2004

Nine of nine

Nancy Nino
San Jose State University

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NINE OF NINE

A Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Nancy Nino

December 2004

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Nancy Nino

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Samuel Maio, Ph.D.

Dr. Samuel Maio

Alan Soldofsky

Prof. Alan Soldofsky

Rob Swigart

Dr. Rob Swigart

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Rhea I. Williamson

ABSTRACT

NINE OF NINE

by Nancy Nino

directed by Dr. Samuel Maio

This project is a book-length collection of poems. The poems are arranged thematically, including reflections on childhood and youth, love, death, and religion and faith. The collection includes both free verse and formal verse pieces. Like William Carlos Williams, the poet elevates the “simple subject” to the realm of poetry because she considers the “everyday” a most compelling topic. The poems seek not to answer all of the questions they pose, but rather to present brief moments of reflection saturated in sound and story. It is in these everyday moments that the reader, too, receives “graces unsolicited.” The first line of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur” aptly serves as the collection’s underlying assumption: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

In loving memory of
Big Ed and Gracie Girl

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INTRODUCTION

The Teachers

Answering Paul's Call

In St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he refers to himself as "a prisoner for the Lord." Paul did not write what his audience wanted to hear; he wrote what they needed to hear...to save their souls. Paul's purpose was to inspire in people a reverence for their Creator and His creations. This collection endeavors to do the same.

In I Corinthians 13, the passage often read at Christian wedding ceremonies, Paul begins "if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." The strength of the passage lies in its use of metaphor, repetition, and cadence. Regardless of how many times I read or hear this passage, it remains breathtaking to me. The words *motivate* me to change my life...every time I hear them. What greater audience response could a writer (an evangelist like Paul, in particular) ask for? Paul's tone transmits expectation; he puts demands on his readers. Meanwhile, he maintains a candor and honesty throughout his body of work. I believe that the poems that follow echo Paul's forthright manner; they say what must be said, without reservation. Poems such as "Convenience," "Klaus," "Raise a Flag," and "In Thanksgiving for the Priest" demonstrate this expectant, honest—and yet still vulnerable—tone.

Auden's "Knock of the Tide" of Words and Hopkins' "Rollrock" Sound

In one of his earlier poems, "On This Island" W.H. Auden immerses the reader in sound play:

When the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges
Oppose the pluck
And knock of the tide
And the shingle scrambles after the suck-
-ing surf,
And the gull lodges
A moment on its sheer side

This poem's sounds are so pleasurable to *hear*, I often do not even *comprehend* the subject at first. Likewise, in the untitled poem which begins "Lady, weeping at the crossroads" he combines alliteration, consonance, and assonance with a flawless meter:

Bribe the birds then on the branches
Bribe them to be dumb
Stare the hot sun out of heaven
That the night may come

One of Auden's own influences, Gerard Manley Hopkins, is well known for his own work with sound. The words of his poems almost seem to ricochet off each other when they are read aloud, as in "Inversnaid,"

This darksome burn, horseback brown
His rollrock highroad roaring down,

In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam

Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

It is precisely this ricochet which drew me into poetry, and the poetry of these two poets in particular. I consider “Spring,” “Chick,” and “On Waking Each Morning with a Perpetual Thirst” tributes to these poets who so masterfully worked with sound.

Williams’ “Simple” Subject

In young adulthood, reading William Carlos Williams and specifically, “This Is Just to Say,” I was struck that something important was happening on that page, something was waiting to be found behind the simplicity of the words. I was inspired by the fact that like Williams, I could use “regular” language and write about “ordinary” experiences. However, precisely the way I transmitted that experience onto paper could make for something called “poetry,” what William Packard defines as “the rhythmic creation of beauty in words.” Williams, I believe, spoke to a great variety of people because he treated the experiences of ordinary people and did so in colloquial verse. While I am less inclined to short-lined poems than Williams, I share his interest in simple subjects that may not seem “worthy” of poetry. Likewise, I consider my audience to be the “average” person, one who does not read volumes of poetry, but who may be inspired to purchase a poetry book when she discover poems which resonate with her “ordinary” experiences. Examples of these include “Code of Conduct,” “The Smell of a Hot Horse,” and “Port-o-Potties or Thinking about the Crapper Business on the Commuter Bus from Gilroy to Hollister.”

Kleinschmidt Mayes Painting Momentary Worlds through Images

As a student of Ed Kleinschmidt Mayes, I acquired a great appreciation for the use of imagery. In his “University of Iowa Hospital, 1976,” Mayes describes the patients in the scene with such precise clarity:

where to begin in this never
ending blasted field of corpses.
Men looking like they had been
attacked repeatedly by a succession

of wild animals, throats half gone
eyes bleeding, raw meat heaped
in piles. One walks around
sniffing through his long tubes.

With meticulous imagery, poets can take their readers to that place. Mayes’s description of the hospital leaves me with a very distinct picture and feeling of the scene. In “Random Panic in the U.S.A.” he paints another clear picture:

In the backyard
You were clipping

Your toenails in the sun.
A dog was barking

At a butterfly. The wind
Had collapsed on your

doorstep. You don't button
Your collar anymore.

The plastic chair
Is baking on the

Hot patio stones.

For years, I've remembered that image of the plastic chair on the patio. I can feel its warmth, I can see its gloss finish reflect the sun, I can smell it heating up in the summer sun. The world Mayes creates works because of the constancy of particular images which combine to create a complete scene. I endeavor to create such scenes in poems such as "In Her Hands," "The Small Place Between Hand and Arm," and "Summer, On the Patio."

Jeffers and "The Beauty of Things"

Robinson Jeffers' poem, "Love the Wild Swan," is one of my favorite poems. Like St. Paul's writings, the poem *motivates* you. The poem addresses the writer's struggle to record the inherent beauty of the world using the inadequate vehicle of

language. But then, I would submit, the poem pushes beyond the writer's struggle to *every* person's struggle with his or her own inadequacies. Then, the poem presents a treatment for it:

Love your eyes that can see, your mind that can

Hear the music, the thunder of the wings. Love the wild swan.

This is an imperative: Be grateful! Give thanks for the beauty and divinity that surround you! This poem captures precisely what I want to capture in *every* poem I write.

Whether implicit or explicit, every piece, even those sorrowful in nature, should demonstrate some aspect of gratitude, an acknowledgement that life is a gift and a blessing. The theme of gratitude is especially apparent in poems such as "Love Song," "Graces Unsolicited," and "The Gift of Your Brain."

The Poems

Drawing from the influences of my aforementioned "teachers," this collection of poems maintains an honest and candid tone. Often, the subjects of the poems are simple or ordinary. However, my hope is that my particular expression of the experiences, highlighted through rhythmic sound play and detailed imagery, prevents the poems from being mundane. Within the sorrowful and joyful poems of the collection, one theme persists: gratitude. In essence, the pain is great because the love is great.

I. *Nine of Nine*

“Nine of Nine,” refers to my place in my family as the ninth of nine children. This first section includes poems reflecting on childhood and early adulthood that inform the later poems. There is a very youthful and innocent feel to these poems. At the same time, they embody underlying themes of discovery and coming-of-age.

II. *The Geology of Hearts*

“The Geology of Hearts” poems reflect on love’s joys and heartaches. There is a certain fierceness to these poems. Love’s challenges provide so much more raw material for writing than quiet contentedness in love. The section’s title poem “The Geology of Hearts” speaks to the human desire to try to treat love in the analytical way we treat science and the inherent impossibility of doing so. If the heart were a rock, it would make the breaking of it much less painful. But the heart is not a rock, and as such, when it breaks, the whole body experiences a great fallout.

III. *Deliverance*

“Deliverance” poems treat the sickness and subsequent deaths of my parents and the life that prevails in the midst of death. While it has been over five years since my parents passed away, these are the poems that continue to come to me, almost always unsolicited. Filial relationships are such an essential part of who I am, and my parents seem to continue to find ways to interact with me through the art of writing. These poems deliver

me from my sorrow and help me avoid the feeling which I personally find to be the most harmful for any human being: despair.

IV. *Graces Unsolicited*

“Graces Unsolicited” poems treat the subjects of religion and faith, as well as everyday occurrences that are themselves moments of grace. We all have opportunities each day to experience tiny miracles; our perspective dictates how we comprehend an occurrence or situation. In this section, I am taking notice of those little experiences, blessings that may easily go unnoticed. So many times I forget to do so. But, as Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds me, the world truly is charged with the grandeur of God.

I.

Nine of Nine

Spring

Spring is Monday drunk, a coming-out party for
the new week. Such Mondays follow wiffle-ball

Sundays. Oak tree first base, lawn chair third.
Blacktop hot off your feet makes them patter

faster for the game. My eyes take color seriously
in Spring, when green blades debut, singing a

Summer's preview. Creeks of red heat cut through
my house, warming the wet bodies that drip blue

pool water. My mother uses the explosion of roses
in the yard to flavor my room, whose walls swell

to fit the extra light. Boys find ways to talk out
loud for new sun has made them ready. Cocktails

and watermelon, charcoal days grill into night, and
I can't remember how wool fits in. My nephews

blaze into ribbed wetness in their baseball pants
and wrinkled gloves, and they give me flushed

smiles from the corner of the dugout. They know
how the sun sparks the pigment in my white skin,

taking away the winter. They know how it grows
us all, harvests the world in June.

In Her Hands

My mother broke open her
pelvis nine times to give my
father sons and daughters
and sons. What made her

have and have and have,
streams of children flowing
from her for twenty years
and never an instant to

reflect on her reflection?
Flies have broken into
the house again and dogs
graze her ankle with their

white rock teeth, demanding
dinner. Tom and I drag
plastic roadsters up the hill
to race down. I spin twelve

times before hooking myself
on the fender of the station
wagon, split my head skin
open. She has to drop dishes

or phone or laundry to
ladle me up, into the car
to meet the doctor's needle.
She holds my sweaty hand

through every screaming stitch.
She hold's my uncle's crooked
hand through sermons on his
glory days, sweeps clean

his yellowy eyes. She holds
my father's hand in church.
Her white fingers weave through
his brown, gently scraping ring

to ring. When I was younger,
I blamed her for boyish

haircuts, healthy kitchen
cupboards, and stark white

skin. Now I thank her for
my middle name, for my
sphere of brothers and sisters,
for giving me her life, and mine.

Code of Conduct

High school is hard time. I remember some Cindy and that Kerri--those friends of mine--crank call me. They be voice of boy, Dan. Boy I liked, for two minutes, then. *Hello, this Dan--real deep voice--wonderin' if you want to go with me to that dance?* I can't talk. I say yes. They laugh loud on the phone in my ear. They say it's them. I be real mad. We eat lunch together next day. Those good friends of mine.

Chick

I am a chick because I rock unsuspecting hands with my firm grip, smooth palms. Yesterday I found myself in the schism between girl and lady, to young to *not* stumble in heels, shred sheer nylons, too old to consider boys a novelty. Told my dad I'd be a lady the day I had to dress up for work every day. He told me to scrub my face real good, put on some makeup, tuck my shirt in, straighten my shoulders. But I'm a chick because I tuck my shirt in only *sometimes*, play dress-up only when the thunder strikes me, and just to hear my bros gulp, "Damn girl, you clean up well!" When we cheer "chicks with sticks" on the lacrosse field, it serves to inspire, gets us fired up, turns the score up higher because we feed off the blood of battle, enjoy bearing black bruises on our bellies and jaws, love the sound of wood cracking wood and yellow rubber ripping past goalie sticks to hit thick nets. I am a chick who likes six-packs, not the slicked-up-tanned-up-tricked up man's on the TV talk show, but my own, the one that is--and you may not agree--but is because it's mine and I define it to be, even though I am not ripped or defined, and I *like* pretending those lines on my skin are *not* my ribs, but rather abs of steel or maybe many meals, because, *remember*, I like six-packs, no not the ones in the fridge though I wouldn't mind a cold one right about now either. I am a chick because I still like to ricochet between my father and mother, enjoy staying close to the womb, not yet cut away from my kin by some hobo I fall for who wants to move me to Grants Pass, Oregon where we can grow dope and live off the fatted tree, that is, *after* we embrace it. I am a chick because I'm still waking between the waters of bound and free, searching for the place where I can sip red wine on the merry-go-round, or dance and sweat half-naked on the town bridge, defying definition, and finding the peace in blazing a trail and accepting someone's offer to help me clear away the brush.

College Party

Drunk wallflowers who have not once before
Made venture upon that frightful dance floor
Will try their foot at popular routines,
Now worried not about making a scene

Girl bums from cool boy her first cigarette
Already the gossips are placing bets
As to how far they'll go and what they'll do
This cool boy and girl in their rendezvous

The fat old boys who serve so fine a brew
Are cussing 'cause of probs with CO₂
And little boy blue, who just turned eighteen,
Can't wait to brag 'bout the wild party scene

Convenience

There are four pairs
of starch ironed jeans
sprawled out all over
the living room couch
and suddenly I feel very full.
I came home to a leafless yard.
Friday is gardener day
in our neighborhood.
I finished college in four years:
drank a fair amount, worked a little,
took up a new sport.
It is convenient when a sick woman
can afford alternative medicine.
It is convenient to have possibilities
in your cereal selection.
In the small quaint town where I grew up
high school kids got coked up
before Math
on Tuesdays.

Student

Miss Nino, did you see what's on your desk?
A picture for you, did I color good,
Miss Nino? I like pink. Is pink for girls?
The picture's of my grandma's house that's new
with all the biggest rooms and lots of them.
I wonder if you got a room like that.
My room has Pocohantas sheets in it.
I like that girl. And all those animals.
You like to hug your dog Miss Nino, huh?
But does he lick your face all up sometimes?
I want a dog that licks my face all up
and sleeps with me in bed on scary nights.
I couldn't come to school on Halloween
because my dad was tired. He slept all day.

II.
The Geology of Hearts

Parameters

Was is the wine that made you weak, the wine
that pumped your lips to red and taught your hands
to clench my back and taught me not to mind?
Was it the wine...the song of love, the dance?

For friends are not supposed to lust, to bear
their souls and bodies open, risk a loss
of trust. Yet you threw rules aside to stare
into my eyes, demand my lips, no less.

I sweltered in your heat, your ready tongue,
your fingers clinging to my dress, your bone
of hip that locked to mine. In waves you sang
my praises, ate my neck and heart unsewn.

We've split each others' seams, expanded range
of touch and love. Now you and I are changed.

The Small Place Between Hand and Arm

You are the one who brings the morning in slowly, holds
the sun on your shoulder. You make me want to polish

my lashes, shine my hair, learn what turns the sun in your
world. But the doctor in me said it's too early to write a

poem about you yet. So I make sketches in the small place
between your hand and arm, explore your wrists, wonder

why fingertapping on your skin sounds different than on
mine, wonder why I feel currents of truth in your voice, why

I let you touch my eyes. In Italy, my cousin, Antonio, painted
me shy. Maybe that's where I learned to look away from

the light. Still I can't stop the words from tumbling in my
head, spilling from my ears and the shafts of my hair and I'm

hunting for you handkerchief to stuff them back in. You've
been taught the live the simpler pleasures, to eat your apple

when it's at its greenest, so I play the skeptic in this morality
play. And because I attempt to unwrinkle you, you confuse

me for your mother. The heavy linen of our before weights
the day, makes us too tense to move into each other until

the night. When you evolve into my father, I will mold myself
to your lap and wrap my whole hand around your fat index

finger. But now I want my fingertips to play chords on the bones
of your back, knuckle the line of your spine. Commit to memory

the dents of your arm when you're asleep, forget the girlish
buzzing outside the window or cat talk on the radio. Think

only of how your breath collides with the sheet and reflects
back onto your face. Fasten my eyes and know how your

palm will flex, raising the tendons to terraces on the inside of
your wrist, how your hand will flatten my hair when you wake.

Summer and Desire

I could strip bare, take the fury from the sun and tear the fabric that binds me, but sweat would still drip, wet hair fades to dry, and the dogs keep crying. I watch how they lick circles in the bricks, clocks built with tongue and saliva, something cool to lie on. They do not sweat like me, but summer torments them just the same. Usually, I like it when you glaze my neck with your tongue, turning me cool and flushed all at once. But now your tongue singes my skin, and my salt strips from you your water blood. Words serve no purpose, are only instruments of noise which seem to deepen the heat, so I beg us silent. We could find ice to smooth along the cracks in our backs and foreheads, but I would hate to watch the cube lose its form. On days like these we all seem to lose our form. We have no corners. We are ovals of wetness swelling to burgundy. The grapes that are our bodies are subject to puncture at any time, so I deny the soft stones of your fingers on my waist. I can see only rounded shapes now, no hard lines, no definition, just fragments of color falling together, like we would be, had this day not inspired separation.

Untangled

Sometimes, you make me feel like I should be having sex with my brother-in-law or sliding out for winks and drinks, motel midnights with my dad's best friend. I have watched you drive the eight-ball, slide its skin across green felt right before you drown it, wondered if you rode that angle intentionally, if you plan to sink me too. Sharpshooter with salt on your thumb, lime in my eye. Why is it that when the moon burns out and the night lacks light you can't remember your mother's name, but you can't forget to wash through me with hands and songs, begging for my legs in your bed? I know why a bar is called a bar. Bars lock people out, lock people in. Bars are bars between people. And still I meet you there, bringing my legs and my burnt brown eyes, knowing you'll convince me they're blue. You have tuned them to your rhythms, made them see you dance with Hades, made them want you anyway. You will not give me yourself whole, just edges, ends, smatterings of the space your body fills. As if my elbows would break beneath your weight, as if they don't deserve you in your entirety. At dawn, you press my creases, fill my cracks with little bits of you, the few you choose to relinquish. But days cannot live on dawn alone so why should I? The time has come to become untangled, to brush ourselves free of each other. In the old time I understood *we* as you and me. But now I need to extract the me from we. The me needs to forget the days your tattered offerings were enough, the hymns you tapped into my back. Being strung together too tight to sleep and the feel of your voice on my shoulder. The me needs to remember it was me who walked into the scene, who wrote half the script and acted to the music. It was me who never walked out.

The Philosophy of Nakedness

I wonder about the philosophy of a nudist colony. My own friends profess the wonders of nakedness, incessant nakedness, the glory of being nude

in a hot room in February. It seems a body would lose its flair in such alleged bliss. It seems we'd start to treat our bodies like a ragged house dress, *oh this old thing?*

An old woman feels no fire in her legs when her husband drags his saggy rump from the shower. Perhaps she suffers from over-exposure. Perhaps

if he had always maintained that initial bashfulness, the boyish tendency to crumple his abdomen, walk with his shoulders pointed inward, she would've remembered to feel

desire. There is a lush quality to unknown flesh. What is it that makes it lose the luster? The bloom is off the rosemary plant. The sun's monotony dries up an appetite.

Virgin's Burden

I have been good to you, Mary, but I have kept this burden for too long. I cannot keep you in here anymore. You were built Immaculate.

Rising destines falling.

I am Sisyphus and my offertory boulder keeps falling, every time I almost get it to you.

My back has become a degenerate, *a narrowing of the discs*. It's the burden that made it so. We can only stay pure for a time.

I have been chaste and I have been wicked.

The beauty in being wicked is that you're not being chaste.

The thinker suffers more than the beast.

Documenting Desire

Do not forget the night we slept in the twin,
dwindling the minutes until morning, talking chaste

and your desire to be virginal. Do not forget the paint
splitting off the wall, the wall beating to the rhythm

of the lovers in the next room. They made us
timid, scarcely touching the rims of

each other. I still remember the jagged peak
of your hip bone, the jutting stone of your collar

bone. This is skin hard to forget. But do not forget
the ring and click of ice cubes in a pint glass

on the floor, the remnants of a whiskey coke. We could
not taste its sting that night. Do not forget the cracks

of your hands, and my desire to soak your shell in aloe,
smooth you out, resurface you. I could not

stand to see you not shine. Do not forget
that I could not give you myself whole for my body is not

mine to give. *I am the handmaid of the Lord.* Do not forget
the white of morning creeping up that shadeless window,

determined to divide us, cutting the night away.

Hands

It's a funny thing about hands, the way they tell a person's story. His palms are hard, cracked like old pavement, gravelly paths. Days upon days roping steers, cinching girths, the splinter of unfixed fences. This life hardens surfaces, thickens skin. I wonder what he thinks about my hands, sliding in between his cracks, how they're so smooth and unweathered. The skin of nectarines. There something daunting in difference, a lack of orientation. Perhaps he likes the contrast. Like rain in California summer. Like making things fit that don't.

On Waking Each Morning with a Perpetual Thirst

One might think you liked the sound of cracked
glass,
the way your words blasted my heart to pieces.
Peace has
fallen farther from the tree than I can grasp.
My task
is to round it up again. Like spooked cattle
who battle
to get away from a cowboy, so you fled,
not bred
for dependency. A recluse. Late in June,
a few moons
before Independence Day, the day
you claimed
your independence from me, my chest
pressed
to your back as we lay on the couch
crouched
together like hide-and-seek kids.
Did
you feel the way my arm stretched
around your chest
gripping your ribs? I longed to become bone
of your bone,
flesh of your flesh, a necessary organ
of your person,
a second heart relieving the first
of its thirst
for blood and love. But summer left me dry
no longer high
on the fever of spring. Spring springs eternal,
returns
each year with tulips and daffodils,
thrills
us into resurrections. Resurrect, then. Know,
though,
that when you call to say you hope all is well,
I'll tell
you that all is *not* well when you are not near.
Here.

Love Song

I have sung you into the air
and thin white paper because
you will not sit still in my head.

There are babies waiting to be born
built with your green eyes and strong
bones. There is a smile waiting

to pull the skin tight to my cheeks.
You will be sitting beside me
in the sweetness of saying nothing.

There are lines waiting to be traced
in between the ribs of your back,
and words waiting to explain how

God rolls out such carpets of loveliness.

Raw

In your direct way, just like when you asked how much I weighed,
you asked if I ever kissed a girl. I balked, *No*, and asked if you ever kissed a guy.
Only once...nah, I'm joking, shit, girl, I don't even kiss my Dad.
I think of how I used to wrap my arms so tight around my Dad to hug him,
as if that would ensure he'd never go away.

When I left you at the airport, 70 minutes after I met you, I ran back
to throw my arms around you, the sturdy stalk that is your body.
You stepped back, not knowing how to take such raw expression.
You are raw with your words, your forthright dialogue.
It hurt like hell when I got my tattoo.
But I was trying to be tough 'cause my girlfriend was there watching me.

I answer your questions without delay, *140 pounds*, as if
your candor compels my own; I have no time to fumble for half-truths.

Someday, you will go home to your Dad in Florida.
You will wrap yourself around him
and feel the bristles of his cheek against your own.
He will tremble at first
and then look straight at you and say
Welcome home.

The Geology of Hearts

If my heart were an archeological site,
I could excavate it
and extract the part that is you.

I couldn't say for sure
the number of square centimeters that you possess,
but when I found you, I'd cut out
those squares and the squares around them
to be sure you were really gone.

It would be fascinating, really, to mine one's own heart,
different colors denoting different lovers,
you would be green
because you were fresh and short-lived
like the spring hillsides in the Central Valley.

I would mourn your loss for a while,
with the generic pain of the incision,
and that general feeling of vacancy.
Like all wounds,
your space would eventually be filled in, with a tougher muscle,
not someone else's, but my own reclamation.

It would help if there were an exact method to pinpoint
your position in my heart,
like x and y coordinates,
meridians and parallels,
a radiologist's arrow on an x-ray.

That intersection defined by my heartmap's legend,
would be the point where I'd direct the chisel
dig you out and brush the dust away.

The clock strikes 10 and this is no fairy tale. A girl cannot mine
out the parts of her which are undesirable, and so you live here
without even knowing your place,
without even knowing that you live
on your own Atlantic Coast, and here, on the Pacific, in me.

Sharing a Sestina with You

Sometimes, I call you just to hear your voice,
that hint of the South that resounds from your mouth, your body.
Your words rise, then fall, making our distance
seem more distant. I cannot watch you smile. *Revive*
me, I think, as I dial dead plastic to find you. Time
grows longer, space expands. Both spread across the vacant

plains of the America that split us in two. Today you are vacant,
your words too steady, straight-lined like the voice
of a telephone operator, lackluster. This time
I regret the effort. The call falls short. A body
cannot live in flat word alone. The dead revive
at the sound of their grandchildren laughing. Distance

is of no consequence. Today, *I* am of no consequence. Distance
makes me so. You cannot reach for my hand. A vacant
apartment boxes itself around you. Such cold walls. I long to revive
you, place a flower in your bathroom, be the voice
next to yours that reflects off the walls, the body
on the other side of the bed, the girl who inspires you. Time

has told me: *Patience*. But I am not virtuous. Time's
nights are full, not lived alone. Distance
creates illusion—I imagine the way your morning begins, a body
fighting the dark before dawn, the tall stretch, yawn, drive through vacant
streets to the gym, work, the rote day you detest. Your voice
gets beaten down with the hours; I pretend I can revive

it. I pretend that if I were there, nights would revive
your weariness, return the bright green to your eyes. Time
would not be hateful, because our voices
would stand side by side. Instead, you're there and you distance
yourself from me like magnets that repel, turn us into vacant
metal pieces pushing away from each other. Days like these, my body

can't remember how it feels to have your hand on my bare back. My body
fears losing that memory. What can I do to relive that, to revive
your hands? You need something more from me than a vacant
phone. I need something more from you than *someday*, *sometime*.
A poem keeps things in their rightful places, sees distance
for what it is: distant. Puts the cutthroat truth back into a voice.

We have the bodies, but cannot find an intersection of space or time.
We cannot revive these roads broken down and impossible with distance.
The world has become vacant; I have no voice.

Same Plane, Four Flights

And all I can think of is
how the weird guy next to me
keeps letting them go
and how things are
just as they seem.

I hinted for someone
to meet me in D.C.
Told him I'd be there
a couple days,
would love to see him.
He didn't decline.
He just didn't answer at all.

The weird guy next to me
is reading this poem now.
I've shrunk the font down
to seventy five percent,
but he's crooning his head
to read it anyway.

Maybe that's what I am,
the weird girl crooning my head
into a boy's life,
trying to make something
out of nothing,
trying to make love
out of lack-there-of.

There are no lights out
the plane window tonight.
There may be clouds.
Or maybe,
Baltimore just
shut itself off for the night,
sick of being watched, spied on
by girls in planes overhead.

The First Stages of Citizenship in This New and Unknown Nation Called Love

With you
I am just beginning
to understand
the uncharted land
of love,
the tip of
the tip of
the iceberg
that is far
from cold
but still akin to Antarctica,
nevertheless.

Sacrament

Today we have taken part in a sacrament.
We've enjoyed the fruits of a wedding
while pledging our support of a marriage.
We've joined together with the residents of heaven
to extend our hands in blessing over this union.
We've felt the presence among us
of Grampy, Nana, and Pop, who've come back
from eternity to honor their grandchildren.
And some day, many suns and moons from now,
we may be invited over to this couple's home
for a party, a barbecue, a Sunday dinner.
We'll approach the door and catch
the laughs of their children's children
passing through the window screen.
We'll know that when we enter
we'll be greeted by the ever-present light
of Jeff's blue eyes, Lisa's freely-given smile
that breaks into laughter with the little ones,
the smell of beef on the barbecue,
and the voices of young and old
engaged in friendly banter.
But we'll linger outside their front door
for just a moment longer
to say a silent thank-you
for this blessed day in July
when the wine was a little sweeter,
the sun shone a little brighter,
the dance lasted a little longer,
for we, too, shared
in the sacrament
in this covenant,
in the joining of hearts and hands.

III.
Deliverance

Epistle

I used to wonder why you didn't tell
me turning child to woman meant I'd bleed
inside out six or seven days a month.

I wondered why you wore those pants, the ones
that were too short. They hit you at the calf;
your white and bony ankles walked exposed.

I wondered why you let your hair turn gray
and why you didn't dye or buy shampoo
that took your gray away and made you new.

I wondered why I had to go to church,
and say my prayers with dad each night, and why
would a good God let you get sick and die.

I wondered why you always cried to talk
about your mom, who died when you were young,
who died from that disease which kills you now.

Today, I wonder why your bones just eat
themselves away and why your liver, lungs,
and skin are stained with black and brown decay.

No longer do I wonder why I should
believe in God and say my prayers each night
or why you cried to talk about your mom.

Evolution

I have recorded the evolution of your body,
seen it marble from one drug, go lean from

another. When they prick your wrist on
the first day, you shrink from dilution of blood,

the graying scarlet. And so the little evolutions
inside the big one begin; you return to us faint

in the black lethargy of your cells, sore from
the war that happens underneath your skin.

Marla's watched that war at her
home too, seen the luded territory

of a woman's body. She took out her
nipple rings, said it didn't seem right to

treat her body with such nonchalance, tear
into the breasts her mother no longer

has. Defacing has lost its glory. I, too,
have learned the holiness of flesh, found

the urge to *not* bite my nails overrides
the urge to bite, turned relentless in my

desire to retain all parts. I remember
your hair, brown and full, crazed with curl

and beautiful disorder. By the twenty-first
day, you reclaim your right to stand, step

out to water the roses. You have eyes that
notice color, skin that feels the joy of water.

Klaus

Klaus is my mom's oncologist. He goes by Dr. Porzig, but I like to think of him as Klaus. It's good to know he's got a name.

Klaus will be performing tomorrow. He's got to drain the fluid from her lungs, and then blow them up, let her breathe a little. He'll stick some paste on them to make them stick to her ribs, you know, keep them inflated.

Klaus is a busy man. He will come to us after the surgery with hurry on his face. It's not that he's unkind or unskilled for he is both kind and skilled. But he works with dying people every day and perhaps he thinks if he just keeps hurrying along, they'll never die on him, or at least not when he's there.

Klaus will say what he has to say about the procedure. He will take our question-and-answer session well because he's used to it. We think if we are relentless enough with inquiry, he will be relentless in treatment. Klaus knows our kind. He'll wait out the storm, then hurry to catch the next one.

Klaus is on the backside of forty. I like to think he has no lover because he'd have nothing left for her. Klaus has seen too much damage in people to be passionate.

Klaus knows that things affect me differently because I am the youngest. Klaus knows that I'd really rather be getting high right now. Klaus knows that being high is all think and no feel. Klaus's job is to be all think.

Ways of Remembering

The way she'd call me into her room, as soon as I got home, to bring her news of the world, a world of news to someone pinned to bed.

The way she clasped her chest, searching for that precious tiny bit of breath that may or may not be left.

The way she'd beg me to eat lunch with her, smiling brightly when I did, that silent thank-you that made busy-ness seem foolish.

The way she ate less and less, more and more like a child, smaller portions, softer surfaces, blander flavors, no spice in the end of life.

The way she thinned as the months dwindled down, the bones of her sternum protruding through the skin.

The way that every treatment worked a while, charging my heart and her eyes with slim strands of hope, until what was working stopped.

The way Dad came to understand her better: the time and sweat it takes to keep up a house, the gift of tidiness, appreciation of clean sheets, water that roses require.

The way she'd have to work to take a bath, the aided steps down the hall, stopping midway to catch her breath, the cold of white porcelain chilling her thinning body.

The way the morphine traded facts within her mind, forgetting what happened, inventing what didn't.

The way that two days before her life ended, she held my hand and said, "You miss her, don't you" when I cried about Megan being away in Europe.

The way that the sun, absent from our lives in her last two days, broke through the window the moment after she died, to lighten and bless her angel face.

Grace: Other Ways of Remembering

The way we'd go on errands every day after school: the bank (where I'd get coffee with mounds of non-dairy creamer), the cleaners for Dad's suits, Rita's house to drop off the clothes for the poor and indulge in her famous Noni cookies, the grocery store (where I'd slip sugar cereal and candy bars in the cart, which she'd playfully comment on at the checkout).

The way she'd always take me swimming in Joy's heart-shaped pool, where she'd sit poolside, sipping sugar ice tea, catching up on neighborhood gossip, and serving as my best handstands-in-the-water audience.

The way she made us rounder people: forcing piano or guitar lessons, rules of no TV on school nights and trying everything on our plate...things which we then detested and now respect.

The way she saved everything...absolutely everything...which drove me mad but also provided me with numerous costumes and other props for life.

The way she loved to go to parties: dressing up for the occasion and asking my fashion advice, returning delightfully exhausted with tales of wonderful food, raucous laughter, and jovial music and dance.

The way I'd come down to the kitchen on Valentines day, or St. Patrick's day, or Halloween, to find a festive treat on the kitchen table: a pair of hearted underwear, a shamrock key chain, some pumpkin cookies.

The way she'd let me sleep in her room, me sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor at her side of the bed, the hard of floor feeling better than my own lonesome bed on nights of nightmares or sleepless sorrows.

The way she'd make Dutch Babies, because I asked her to and because I love them, that sweet fluff and powder that made a morning extra special.

The way she let me have a 9 and 1/2 year old birthday party, because I was a summer baby, because I had never had a birthday party before, and because I wouldn't stop nagging her about having one.

The way she taught me the importance of inviting *everyone* to the party, even those who I'd rather not.

The way I decided I would start a club called the Old Parent's Club, of which she and Dad would be presidents.

The way she showed me, but did not tell me, how lucky I was to have older parents.

The way the little bits of her come back: in a certain street sign, in a western ballad, in an aisle in the grocery store, in the view of a beat up-station wagon, in a busy little girl trailing her mama's steps.

The way she provided me with grace, for she was Grace: a gift, undeserved, from God.

Dear Dad

I didn't eat the plums
but borrowed twenty bucks.
The clothes now drying will

be ready when you wake.
When washing separate
the white and darks; you turned

your boxers pink. If you
go shopping, buy the milk
non-fat; the other kinds

are full of it. I know
that mom would be surprised
to see you make your bed

yourself now. Once, she told
me when you first got hitched
you asked her if she'd hang

your shirts up, buttoned at
the top. She always did,
and now I do the same.

Well, *this is just to say*
I love it when you call
me angel, just like her.

Supermarket

How can I not feel sorry for this man,
The older gentleman whose buying franks,
A frozen fish filet, some milk, and buns
To wrap around his dogs? I see him by
Himself, his table has an empty seat.
His wife would cook him vegetables,
Potatoes, cornbread, steak, and apple pie.
There's no one now to tell him "wipe your face"
Or "take your multi-vitamin," for she
Who with religion took her daily dose
Has proved how arbitrary are our ends.
I picture my own dad who shops alone
A pot pie, frozen spinach, loaf of rye.
I cringe and know to you he's that old man.

16 Days

A time for every purpose under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1-2.

Those days held moments, little flecks of time
in which I thought you'd make it, live to walk
me down the aisle, and sing a ballad rhymed
to my own little boys and girls. You'd rock

them into dreams the way you rocked me, small
and needy. Steve and I sat either side,
infused you with your prayers, our palms. Still all
your systems closed up shop, a time to die.

When Father Justin came with holy oil,
you thanked him for anointing you. Smile slack,
eyes lopsided, polite within the toil.
Struck down by stroke and still your faith intact.

Never again will I hug you, my haven,
those massive arms. Not here. Never again.

Longing For the Day When It Rains So Much, I Can Hear the Grass Grow

Three years ago, my Dad sold the lot above our house to a young city couple with wild ideas about living in the country. They planted a mansion on the ground that raised our steers to fatness for the fairs and sprouted purple-flowered thistles in the spring. Tom and I had to slice each stalk with wood-handled shears to keep the fires from coming. Like good dogs that die, good land can have a hold on us.

The house is up for sale now, the structure my family has grown in and out of for over thirty years. No one is ready to take down the rows of pictures hanging in the hall, emblems of our connectedness. My sisters and I sit over the floor heater in the hall and compare the features, comment on the ones that have sprung up in the grandchildren. Mom and Dad were both only children, but their offspring multiplies like the loaves of Christ.

We'll put the pictures up at the ranch, my grandfather's and my father's first love. After a branding, I'll lounge on the porch on a couch that my Dad took cat naps on. If I listen to the wind beating against the poplar trees, I may hear the boom of his voice telling me to bring him a jug of water. Even in the hospital in his last days, he begged me for a glass of water. He, like the land, needed water to grow. I understand now why he always feared drought.

Deliverance

When I walked into the delivery room, my sister was lying on her side, facing away from me. The seams of her gown formed a two-sided triangle down her back.

Someone in hospital blues was working on her back, a black string, like the stuff that stitches are made of, poked out from between two vertebrae, and a strip of dark red was dripping down her back. It was an epidural.

It was beyond my blood strength to stay.

I left and got an oil change, thought about that drip, drip, drip, how oil and blood are the same consistency.

I figure the brown of her husband's hand must have turned white like binder paper when she squeezed it, pushing his blood out with the baby.

So Matthew arrived.

Mom was in the hospital at that same time, a patient herself. She on the fifth floor, KG and Matthew on the third. Her low white blood cell count getting refilled. It's funny that when we are dying, we keep filling ourselves up with stuff, as if to keep our forms for death.

So she was wheeled down and held the boy, her thirteenth grandchild, the last she'd know. She probably looked down at that little self and took note of detail, those big dark lips, the darker blackish eyes. She needed particulars.

Last month, Matthew turned one.

At his party, there was a trampoline for the kids. Before anyone came, I climbed onto the trampoline and began to jump. Each leap higher than the one before, fervor and nature pushing me upward towards the heavens.

Summer, on the Patio

If you were here tonight, we would listen
to the Giants game on the patio,
and I'd pluck petals from the roses,
suck in the smell from the light
pink ones with yellow tips
and think of Mom.

You would hoof around the big cement squares,
your right leg, wooden and sturdy,
dragging behind the left.
Only yesterday, I reread your obituary
to find out it was the right one Korea took.

We'd wish it were ten years earlier
when I was in high school
and we'd be up at the steer pen,
getting the wild rascals ready for the fair.
I think you've got a champion, honey.
Look at the finish over his ribs...
Can't go wrong with those Angus.

We'd lament the going-out-of-business
of the last old time country station in the area.
Who would play *Saginaw, Michigan* for us anymore?
We'd admit that you could buy the tape,
but that there's something so satisfying
about listening to it through the A.M. waves,
as if a reward after a good day's work.

You'd have a rip in the knee
of your Levis, a ketchup stain
on the pocket of your shirt.
And I'd hassle you and love you for it.

You might make fresh tomatoes with purple onions,
flood them in oil, pepper, salt,
maybe pan-fried thick steak,
sourdough with lots of butter.
Food would be hearty and it would be good.
Because it was you
and it was summer
and it was the Giants

and though we'd be alone,
we'd be together.

I haven't gone back to Sky Lane
since we sold the house.
I remember how after Mom died
you used to come home from work
and sit in your beat-up white truck
for a while before you came in.
I never loved you more than the day
you told me that you would sit out there and cry.

Sometimes, I sit outside in my car and cry,
before going into my own new house,
the one I wouldn't have if you were still alive.

I've been there two years now and still,
I long for those days, and still,
I have that old desire
to be fenced in,
to be somebody's *angel cake*,
to be loved for no reason at all.

Winter, on those Rainy Days

If you were here tonight, we'd head
to OJ's for a big plate of pasta.
I'd come over to your office after school,
read you my short stories about small town America,
We'd laugh because you'd be wiping your wet eyes
at the end of the first page.

We might hit a Broncos Basketball game.
I'd watch your Levi's make
the slow and steady one-step-at-a-time
down the stairs to our section.
You'd like the new recruit,
would probably say something about
the fact that those cold Alaska winters
made him tough, *strong as a bull*.
Why don't you go up and get us
some popcorn? you'd say,
handing me your weathered wallet,
just like you did when I was eight,
and eighteen.
We'd hang our heads low after a loss,
but hit Marie Calendars after a win.
Winning beats losin' every time, you'd say.

We might be hanging at home
in the rumpus room,
set the heater to about 90,
and set our sights on a double feature.
Nance, you asleep? you'd ask
halfway through. *Come on, go to bed*,
you'd direct me at the end, as if I were still ten.
I wouldn't mind.
I always liked to fall asleep upstairs
to the sound of your TV down below.

I was hoping someday you might be able
to hold my first-born in your football hold,
just like you did to Matthew G.
and Matthew N. and the rest
of your children's children before them.

The 2nd Joyful Mystery—The Visitation

Sometimes, your visits come at the most inopportune moments
driving me out of bed to the drafty garage at eleven on a Sunday night.
I put on a fleece, crouch my back over the wood desk, pound out a poem.
Only then will you let me sleep.

I wish, on those nights, that I was there next to you, in your bed at home
on Sky Lane. It would be one of those nights when Dad was at the ranch
and I would sleep with you. We would each be reading. You would pat
my hand because I'd start crying about some I'd read.

You come to me at work. I'll look up at you in the picture on your
wedding day, that white face and dark hair, that dress that Julie wore for her wedding.
Dad wearing a wide smile of satisfaction because finally he married the girl
that he'd been in love with since the 5th grade. It's then I remember
you both won't be there on my day. Then the boss comes in.
He sees my wet face and back steps and stutters.
He's the father of five boys. He can't stand to see me cry.

I am not alone in the car because you are there with me. When I brake too quickly
and jerk my purse out of the passenger seat and onto the floor, you are there
bracing your hand against the windshield and telling me to watch where I'm going.
It makes you nervous, the manic way I drive, flipping stations, making calls,
sipping the fountain drink balanced on my thigh, gliding through yellows, through reds.
But my face goes wet again because I know you're right. In the second I look
down to grab a tape, the world could rotate. I could make someone lost forever.

What did the Virgin Mary do when the angel Gabriel came to visit her, telling her
that she would bear the Savior? She was probably in the middle of a dream about Joseph
and the family they would have, when Gabriel jolted her awake with the news.
Did her face betray her annoyance at the disturbance, her eyelids wrinkle indignantly?
Did her shoulders tighten, her mind roll over with scenes of a hardshipped life?
No. Instead, she opened up her body to that inevitable heartbreak.
I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to your word.

I look to her example, that perfect Virgin.
Wonder how she carried such pain with dignity, smiled within her sorrow.

Sometimes, I think of how ungrateful I am. This selfish girl.
Sometimes, I shun you, so I don't have to miss you.

Sometimes, your visits are fleeting, inopportune, joyful, a mystery.

Our Father

You were my Dad's favorite,
the army boy,
who rode his bike across country,
got a flat in Colorado,
hitch hiked to the Thrifty's store in town
to call us and say
I'm your cousin from New York...
can you pick me up?
I'm in town.

You had never eaten an artichoke
before you came to California.
But you ran the hills around the house and the flats in town,
wrestled on the lawn with us.

You stayed a month or so and still
we wished it longer.

I remember going to your wedding in Virginia.
I'd never seen a person married in a uniform.
At first, it seemed so formal,
but we drank Guinness at your reception.
Things were as they should be.

The last time you came here,
Dad was dying.
He was in a coma
and still you flew out
to sit in the ICU waiting room,
to sleep at the hospital.
to pray,
to turn to one of us
at just the right time.

We'd wash our hands
before we went in to see him.
John said he'd soap up
the length of time it took to say one "Our Father,"
making sure his hands were clean.

I remember you sitting across from me in the hospital cafeteria.
You were a column, thick stone with chiseled edges.

And yet I saw your flesh when you told me
I respected him more than any man I've ever known, besides my own father.

What did you say to Dad
each time you'd go in?

Now, you're in Afghanistan,
away from your wife, your boys, your Mom.
You're being the ranger you've trained your whole life to be.
And I've chosen to write you this poem to tell you

I saw your Mom two weeks ago
and I told her we'd be praying.

Now each time we wash our hands,
we think of you,
say an "Our Father,"
and pray the world doesn't end
today.

In the Green Fishing Box

In the green fishing box,
army green and metal,
Mom kept all our birth certificates,
social security cards,
veteran's dependents medical cards
laminated with goofy photos that we took
at some old Vets Hospital in Oakland.

I am not supposed to be the person
who holds my own social security card,
maintains my own birth certificate,
certificate of live birth;
that does not feel like my job.

But today on my kitchen counter
my sister left my portion
of the green fishing box,
a worn 5x7 manila envelope,
my first and last name written on it in pencil,
my Mom's writing,
those big N's,
loopy like they had big hats on top.

Tucked in with the card and certificate,
a stack of crispy two dollar bills,
one from the 1928 series,
the rest from the 1976 series.
In childhood I thought them worth millions,
and they are.

I wonder what happened to her collection
of wheat-back pennies.
We'd put them aside whenever we got them as change,
piled them up in some canister in the top drawer
of her jewelry chest.

Some days, it feels like there's no one left
to teach you about wheat-backs,
to keep your birth certificate in an old fishing box,
to make the N's in your name look beautiful,
using a beat-up old pencil
that she sharpened herself

with the manual sharpener she kept on the desk.

Upon Getting the Call

This morning my sister called me *Hon* on the phone. She laughed lightly, addressing me like she does her own kids.

I hung up the phone to face a mound of clothes waiting to be folded, closeted, put in place. I have no strength to move mountains today.

My pregnant sister-in-law is at the hospital, the fourth of her children coming forward, another soul to adorn the world, another grandchild.

There have been three grandchildren born since their passing into a May afternoon and a December dawn. There are three more to arrive by June,

one today, a perfect little daystar in the unceasing dullness of February. Tonight, I will hold the tiny hand, my own hand a medium between the dead and the just born,

my parents sifting through me and into that fresh flesh. But winter has a way of lodging itself cold under my skin. *No father, no mother, only fruitless lovers.*

The mantra knocks around in my wintered head. But today, I have no right to sit in my own pity: There is a little miracle working to sanctify us.

Spring knocks lightly.

IV.
Graces Unsolicited

Contortions

I want to work with contortions, make things fit
that don't. Stuff my stomach in my shoe to stop

it from growing. Mesh the bodies of the boys who
live in my eyes. Make them lock ribcage to ribcage,

scapula to jawbone. But contortion exists outside
my creation. Mostly in Spring, when the world bathes

its backside and the mammals go loco. An April
bar knows such convolution. Bags of flesh hang

on bar stools and bartenders and bar drinks to
twist themselves straight, seeking to find where

they got lost. The drunk's mind knocks against
his skull, bruises its cords, while the drunk dances

a jagged jig. Sometimes, I long to rock a minute
in his shoes, receive his blasted eyes. They can

see beyond the cages of logic, teach me how to
become unchained. How to stretch my ear to my

toe to increase range of notion. Fit glass jars
of water into the fire. Swallow an apricot whole.

Job Dissatisfaction

The fierce pace of my windshield wipers
informs me
that they detest the drudgery of their maintenance,
which brings me home in the rain.

**Graces Unsolicited,
Or
That for Which We Neglect to Say Thank You**

The way the right side of a book
gets thinner and thinner
under your thumb
as the plot thickens.

Finding ten bucks
in winter's pants.

Home. The smell of bacon snapping
and coffee dripping. Home.

The salt of bacon.

A kiss, not sought out,
from my three-year-old nephew.

The comfort of Levis'
worn a second time. Third. Fourth.

The dark jeans I wore
shooting skeet on the hillside last Thanksgiving
finally losing the green weed stains.

Handmade beaver earmuffs
Charlie brought me from Cownie Furs in Iowa.

A cold beer in a dark brown bottle:
a baseball cap in summer.

Having that one day
every nine years
when things are right.

Raise a Flag

Eat a green apple and appreciate
the strength of its skin. Get strong skin.

Reach to the top right corner of your closet.
Take out your grandmother's funeral flag,
a World War One nurse's remains.
This time is what it's been waiting for,
sitting patiently in the tight
triangle fold for thirty years.

Confess.

Study the map. Navigate your way
into your own opinions.
Have an opinion.

Fall into
Norman Rockwell's *Mending the Flag*.
Learn to mend.
Mend your heart.

Sing.

Pray to St. Michael the Archangel.
Simply pray.

Write a letter to Missouri.

Work.

Feel the fingers that type the keys,
the legs that carry you upstairs to the bathroom.
You can move.
You've got blood moving through you.
Make use of it.

Grieve.

Drive slowly. Look
left and right
for boys on bikes,
girls on skateboards,

for children eating ice cream,
chasing red rubber balls.

Wave.

The Aquarium Effect

Thou shalt not sunbathe shirtless in your own backyard in a small town without there being an editorial in the paper about your doing so. *Did you hear that Tiffany is now going out with Tommy B. though she used to go out with his brother, but that was last month and that's soooooo ooooooover.* It is pointed out that Tiffany was also recently going out with Johnny R., Tommy B.'s cousin. Johnny R. hasn't been out lately due to a three-day heartache, *but he's got the babes chasing him like he's sugar so he'll be back in the game soon.* The line of communication is a little jagged in smaller towns: Sam learns fifth-hand that his neighbor, Joe, is planning to sell his house, and Sam ha-rumphs and walks right over to give that Joe a scrap of his mind. *Why didn't you tell me first...maybe I wanted to buy it!* Come to find out, Sam's only building a granny unit onto the back of his house, never plans to move, *God willing, I'll die here.* It is in this aquarium that you and all your colors show, whether or not you go out shirtless or fully clothed because you, like the guppies in the tank, are on display for the town to see at church, at the bar, at the golf course, at school. Is there anyone among us who is not hiding something? In the city, I can duck into a museum, hop into a piece of artwork and evade notice. I blend right in with the oil painting. The shopping mall is a good blending place: so many items to see, touch, purchase, you almost misplace your breath in all the shapes and colors. Many times I've longed to bash the aquarium, bust its glass walls, and get out with my scrapes and bruises to a bigger, less boxy place. But standing on a hillside in that small town, I feel split half open. I can't help but love the tiny world inside the world where you can sit on your porch and watch the sun inch down after a good day, drink a cold beer in a silver can, wave to the passersby, watch them wave back, look south towards the vineyards and north towards the vegetable fields and know that amidst all the chatter, something must be right here.

The Smell of a Hot Horse

It's dust and sweat melded together on that fine hair
that makes you feel at home,
not home like in your house
but home as in you are where you should be.

I can't forget the way they ran
to the brown gate at the top of the driveway
when I'd come with alfalfa.
Such longing in their eyes.

Horses came to us in cycles:
a brother's roping horse here over the college summer,
a friend's hag needing green,
a fat mare.

The ears of one poor brute
were ravaged with fleas or mites,
some sort of tiny bloodsuckers that left him
shaking his head to free himself.
But those suckers latched on with all their legs
and tiny sticker teeth, digging into the finest skin inside
that horse's ear, scarring up the only delicate part left to him,
a body mangy, ribbed, ready to call it quits.

I would crawl under the fence each time I fed him,
spray his brown-bloodied ears with foam,
dig out each hateful little skinsucker
and smash the hell out of it.

Airport Bar

Spanish is spoken in truckloads,
and I love that they don't think I'm listening
or can understand.

I learned today the contents of a Long Island:
vok-ka, rum, trip-pull sec, tek-ki-la, bar mix (that's sweet-un-sour) and a shotta coke.

I'm feeling long enough to stretch to Long Island.

It is customary to have thinning hair if you're sitting at the bar,
and so, not fitting in,
I find my place in a corner bench seat.

Bartender, kinky long hair and crooked teeth,
watches over me as I hide in the corner.
She does not look at me funny when I ask for a cup of ice.

I vow to take up football as a pastime,
to hunt down John Madden in his bus.

I vow to never talk on my cell phone in elevated decibals in a public place.

I vow to never make out with my boyfriend in an airport bar
unless I'm drunk.

Drink Bloody Marys for nutrients.

Don't smile back at Latin lovers over 50;
They think it means something you don't.

Popcorn machines house exploding kernels.
It is likely the same kernels that explode today
will be scooped out of the box and served up to someone else tomorrow.

When you're bored,
it is important to remember that 16-year-old boys with their moms
are still 16,
still boys,
and still, with their moms.

Port-o-Potties

Or

Thinking About the Crapper Business on the Commuter Shuttle From Gilroy to Hollister

My brother says it might be pretty cool to get into the port-o-potty business. He can see it now: *Mike's Crappers*.

I say I want in. We'll call it *Nino's Crappers*.

My nephew says *shut the hell up; don't talk like that at a party*.

I say nothing, shove my tongue to the back of my throat. Put a lid on it.

There's no use being in business when you can't talk business.

I move to Florida, line *Nino's Crappers* up and down the coastline. Neat green plastic boxes stocked with sinks and soaps. A sweet and clean American dream.

A Boy and a Girl
Or
Sacrificios

She says she's given up drinking for Lent.

Drinking? he says. *Not drinking for forty days?*

He says he's given up masturbation, *but not really for Lent, that's not really appropriate.*

He shakes his head with a doubtful smile...*Forty days with no personal gratification.*

~

Por qué hacemos estos sacrificios...y por quién?

Es que compartir en el dolor de Cristo. Pan y agua. Carne y sangre.

~

Sometimes, when he gets a little drunk, he holds her hand, soft as butter, under the table.

Sometimes, it feels better than holding himself.

The Gift of Your Brain

There are moments
when you can't help but thank God
for the gift of the brain
and not just any old brain
but the brain he gave *you*
the one that knocks
out ideas in your own head.

A Tribute to the Monopolization of the Starbucks Chain

When you're always at Starbucks
every poem is about Starbucks.
Good thing I don't live in San Francisco
else I'd be beaten to a coffee grind
by those who tow the liberal line.

For the Secret Love of an Asphalt Worker in Ashland, Oregon

If there is one thing we learn from the Bard
it is that love knoweth no boundaries.

My friends berate my beloved on the street
for it is he that stops traffic
to pour the hot asphalt that hinders
us from making our play in rightful time.

But it is the same he that cares not that my eyes are hazel,
the color of a tree's north side.

I have known no love like that of my asphalt worker,
that of the one who does not decry my muddied eye,
that of the one who reveres the flaw of my thigh,
the faulty knock of my knee.

I am clumsy, yeah,
have trouble balancing the drinks on a tray,
the steps of a hot and dry day.

But my beloved forgives all,
greet me with the sweet and tender smile
of a child

and demonstrates that beyond all outer skin and bone
there is an inside to me,
which is worthy,
which is well.

Someday, I will look back upon these days
and know

my Bard was not William
but he, the gentle soul on the street
who guided my way through the hot asphalt,
who took care to make sure that my shoes
and those of my sister
melted not in the hot of the street
which he took great care to repair.

In Thanksgiving for the Priest

There are too many times
we've neglected to say thank you
to these men of God
who give us our daily bread.

To Father Rudy,
for his unceasing joy,
for his steady unwillingness
to despair,
for his commitment to harvesting
saints out of the clay soil of Hollister.

To Father Claudio,
for blessing my sister's newly planted apricot orchard,
for knowing that on that field
God would be present
in every seed,
in every leaf,
in every cot,
and every picking bucket,
in the races to see which cousin
could fill up his bucket first,
in the yearly coming together
to gather the fruits of our labor.

To Father Burns,
for coming to visit my mom
when she was dying,
for giving her his own mother's necklace,
for the gentle way he put the small chain
around her small neck
and straightened its saint
neatly below the chin of my own saint,
my mother.

To Father Justin,
for coming to Good Samaritan Hospital
when I called to tell him
my dad had had a stroke,
for anointing his head with oil,
for simply
answering my call,

answering *the* call.

To Father DaSilva,
for refusing to let his being bound
to a wheelchair
stop him from appreciating
the joys of his garden,
the delight of cooking with the food
you've grown yourself,
for sharing his time, his wisdom
with a desperate girl in her early twenties
who resented being orphaned so young,
for discussing with her
the letters of St. Paul,
for loving the Blessed Mother
in a such way
that it showed on his face.

To Father Euteneuer,
for knowing long before I did
that your gut feeling
is your gut feeling
even if it's at odds
with your heart,
for traveling from Ireland
to Argentina
to Nigeria
to South Korea
saving soul
after soul
after soul
because a life
is a life
is a life.

To Father Larry,
for his humble brown Franciscan robe,
for his gentle, round face,
for his tender hug
after a painful confession,
for his ability
to give me my life back
outside the San Miguel Mission
with his overflowing

fount of forgiveness.