, my anemic ivy,  
our chipped crystal bowl  
from this space  
a realtor once sold  
as an extra, the wet bar.

Our son carries in boxes  
that rattled the trunk. Stiff necks  
of bottles peer from his arms--  
a litter of liquor  
each dressed in its own brown sack.

You arrange your Vodka against Vermouth,  
place Kahlua next to Scotch, promise

(continued, without stanza break)

the Mai Tai we shared in Hawaii,  
Elbow Benders from a thatched bar  
in Marsh Harbour, the Mimosa we sipped  
from a feather bed in The French Quarter  
after our wedding night,

and I travel to our kitchen, dig  
for lost jiggers and corkscrews  
in drawers of spatulas, measuring spoons,  
crawl into painted cabinets for the set  
of fluted champagnes I kept  
behind our glasses of plastic,

and ask forgiveness  
for letting limes and lemons spoil  
in the crisper, for letting the dust  
settle on our hand-cut crystal goblets.

A White Girl Remembers the Assassination  
of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I. Fredericksburg, Texas, 1978

Students from Nacogdoches High  
said I had no right  
to yez ma'ams  
or lawd bless you, chile.  
Who was I in my magnolia-blossom skin  
to wear color imported  
like diamonds, to steal dialect  
from lips that once massaged  
Granddaddy's cotton with hymns  
from the Psalms?

I tried to explain  
my role in the one-act play,  
the black that painted  
my face, my ears, my neck,  
the grease sweating in soft folds  
of my fingers and wrists,  
the hot spotlights, so unlike  
their grandmothers' palms that bled

(continued, without stanza break)

from burs slicing at fingers  
like ice-picks; and these blueblack  
pin-curls rinsed stiff  
beneath my Woolworth's hair net,  
I confessed--impostors, fakes.

Liberal tagged our U-Haul  
like a string of wedding cans  
as we sputtered down Main.  
Eyes of coal, my Georgia birth,  
whispers of black friends,  
I was cast without audition.  
The play needed black,  
in this whitewashed school,  
an Alabama Negro shuffling vowels,  
serving grits and ham,  
not a Texas kicker,  
booting "h's" like mares,  
two-stepping in jalapeño jam.

Essie's sorghum voice  
clung to my ear  
through five states of phone lines.  
Despite my forgery of skin,

(continued, without stanza break)

I told her, our play won  
third place in state. We giggled  
too loud, not sure of the joke, and remembered...

## II. Atlanta, Georgia, 1968

...that April night, shivering  
in the backseat of her daddy's Ford,  
huddled like the Vietnamese children  
our Mammamas pitied each night  
on the six o'clock news.

Fingers braided in prayer,  
we begged the Lord  
for charcoal, tar,  
blindfolds for the angry mob,  
anything to hide

my cotton-white neck.

Essie's black arms, skinny  
as the riot's fuse, draped my face  
like a Muslim's veil.

And as we inched block to block  
towards home, we played

(continued, with stanza break)

make-believe, ducked  
into our floorboard stage,  
waved to Alice, the Mad Hatter,  
brushed invisible paint  
on each other's skin, and floated  
down sewers past rocks and bottles,  
past torches and stop lights,  
past curses we'd never heard,

then bobbed on our backs,  
sipped coke floats through a straw,  
and grazed the boiling sky  
for that star that had fallen.

## Lunch Money

Walking to the fair, I confessed  
to my best friend Eric  
that I'd been Jesus.

Crossed my heart, swore  
I'd fasted for weeks  
on nothing but grey water

from Ward Elementary's  
cafeteria fountain. No peach,  
no sloppy joes--Mr. Thorpe

too busy monitoring sixth-grade girls  
instead of ketchup and forks  
to catch me. Satan's watching,

I whispered in Eric's ear.  
Kids like us die  
every year on the Zipper,

(continued, with stanza break)



Ferris Wheel. Cables snap,  
a chain slips (like the one  
on your bike), and you dangle

from the cage long enough  
to wish you hadn't committed  
sacrilege, That you believed

in me. We were inches  
from the entrance, and Eric's  
hotter than a corndog, cussing

to leave, daring me  
to prove my smart-ass talk.  
He wanted proof, a miracle.

Told him I'd pay his way  
if he'd take off his All-Star cap,  
hold it like an offering plate.

I poured pockets full of lunches  
into Eric's sweaty crown. He saw nothing  
but a waterfall of nickels, quarters, dimes.

(continued, with stanza break)

I promised him cotton candy, the freak show  
twenty times, a pass through these gates,  
while I wait by a bucket of torn tickets.

Eric grinned like a carnie, said he'd believe  
for this, be a convict, convert,  
or whatever the hell it's called

to my testimony; but *how*, he asked?  
Didn't my stomach growl in Science,  
wasn't I afraid I'd get caught

by my mom, shrivel up and die,  
slide under a cafeteria table?  
I laid my hand on Eric's shoulder,

feeling like later I might walk  
on the city pond, and told him this  
is what pastors really mean  
by sacrifice.

Talking to Tom's Father,  
The Reverend Smith, During Tuesday Night's  
Little League Game

A little Copenhagen, Reverend?  
Some seeds? Sure? Here, have  
a seat. This old quilt'll keep  
the splinters out. Look, your Tom's  
starting at third and Nathan's  
in the bull pen. You know, my boy  
might last more than a batter or two,  
if Larry's uncle wasn't umpiring  
behind the plate. He won't call  
Nathan's breaking ball for nothin'  
since Nathan kicked his nephew  
in the nuts. Sorry, Reverend,  
but you know I'm no saint  
like Mary. Tell me, who picked her  
anyway? Why He just draws names  
out of a baseball cap  
I'll never know. Let's see...  
Nathan gets no daddy, your Tommy's blessed  
with bad knees, Coach benches both our boys  
after two innings every game, keeping

(continued, without stanza break)

his fire-headed lefty on the mound,  
like his son was baseball's salvation.  
Grace, sacrifice, it's all a game  
somebody rigged. You ought to tell Coach Todd  
you heard God's voice calling Nathan's name,  
calling my boy like John the Baptist  
in from the bull pen. Oh, sweet Jesus,  
don't leave, Reverend, you know I'm pulling  
your old holy leg. Don't you know  
if Jesus ever played  
Little League, I know damned well his Father  
wouldn't put our sons' butts  
on no bench. They'd play shortstop and pitch,  
no matter what the score.

Competition

*Little League is a great game for orphans.*

Youth Baseball Coach

Each game I unfold my chair  
farther from these mothers  
who argue merits of Tide, Wisk--  
a quest for spotless baseball.  
I run no risk of winning  
this mother game. The catcher's  
mom cranked a grand slam  
over the fence when she baked  
chocolate chip bats and balls  
for after-game snacks. Our shortstop's  
mom played errorless ball  
for six full innings when she bought  
five hundred tickets  
offered at our annual raffle.  
I explained she could have paid cash  
for ten mountain bikes,  
but she scowled like a sunburned ump  
in extra innings, said my swing  
needed a grip, perhaps  
a more open stance at the plate.

(continued, without stanza break)

I wouldn't make starting line-up,  
she claimed, unless I grilled  
two thousand burgers in the concession stand  
and bleached the right-field grass  
from my son's stained knees.

An Apology to Fellow Poets  
For Another Poem About Craft

You spent winters in a carcass,  
summers squatting at a swamp,  
so forgive my domestic debate  
over white or pearl thread, widths  
of needles' eyes, the tension  
of a stitch. You know so much depends  
upon pattern and what's been stashed  
in family attics. Did you find  
your sister's wedding gown  
frozen in tundra? or a bib  
stitched in wheelbarrow red  
sinking in mud? Did you create seams  
that bind remnants together  
longer than marriage, in fingertips  
stained in wild blood? I spend hours  
  
hauling boxes downstairs, wiping off  
cobwebs. Most are not marked.  
My kitchen window faces east--easy light,  
like elevator music. I don't need  
a high-tech beam for adventure, no parka

(continued, without stanza break)

and boots. I take Mother's pink shears  
to snip old tape, and climb inside.

I leave bear-knives to you. My piecing  
depends on fragments, scraps, the teaspoon  
of peas, the fried chicken wing  
your mother packed in a brown sack  
for lunch. You asked why no ham & cheese  
on Rainbow Bread, so sure she knew mama's-boy food  
invited finger clothespins on noses  
of third-grade boys. After school, you took  
the long way home, chunked rocks  
at the swamp's cattails, practiced croaking  
like a raging frog, belly-crawled  
across the vacant lot as if you were a prisoner,  
a soldier, a bear, games my sons play.

And when I quilt their flights to mine  
in patchwork rhyme, I'll offer Roethke and you  
the sofa, molasses cookies, iced tea,  
a framed *embroidery of trivial themes*.  
So when you return from your hunt, your war,  
just wipe the blood, arctic mud from your feet  
across my straw mat, spit the carcass  
from your cheek into my clay pot

(continued, without stanza break)



of red geraniums, and open my door.

Help me finish Mother's day-old pumpkin pie,  
help me carry a cracked iron lamp  
down narrow stairs of my attic,  
and read me your poems. I'll mend the rips  
in the knees of your jeans.

## Rest Stops

At these speeds, I wear a cross  
looped around my neck.

Prayers, like twisters,  
uproot these mile markers  
grounded in steel.

West of Coleman, I ignore  
white and black signs. Limits  
evaporate like wine  
on Texas roads that crawl  
towards sunset, beg  
for alms of pinks and reds.

Detours begin and end  
with wheels spinning by home.  
At ninety, nursing homes blur  
like memories. Your grandpa  
can't hear my tires turn,  
his windows sealed like coffins.

Behind the wheel,  
I consume regrets like gas,

(continued, without stanza break)

vow to write Grandma Benny,  
take chicken and dumplings  
to Uncle James, pot  
Winter Queen Begonias  
to place by the bed of Norma Rae.

Perhaps tomorrow  
I'll have time. Or Monday.  
Such random choices we make,  
these pen marks drawn on maps,  
the places we plan to stop.

This bouquet of carnations  
wilts in the passenger's seat  
like the faces at Golden Manor.  
I had meant to stop. Now  
I watch my good intentions  
shrink in the mirror  
like the butt of a cigarette  
blowing down the road.

I take brother's advice, *Stop*  
*when the petro runs dry.* But I need  
caffeine, the ladies' room,

(continued, without stanza break)

though the tank's not red. I chat  
as I pay, walk to the cemetery  
behind the station, and weave  
these blossoms to the weeds,  
ask for understanding from the dead.

CHAPTER IV  
TRIMMING THE LAMB

Stepmom

Please, don't wrap  
that fairy-tale crap  
around my shoulders  
like a shawl shaken free  
of moth balls.

I scrape bones off plates,  
scrub bathroom floors,  
*maid's work, ruins*  
*a manicure, you say*  
to me, as your eyes roll  
like a pair of bowling balls  
on a ferris wheel.

This duplicate key  
of your mother's sticks  
when I turn to enter  
*your daddy's house.*  
Spices already in the pantry,  
photos clustered  
like students who stare  
at the new kid in school.

(continued, without stanza break)

Perfume lingers under quilts,  
an old tenant  
reluctant to move.

And these walls stay papered,  
painted the same egg yellow  
from years before.

This was your space  
cut along dotted lines,  
your mamma's and daddy's hands  
once held the scissors together,  
careful to dress their doll,  
paper tabs bent back  
behind your neck and legs.

Perfect fit! New addition  
to the wardrobe, I suppose.  
A Cinderella girdle?  
I see that you cinch it tight  
until the blood drips  
through your hourglass figure,  
purging the seconds  
my shadow dares to trespass  
across your skin.

(continued, with stanza break)

Go ahead, call me wicked,  
sleep with a pumpkin at your head.



The Butterfly Kit

Fingers of sons  
too awkward to tie shoes,  
construct a vault  
of cardboard and glue,  
tape magazine roses  
to the sides and floor,  
color clouds on a blue lid,  
wait for caterpillars  
hanging like piñatas  
to grow wings.

A book falls from our shelf.  
Myths of Narcissus,  
Hyacinthus, names  
dressed like medicine  
to my young sons who chew,  
not swallow whole,  
their pills.

Together we wait.  
Like ancient cantors,  
we practice

(continued, without stanza break)

blending sounds  
of met-a-mor-pho-sis  
as it sticks to our mouths  
like peanut butter.

Butterflies  
escape hard casings  
of pupal shells  
like mummies  
that chisel out of caskets  
on late-night T.V.,  
pump their wings  
so ready to fly  
after hanging by threads  
to a box.

Freedom,  
that slippery word  
I forgot to explain.

Butterflies  
bump off walls  
like my sons  
on a rainy day.  
We talk of balloons

(continued, without stanza break)

that break from our wrists  
to roam the sky,  
fish that wriggle free  
from our hooks  
to swim up river,  
those simple metaphors

and while they plead  
for pets with wings,  
I see boys  
with keys to a car,  
jobs in another state,  
and I wish the gift  
had been tadpoles,  
the epiphany--frogs.

A Divorced Mother of Two  
Returns to School

She owns the front-row desk  
nearest the door, records her name  
on backs of old handouts  
that I pass around class  
to take roll. I watch her pen  
sink into paper, as if ink  
needed deep clefts to float  
the wreckage of letters.

I know this woman. She drives  
morning carpool, sleeps all night  
with the TV news, perhaps cashiers  
part-time at Dairy Queen. She needs  
more than freewriting, more  
than outlines and sources, more  
than peer editing. Three mornings  
each week she searches

my face for more  
than I can give--as if my eyes  
were green life-preservers, my voice

(continued, without stanza break)

a fog horn, my hands  
two buoys to guide lost vessels  
through channels of murky text.

And though she bobs her head  
up and down to my plea  
for a clear concise thesis,  
I know this woman does not believe  
in clarity, the merit  
of narrowing focus. For sixteen years,  
she later tells me in my office,  
she sharpened her focus until

she herself became the dot  
of the i, the cross  
of the t, in the name  
she continued to wear  
like her dated  
red vinyl raincoat.

Trimming the Lamb

Rust drips from this faucet,  
dishwasher stuck,  
my arms bracelets of suds.  
Hear the guttural clack.  
No diamonds clog my disposal,  
just measuring spoons  
I rescue from the grind.

If I dialed 911,  
maybe Prufrock would come,  
sit, drink some tea,  
talk of fashion or art.  
But who has time  
for poetry, gossip?

Boys root through the pantry  
like coons in a cabin.  
I snap beans, peel carrots,  
trim fat from lamb.

Abraham did it right.  
No gripes about sacrifice

(continued, without stanza break)

as he gathered wood,  
sharpened his knife,  
knelt at the altar.

And Isaac, like my sons,  
collected questions as he hiked,  
eyes sparking like the flint  
in his daddy's hands.  
He wanted water, a gumball,  
the rock at his toe;  
but for his hike up the trail  
his palms accepted rope.

If my daddy stood here  
he'd wash my mouth  
with this bar of soap,  
as when I was young  
and whined of dirty dishes,  
the ashes in the stove.

Who needs Michelangelo,  
mermaids and porcelain cups?  
Tonight,

(continued, without stanza break)

I'll change dresses,  
spread the table with lace,  
bake Nana's sponge cake,  
put daisies in a jar.



## Night Wrappings

Streamers of *Charmin* stretch across our moon,  
dangle from stiff necks of oak limbs  
like a thousand white silk ties.

At thirteen, my neighbor's daughter knows  
no curfew yet, nor how to wrap  
her fingers beneath my son's starched collar

to knot his first silk tie. She rehearses  
this dance of accoutrement, bumps  
her thigh against the trunk as she clothes

our trees. Tonight she waits  
for me to put the dog inside, lock doors,  
pull shades, before she pirouettes back

and forth across our black lawns,  
hedges of pansies and kale. Her arms pressed  
against her breasts, a grocery cart

(continued, with stanza break)

of paper rolls unraveling at seams.  
Above my laceless window, I hear awkward steps  
of a son who combs his hair, who probes his face  
for hair coarse enough to shave. I know  
he watches her toes slip below his room, drape  
stars to his yard and that someday he'll wake  
to a girl veiled in pearls and white lace, her face  
no longer a secret shadow below. Perhaps  
that frail old limb she dresses last seems far away  
to her and my son, so brittle and worn,  
in need of a shawl, a hat to cover  
barkish grey. And from my dark corner I see  
this dutiful daughter wrapping  
her husband's mother for moonless nights,  
helping him knot his best black tie.

August Drought Near Killeen

Go ahead, it's safe to open gates  
into Grandpa's ranch. I tell my sons  
red wasps refuse to guard locks  
during these wilting months, and rattlers  
lie fat on parched ledges, drowsy  
like their uncles who couch at our house  
feasting weeks on baseball, beef fajitas, beer.

My boys remind me this summer I promised Epcot,  
Minnie and Mickey, the all-star game. Last year  
we marked maps to Yellowstone, bought ponchos,  
a tent, planned strategy against killer grizzlies.  
Now, taxes and August hold us hostage

to our old faithful, this steaming caliche,  
cedar and scrub oak, calves too young  
to haul to Schwertner's auction, too old  
to fence easy. Even the Lampasas River struggles  
to find its way past barbed-wire, peeling roads,  
deer blinds waiting, hollow as coffins.

(continued, with stanza break)

Driving tank to tank, my husband  
creates fog from ranch. We toss salt blocks,  
honk a heifer back to her calf.  
From the truck's bed I squat among sons,  
plot next August in cable cars, golden bridges,  
vendors pregnant with fish, and sourdough bread.  
I tell them steel doors clash louder than thunder  
in abandoned cells of Alcatraz.

Sun drips off our straw hats  
dense as rain in our prayers. Boys wrestle  
for a last cold coke. They must  
bring jackets, I tell them, always  
a cool ocean breeze in the bay.  
Jumping from the slowing truck, I drag  
fallen limbs from our path, claiming no halos  
in this inheritance, chasing water  
and cows, summer after summer.

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