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FILTERED FICTION, TUNNEL TRUTH

by

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Bachelor of Science
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1994

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Filtered Fiction, Tunnel Truth

by

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The purpose of this writing is to ask questions about identity, to re-evaluate and to better articulate my world and self. The form of this manuscript is a blend of poetry and prose forms, mainly autobiographical in nature, somewhat fictionalized (or revised) and using subjects that are most significant to the understanding of my world and self views, ancestry and family, education, environment, etc. . . .

My goal, and reasons for the content and form selections, is not to find truth and convince my audience of this truth—to achieve synthesis of thought. Instead, through my writing I intend to deeply probe and present ambiguities and possibilities of our world, investigate my perspective, and hopefully encourage a search and a conversation with readers. The searching and conversing together, to whatever degree that is possible, is the motivation.

Do I answer my questions; do I discover anything? Perhaps, but more important is the structure of the questioning, a series of reflections that trigger other memories and questions in myself and in my readers; an invitation to a conversation. The quest, the search for and creation of self and world through storytelling is a commonality of all thinking beings, and through sharing and combining our infinitely diverse stories we can continue to negotiate an understanding of being human. This is my story.
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Philosophers and writers throughout history have been preoccupied with answering the questions of who we are and why we are here. However, this task has not been exclusive to philosophers and writers; these questions must be answered or reconciled by everyone who wishes to be conscious, to some degree, just to continue living. These thinking individuals often adopt a ‘world view’ to help them identify self and purpose in this world.

We want to make sense of what we see around us to ask: What is the nature of the universe? What is our place in it and where did we come from? Why is it the way it is? To try to answer these questions we adopt some ‘world picture’ (Hawking, 192).

Different cultures and time periods have had quite differing world views, ranging from the great chain of being, reincarnation, and evolution, to manifest destiny, transcendentalism and even the American Dream. “...An infinite tower of tortoises supporting the flat earth is such a picture, so is the theory of superstrings” (192). While these world views are constantly being re-evaluated, typically they are adopted to suit the needs of the dominant culture in each particular period. Consolation is the primary function; to be able to believe that we are here for a reason can console even those who cannot fully understand that reason.

I believe we can never really prove that a certain world view is right, especially when dealing with religion-based views. How can we ‘prove’ the existence of heaven or of re-incarnation without objective, observable evidence? Even so, there is nothing wrong with trying to answer the questions of identity and purpose; nothing wrong
with searching for the consolation we need to continue living and growing. I think that consolation is necessary, but I also realize that consolation based on an unprovable world view is very tenuous, if not completely illusory. It proves difficult in one other way as well: consolation available to the masses through a specific dominant world view may not be available on a personal level. It can be very difficult for a specific person to accept the concept of a benevolent God protecting his prized creation, man, if observable, personal experience shows a world devoid of benevolence. Therefore, individuals commonly need and adopt a separate, personal world view which struggles with these questions and may eventually overturn the dominant world view for something more consistently consoling to a changing population. “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (Rich 35). We need to also write and rewrite our past to understand our self and purpose to any degree. This, I believe, is the job of a writer.

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of Mae Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.

I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

(O’Brien 203-04)

I accept our need for—MY need for—a personally constructed world view, stemming
from the human desire for consolation and the human need to live and feel and grow. From this acceptance I have cultivated my belief in the 'I,' the importance of the individual telling an individual perspective, understanding or experience, and developing and questioning the world and self views influencing those perspectives.

To acknowledge the deeply personal aspect of each individual's search for self and purpose in the world, and the deeply personal nature of each individual's conclusions—even when tenuous and possibly illusory—I write from the first person, portraying and projecting only my search. Although the need for the quest, the process, and possibly even some conclusions are common for many others, the only person I will speak for is myself. I believe in reflecting, revising, retelling this experience—story-telling—constructing my story as I construct my sense of self and world. But although this story is from one person's point of view, one person insisting upon the importance of her voice and seeking an audience of understanding, the story is not a lecture or an imparting of expertise; it is a discussion, an invitation to search together for knowledge, an invitation to question what is told in all stories, to inspire new quests even as we question their purpose and success.

The searching and conversing together, to whatever degree that is possible, is my goal in writing. The 'truth' can never really be found; certainly it cannot be found in the work when only one tenuous side of the dialogue is preserved; truth, or what we accept as truth, is dependent on readers and the experience they bring to the text as well. This philosophy of writing as a dialogue partially originates in the “dialectic,” as Marx used it, but deviates as it only attempts to provide and support one side, the thesis, while acknowledging the possibilities of many others. Instead of continuing to the antithesis and synthesis, as in the writing model of the dialectic, the cycle begins over with a new thesis or a modified thesis, perhaps based on an unheard antithesis, reflecting a less rigid, more feminine dialogue. In this 'feminine' form, the dialectic does not set up oppositions to produce a synthesis (a new ideal) to replace all the
original thesis/antithesis voices (Taylor 9). Instead, the thesis is modified or continues to assert itself as valid in some way—possibly redefining the context of its validity—after listening to a range of voices, not necessarily in opposition, but representing other possible perspectives and degrees of support to questioning concerns. This may be based on the “coequal” participation between poets and critics of which Bloom spoke and upon which feminist writers like Annette Kolodny have since insisted (Kolodny 47). But listening is the difficult part for writers, and writing as a dialogue privileges listening more than merely speaking. I attempt this by responding to or continually trying to connect with even my silent readers. I do not settle for synthesis, but seek a connection between the continuously diverse and separate. For me, no real synthesis can ever be achieved, but thesis begins and begins, shifting for whatever antitheses could be possible.

Although this philosophy’s conception is based on the dialectic, the quality that I have labeled “feminine” in this model is influenced by feminist studies, especially as depicted by Deborah Tannen in her article, “I’ll Explain It to You”: Lecturing and Listening. In this article she describes several studies done to determine the differences between male and female communications and attempts to draw conclusions about the habitual behavior of each group. Tannen, in commenting on one such study by Elizabeth Aries, says:

It is crucial to bear in mind that both the women and the men in these studies were establishing camaraderie, and both were concerned with their relationships to each other. But different aspects of their relationships were of primary concern: their place in a hierarchical order for the men, and their place in a network of intimate connections for the women. The consequence of these disparate concerns was very different ways of speaking. (Tannen 263)

Tannen described these ways of speaking as either “displaying knowledge and exper-
tise," or having the knowledge of several perspectives and the ‘answers’ for a range of topics or, for the women, “gaining a closeness through more intimate self-revelation” (263). The later form depends upon trust and also implies speaking only out of personal experience, not out of egotism, but as a way to invite the other to speak on a similar level—each speaking from only their perspective but with equal voice. In this mode of communicating, the one who knows the most about the subject—the authority, the author—does not speak for all but speaks with the intention of hearing more than saying, sharing and experiencing, and learning together (258-270). In contrast, the purpose of the antithesis in the dialectic, at least in Hegel’s system of the dialectic, is to challenge the thesis (Taylor 8), not to establish the connection with which mutual and numerous revelations can be made. The male form of dialectic involves ending with the goal of synthesis, one single answer to which both the thesis and antithesis is finally and perfectly reduced. With one conclusive truth for all there can be no more divergent perspectives, no voices, thesis or antithesis, to challenge the synthesis or to continue the dialogue. Conversation is no longer necessary. I think that while Marx adopted the dialectic and became one of the most famous authors to implement this writing style, his philosophy of continuous revolution and his concerns for “the numerous national and local literatures” being subsumed by a less varied and less culturally rich “world literature” (Marx 84) would exclude such a synthesis. I too resist ideal synthesis.

Why is the invitation for readers to participate in the subjects of my writing and the act of writing, or communicating in general, more important to me than teaching my readers whatever I do know, more important than showing readers what is wrong with the world in hopes that they will change it? I simply relish the conversations, the intimacies that can exist in all communication, even writing. This importance for me stems from an essay, A Map for Rereading, by Annette Kolodny, in reaction to a quote by Harold Bloom, “You are or become what you read” (59). I want the

x
closeness and understanding in the reader/writer relationship, but I want to resist the synthesis, the "becoming what you read." I want to converse with my readers in the same way I argue with my mother, having some chance of understanding each other better without either of us actually compromising self to make that connection.

What does this structure look like? What is the poetic form to which such a philosophy gives birth? Obviously, this writing isn't exactly a dialogue where synchronism is possible. The responses cannot be written into the text, but only encouraged throughout. It is somewhat fragmentary yet can be read as complete: one complete view, one argument deeply and completely investigated, one experience, but fragmentary as the work hesitates, pauses, changes pace and tone, leaving room for other views and trying to listen to the voices of its readers. It is cyclic in nature—not conclusively cyclic, but its investigations emerge through cycles of beginnings, struggling to go somewhere; but, without the voices in response, its only conclusion is a tentative beginning over.

Thus it is important in my writing to vary the forms of my poetry often, to use mostly short poems that shift drastically in form, even becoming prose, to break the steady rhythms, the certain droning lecture quality, which, while may be interesting or even beautiful, does not leave room for the reader to pause. The easier rhythm of prose and its structure insisting on some conclusion or end is particularly important to help readers feel enough closure to pause and consider before continuing, but prose alone would be too conclusive, too authoritarian for my hesitations and the uncertainties of my world view. The poetry, conversely, allows an indeterminacy that readers can think about without having to accept or reject before continuing; it is a cycle of experience that can simply be experienced.

This is, of course, a general theory governing the selection of forms of poetry within a larger work—book length—and it has more to do with the arranging of the poems, or revising the formats to adjust the speed and experience of the reading,
encouraging a discontinuous reading and allowing for reflection and response. This theory also influences the content of poems, stressing the very personal and confessional over more objective issues or more global and current crises. But there are hints of this philosophy of forming in my writing even within separate, individual poems and even beyond the selection of the subjects for these poems. I have recently found myself writing poems that blend prosaic speech in more typically poetic structured lines, such as in the following poem:

**War Constructions**

I believe in taking things for granted.  
When I asked my Dad why he fought a war  
he said, "so my children won't have to know war."  
I know war, am taught war,  
each time I'm caught not thinking about it.  
CNN is there  
M*A*S*H and Rambo and even Rocky  
For fear of war lurking—I am prepared.  
resolved to eat cold cans of  
Spam and pork and beans  
not buy gas  
serve my country  
bake cookies  
if my brother is called  
I watch for it, hide from it  
live in spite of it.  
"Tell me a story, Daddy."  
"Tell me how you won the war."

In this case, the beginning assertions are conclusions, what I feel to be true even as I rethink the subject from the perspective of knowing my father only through his war stories. I wish that I could live in a world where war did not need to be "taught," but this world of war is the only world my father has ever known, a world he cannot abandon without losing much of himself. Who is my father besides the man who stockpiles can goods and believes in dying for his country? Who is my father besides the man that the Great Depression and WWII constructed? How can
I forget war, yet remember my father; how can I reconcile this? How can I insist on the truth of the necessity of forgetting war? I cannot. I can blend the prose speech patterns, reflecting my conclusiveness with the more typically broken lines of poetry, reflecting my ambiguity and uncertainty. My goal is not to find truth and convince my audience of this truth—to achieve synthesis of thought. Instead, I can only present the ambiguities, investigate my perspective, and hopefully encourage a search and a conversation with readers.

In my perspective, in my personal world view, the world is a story unfolding. I don't mean that there was only one beginning, that there will be only one end, with what falls in between the necessary plot that leads to that conclusion. Rather, I see the world as a cycle of stories, like a sonnet sequence. Many of the sonnets convey the same message as the previous sonnet, with very few differences in nuance or language: "Die single, and thine image dies with thee" (Shakespeare 2), "thou art too fair/ To be Death's conquest and make worms thine heir" (4), "Make thee another self, for love of me./ That beauty still may live in thine or thee" (5). Some shift dramatically, building to some conclusion, but there are constant conclusions and beginnings within the work that is the primary focus; one person living a personal story, with immediacy. In the above case, Shakespeare deeply investigates a personal world view—immortality through having children—and is not satisfied with one poem that basically conveys this view, but continues rewriting that same thought, deeply investigating every slight nuance of that thought, as a series of starting over with each new sonnet on this topic. But the story, the reasons behind this world view, is not fully developed. The very personal details behind the narrator so deeply desiring his subject to be immortal is left mostly to speculation. In one sense, this could be taken as an invitation to speculate upon what had to be censored, or it could be seen as the author reasserting a level of privacy, the speaker insisting on remaining marginally impersonal. Either way, this is not entirely an ideal example of inviting conversations—at best the author
is suggesting that while further speculation may be encouraged, the speaker has said all he will or can say on the subject. We are left feeling that after revising the language of the thought over many sonnets, the thought is finally expressed and that the speculation on the motives behind the thought will not change that thought. It is complete, not dependent on speculation or conversation.

Because of this conclusiveness, perhaps an even more accurate comparison for writing the world as what I am referring to as “a story unfolding” exists within Kingston’s short story, “No Name Woman.” This is the story of a young girl speculating about the omitted details of a story her mother told of the aunt who, from the shame of conceiving an illegitimate child, drowns herself in the well. She both speculates on the ways her aunt might have become pregnant—mostly focusing on the possible degrees of rape—as well as her mother’s motives for telling the story and how each version of the story might help her understand her ancestry, culture and her own identity. But because each attempt at retelling this story offers more than different nuances of an already decided story, some retellings are actually contradictory to previous ones. There is no sense of final truth that might be reached by attempting to revise the language of the thought until the thought is definitively expressed. Instead we see how the thoughts themselves are revised, and even if Kingston has decided to believe one version of the story over another, the possibilities and implications of the multiple versions of the story has impacted her life more than knowing the true history, more than ‘getting it right’ could. With Shakespeare’s sonnets, I am always waiting for him to investigate the unspoken motives of his arguments for reproduction, of immortality. I want to know if he ever faltered in his belief, ever, through anger or disillusionment, just thought: maybe beauty isn’t everything, maybe the world would be better if poets didn’t suffer over immortalizing beauty, maybe I should just let this beautiful subject of mine grow old and die. I want to hear and live the story of his maybe’s.
Therefore, my world view is essentially multiple versions of my perception and understanding, constantly shifting and progressing, but the progression may never conclude or may be continually concluding and even concluding in multiple, contradictory ways. I believe in personally and culturally re-evaluating the significance of each interpretation of the world, revising these interpretations on a regular basis to question “how we have been led to imagine ourselves... and therefore live afresh” (Rich 35).

My identity collides with this world view as ‘author,’ ‘performer’, and ‘character’ simultaneously. I construct and revise—author—my world view. I participate—perform—in the production of it, to some degree being led by it, and I am also created or born out of other world views and societal constructions—as a character. In my role as ‘writer’ I have authored my own views about the purpose and value of writer. I teach and learn—perform—within this structure, yet also realize the basis of my created views—characterization—and, through my participation, negotiate previous characterizations and traditions of writer.

With this world and self view, my story is loosely based on the societal constructions that have formed my character: ancestry and family, education, environment, employment/profession, dreams and aspirations, and my negotiating myself in relation to the ‘other.’ My story is only one small aspect in the world’s story, a beginning in a story of constant beginnings, and to what it may lead depends on the infinite stories of my audience.

I write to ask questions about identity, to re-evaluate and to better articulate my world and self. What is Identity? How is it constructed? Can we overcome the limitations of such constructions? What is my constructed identity? What can I do with it, in spite of it?

I begin with these questions; others I discover as I write. The search for the answers is my objective more than the answers, and this search is well suited to
confessional and reflective writing, somewhere between poetry and essay. I depend on past experiences, often to some degree fictionalized (or revised), and images with which I hope readers can connect, fascinating them and triggering their own memories, questions, and tentative answers.

Do I answer my questions; do I discover anything? Perhaps the real value of my writing lies in the structure of the questioning, a series of reflections that trigger other memories and questions in myself and in my readers; an invitation to a conversation. Essentially my writing is my story, though it is a story that in many respects is only beginning. The quest, the search for and creation of self and world through storytelling is a commonality of all thinking beings, and through sharing and combining our infinitely diverse stories we can continue to negotiate an understanding of being human. This is my story.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO STORY

The Story Bookcase

There is an old bookcase in my house, with which I've never been able to part. It was made old, with scraps and warped boards and leftover, unwanted paint. This bookcase is 'Story' to me. It has a story, several stories actually: how it was made, how it came to be mine, and what I had to do to move it into my recent house, but this is not what I mean by Story. Through this bookcase I have discovered and defined Story as what influences my life and what is born out of my life. My identity is linked to this concept of Story, which in turn is influenced by the countless identities with which I associate with my bookcase. It is my beginning. It is my ancestry, family, and my future. It is only an object, yet it is also the Story.

Story is the gaps in the stories my father tells, the parts that are so difficult for him to tell. His stories leave me afraid to attempt to fill the gaps and keep me anticipating the next story, hoping that I'll someday understand the larger Story of my father. This bookcase is a piece of my father's Story. Its presence reminds me how he created it from what others had discarded, its old determined body embodying his determination, continuous compromise, and his sense of himself as provider.

My Great Aunt's stories are often misunderstood as gossip. Her Story reveals a self defined by the old traditions. Her stories teach respect for past and question all deviations from it. I have learned that she is not intolerant of change—not even the past is beyond exaggeration or revision—but change is not something that just happens; it must be tested before it can be accepted. This bookcase houses many books she gave me, and reflects the stories that she told me.

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My mother's stories assume a protective posture—mere hints of stories, always obscuring the larger Story. She attacks stories as problems to be dealt with—rationalized, justified, forgotten. Her Story exists through unconscious slips, and I discovered many of those slips by sharing books with her.

My niece's Story is choice. Some of her Story can be read by which books she chooses and which she rejects. She is action, but her Story, like mine, is only beginning.

Kenneth's Story

There were many times when I was growing up that I wondered why even Tina's father, the struggling head of the poorest family on our block, bought her new presents for birthdays and Christmas, while my father made us only what we needed, when we needed it. It was not easy to understand. My father grew up during The Great Depression, while I grew up in the age of the Sears Christmas Wishbook. While he insisted that the whole family could use the same bath water, I fantasized over colorful, yet very breakable, plastic Barbie accessories. But there are many things that he made me that I have learned to appreciate, and I realize that I would be a different person in many respects if I had not been forced into this appreciation.

My father made me a bookcase out of scrap wood once. He used the warp of the planks to compensate for future shelf sag. These shelves would support more weight than a shelf made with perfectly new boards with reinforcement. The weight would actually flatten out the shelves over time.

When I moved out of my parent's house, I wanted to keep this bookcase, but I couldn't even get it through the door of my new house. This experience with my father is the real beginning of this bookcase for me.

I was devastated. My father repeated his verdict one more time, emphasizing my childishness in yet another round of well-meaning moralizing: "It's not much of a bookcase anymore... maybe that bottom shelf could reinforce that lose board in the garage... don't see much use in fussing over this no-how."

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I responded by puffing out my chest in what I hoped was a display of stubborn
dignity, though I suspect it was perceived as something closer to sentimental irrati-
onality. I should have let my father take the oversize, overused bookcase to the
dump, but I didn’t. Instead I resorted to my back-up plan.

“I know you’ll find a way. I’ll go make some iced tea.”

If the bookcase wouldn’t fit through the door, front or back, we would never get it into the spare bedroom no matter how carefully I had measured its destination. But I also knew that my father would never admit that he couldn’t do it. that he had let me down. It didn’t take long to pour the fresh tea over ice, and I returned to find him just as he had been, sitting on the edge of the cement block that supported the back half of the bookcase. This was the most fragile moment. My renewed presence would pressure him, but was it enough? Pesterin him could be the end of everything. I handed him a glass.

We sat on opposite ends of that bookcase, drinking tea and talking about not much of anything for three hours and twenty-two minutes. No one questioned our sitting there, half in, half out, and completely blocking the front door to the house. In the end, we sawed off the bottom shelf, six inches at a time, until it could be maneuvered through the entrance way.

That was three years ago, back when you could still guess at the original color, and perhaps even be sure of the original purpose of that bookcase. But I have it still, this is only a beginning of the Story.

Aunt Bea’s Story

My great aunt used to come out annually from Illinois to visit us, buying a couple of paperbacks to read on the way. She always gave me the books to make room in her suitcase for souvenirs. I relished them, reading each one a dozen times or more even though the plots were predictable the first time around. Besides bringing me books on her visits, she brought me family stories. One in particular touched me deeply.
I'm not sure I can even really reconstruct what she had told me now; the story has had several transmutations in my imagination. Secretly I have suspected that my aunt made it all up, knowing how much I loved such stories and how much I needed cheering up that day, after sitting alone in my room being punished. It meant much more to me that way, thinking it was a story just for me. And since then, I have made it my story. I have never even bothered to investigate it. Actually, I add to the story each time I tell it.

In my aunt's story, there are three headstones in a graveyard in Illinois, all bearing the same family name. In the middle is Gerald William and on each side is a Sarah Grady, one a devoted wife and the other a beloved mother, though both were born in the same year. Or so my great aunt told me the stones say....

She began with the obligatory, "Once upon a time," though I didn't expect a "happily ever after." It was a story about the beloved mother, but it began with the husband and devoted wife. It was a time just after the "savage Indians" had been "tamed" and a time when the new Americans grew up with all the world around them theirs. Rarely did anything interfere with that belief. In a small town in Illinois there lived Gerald and Sarah Kelley, who had just begun to start such a new life. Tragically, Sarah died in childbirth, the baby left forgotten in the father's grief. A young traveler—wanderer—heard the baby's crying and could not pass by without stopping. There was an eerie feeling about the place with the cries of untended animals echoing the baby's. She was a young, mixed breed woman (my great aunt believed she had been part Cherokee, part French, and possibly part Black) and an outcast.

When she entered the farmhouse she found the widower comatose with grief, soiled and unresponsive in the bedroom clinging to the body of his wife. The baby lay beside his mother, unwashed, trying to nurse. The stranger fed and cleaned the baby, disposed of the afterbirth, and packed up the child. She left the husband and retraced her footsteps to the last farmhouse, miles back down the road. The neighbors
quickly organized a burial, and afterwards, when the strange woman began cleaning and tending to the unmoving widower and his farm, no one said anything about it. She carried the baby everywhere.

After several weeks of barely letting the stranger feed and clean him, Gerald William Kelley walked out of the bedroom and saw her and the baby in the rocking chair he had made for his wife. He went to her, kissed her head, and told her how proud he was of her to give him such a beautiful baby. He called her Sarah, and she did not correct him, nor did anyone who had seen him in those weeks. Whatever her name had been, whatever her past, it was gone and she was Sarah Grady Kelley until the day she died. She bore nine children, though my aunt did not know how many had survived or of which child came the branch of the Kelley family that included my great aunt, my mother, and myself. But it doesn’t matter how the story might relate to me; it is a part of my Story now, held by my bookcase like the years of cheap paperbacks.

Betty’s Story

My mother did not read very often when I was growing up. Reading was idleness, a luxury, an excuse for not doing chores. She continually focused on the practical. My father had reading glasses; he relaxed after work reading the newspaper. My mother had sewing glasses that she used for reading if she had to, “just to keep the insurance man from robbin’ us blind, mind you.” Yet, in my mother’s sewing room, there was a small shelf of books that I often tried to catch her reading.

I took one of these books once, opening it to read at the dinner table just to see what she would say. I expected to be scolded for my rudeness, and was, but after my mother noticed what book I was reading, her tone changed slightly. “I don’t know if you’re old enough to understand that book,” she told me.

“It sounds interesting,” I replied.

“Well, when you’re done with it, I’d like to hear what you got out of it.”
“OK,” I had said.

I thought I was old enough to understand the book. I was convinced that what she thought I wouldn’t understand was about sex. The heroine is an Indian maiden threatened with being sold, raped and enslaved. But there is no actual sex in the book, because she escapes and lives independently, killing slave traders and fighting injustices everywhere. In the end she dies in the arms of a man who had tried to help her and who she would have probably married if she only could have made it out of that last battle alive. I told my mother, when I had finished the book, that it was about how important freedom was, and that it was worth fighting for to our dying breath. My mother shook her head sadly.

“I knew you were too young to understand,” she said. Then after a few seconds she continued, “It’s about the importance of motherhood. When you’re older you will understand.”

At the time I felt that I had finally solved the mystery of my mother’s books. That settled it, she didn’t sneak a few pages when no one was looking, she probably had never read the books at all. Yet, for years I tried to figure out how a book without a mother in it could be about motherhood.

I keep all of her books on my bookcase now. She gave them to me years ago. And now, after I know a little more about my mother, I understand what she said about the book. My mother didn’t escape. She married, had children, and lives to serve others. But she believes she has more than that heroine, motherhood instead of independence. I look at her books now and then, still wondering if that is enough.

Laura’s Story

“Why do we have to read in here?” Laura, my fifteen-year-old niece asked me.

“The books are in here.”

“Can’t we take them in the other room to sort through them?” Her voice grew fainter with every word as she watched the splintered planks of the giant case for signs of collapse under the weight of her breath.
I sighed. We emptied the shelves, toppling the worn tomes on the kitchen table, chairs, and the dull flowery floor. When all the books were free from the oppressive wooden shelves, she carefully read each back cover to form several ranked piles along the counter. The pile for final consideration leaned against the toaster, and I reshelved each of the other piles, careful not to rush her decisions.

I read each title that I reshelved, trying to imagine the sort of person Laura was becoming through her selections, gauging her maturity. She never even asked me what I had thought about any particular book, and I let her make her own choices. After her yearly visit had ended, I re-organized my remaining books. Long after she was gone, I wondered why I had kept any of them all of these years, trying to remember who I was when I had read each book, who I was still to become.

Karen’s Story

My aunt had told me that whenever we are at the lowest point in our life, someone will come along to help us if we will let them, but that sometimes ‘the letting them’ is harder than any of us realize. My mother believed that she would always be that person, ‘the helper.’ My father believed in never being in a position to need help, in being strong and smart and never needing anyone.

These are stories, but not my Story. I have yet to write my Story, but I begin with no small amount of stories; of beginnings, possibilities.

A few years ago I had begun sanding down my bookcase, but the wood was too dry from age. The top layer resisted and then splintered off, leaving deep groves on one side. I pushed it into the corner, dismissing my restoration plans. I have kept it for too many years, anyone can see that. Yet somehow I sense a beauty in it that I logically know is not there, and it seems to belong in that corner among the boxes of pictures and beside the closet of outgrown ballet tutu’s and prom dresses.

The bookcase itself is now a graveyard of tightly packed board games and cheap broken paperbacks that had never been particularly good books in the first place. I
thumb a row a books, disturbing the dust. Patches of light blue paint with darker edges flake off as I brush too close to one end. The darker blue had been the color of my bedroom in my parents' house for a time. The bookcase has the appearance of being held together by the paint alone, and that is peeling. No, it is held together by the ties of my memories, the stories it has held and represented. no matter how old or ordinary. It is Story. The beginning of my Story. The beginning.
CHAPTER 2

ANCESTRY AND FAMILY

Rock-a-bye

There were claw marks in the rocking chair
The afghan it wore—made from perfect, golden, human hair
Carved wooden bones, poles of its back, cry when she rocked
Yet she rocked—to ease the pain of others
And she sang for the privilege.

A Version of Grandmother

I did not know
    the swollen knuckles
    the lumps of breasts discarded on sterile trays
    the cane as she crowned other elderly inmates
    the medication of her confinement
I did not endure
    the cigarette frailty
    the robbery and rape paranoia
    the selling of memories to pay the state home
    the forced explanations for eccentricities
    the outbursts so beyond her crippling spine

I smelled the cinnamon gum purse
I felt the springing strokes of brushing hair
I knew the humoring smile of the coloring book critic
I tasted the stolen and shared sips of orange soda
I saw the sneaky cheese chunks dropped for the dog

So I know she was happy
Where Do Our Souls Go?

An old woman's husband dies—
  after a few years she gives away
  his belongings.
No longer can he belong.

She can't throw anything away or
  give anything to strangers—
  Give him away.
He must belong in the family.

Clothes from decades ago—
  given to cousins and nephews
  their children and nephews
They say, "fits well."

Rings are melted down—
  new jewelry for nieces
  who smile and don't ask.
The details long past.

Even in accepting such treasures—
  the gaining of given
  responsibility and obligation
Awkward reminders. All loss.

Each parting brings partial acceptance
  to the widow
  pain, loss, regret—baggage
Much harder to bury—
  impossible to forget.
If My Mother Sang To ME

My mother sang to the radio
during her dishes and cookie-batter and meat loaf
days of my childhood.
I listened—thinking it was so beautiful.
She knew all the words when every song was new
and immaterial to me.
She sang to recapture her youth,
there was no oven-foam or draino or ironing boards
in her voice.
I didn’t sing—all I had was youth.
I wished I had lost something so I could sing
with my mother.
Now I sing to for my mother
in a voice—not as sweet—
with too much lost.
The Burden of Beards

When I was a young girl my father told me that he was going to grow a beard.
"Why?" I knew he hated even a nightly hint of stubble.
"To know what kind of beard I would have if I wanted one."

I didn't remember him ever growing it out but in a few days he announced that he was a salt-n-pepper beard man.
I had visions of crystal vials with shiny, stainless steel tops dangling from his chin and sprinkling his newspaper with salt and pepper as he nodded dinner commentaries.

A dozen years later, eating over-salted, boiled ham sandwiches. I asked him if he had checked the color of his beard lately. "I've only gotten used to salt-n-pepper," he said.
And anyway, there is nothing else after, except white.

War Constructions

I believe in taking things for granted.
When I asked my Dad why he fought a war he said, "so my children won't have to know war."

I know war, am taught war, each time I'm caught not thinking about it.
   CNN is there
   M*A*S*H and Rambo and even Rocky
For fear of war lurking—I am prepared.
   resolved to eat cold cans of Spam and pork and beans
   not buy gas
   serve my country
   bake cookies
   if my brother is called

I watch for it, hide from it
   live in spite of it.
"Tell me a story, Daddy."
"Tell me how you won the war."
The Christmas Tree War

The holidays in America: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, all seasons of winter beauty, family, understanding, giving, and forgiveness. Sure, this is the twentieth century, a time of lost traditions and commercialism, but most Americans still hold these ideals in reverence and try to at least keep up the appearance of charity and good-will. And I myself have struggled for many years to recapture, or rediscover that magical something that I have felt has been slipping away for quite some time. It has not been easy.

In my earliest memories of the season, I cannot escape the impression of a certain excessive desperation in my family. Our house was utterly transformed, inside and out, with lights, holly, pine cones, ornaments, mobiles, candles, and candy dishes. My mother played holiday records all day, and at night my sister and I played our piano duets so that the family could gather around and sing traditional carols and hymns. But this never evoked any magical feelings in me. It was like staring for hours into an elaborately decorated Christmas tree, laden with every memory of every Christmas passed down throughout the ages, and not being able to see any part of the actual tree. No matter how much was there, there was still something lacking.

As an adult I have gained some understanding of this perceived emptiness. I had been sensing the silent depression of my father, and the overcompensating, reactionary impulse of my mother. Still, I was actually amazed when my father confessed to me that he couldn’t stand the holidays. He figured, now that his children were grown, he didn’t have to put on pretenses anymore, and that he hoped I wouldn’t mind if he didn’t attend any more “family-get-togethers” and “fancy-sit-down-dinners.” I hid my hurt for a few years in the same way my mother always had, through self-imposed guilt blended with a generous helping of denial. I tried diligently to improve my dinners in every conceivable way, then made up excuses for him when he still didn’t show. But unlike my mother I eventually realized that it was not my fault that he
couldn't stand the 'season's trappings' and consequently I also realized that I could not make him like the holidays.

Although relieved, I also had begun to feel estranged from my father, there was so much in those few weeks each year that I could never share with him, so much that I suddenly needed to share. Our relationship has always had its fluctuations, and eventually it came back around to another frank, adult talk very much like the day he gave up his pretenses. This time he told me what the holidays had been like in Germany as a married, German-American soldier during WWII. He told me how he had to sit in an empty mess hall, listening to American Christmas songs, sung in German, while all the young single men had leave to find comfort in whatever way was possible off base. The songs reminded him of both America, the country he missed, and his German parents, whose culture he was watching be destroyed; participating. There was nothing about Christmas that could ever mean the bringing together of families, but it wasn't so much the story he told as the closeness in his confidence that helped me to understand his associations of loneliness, foreignness, and hopelessness with the change of seasons, the good dishes, and songs of ancient rejoicing.

This last Christmas I decided that I did not want to have a tree, but such customs are not easily foregone in my house. We compromised on a dignified, sensible tree. Through the metal, plastic, wood, glass, tinsel, and blinking lights, small increments of wondrous green were prominently displayed. And if you didn't look too close, you might have even imagined it to be a real tree, alight with the dreams and ideals of a magical, bygone age. Maybe next holiday season it will be that for me. Maybe.
To Juanita Garza Schierhoff

And my nieces were getting older
   thinking of college
It showed in the letters
   we watched their pictures grow

My father said they had
   "the best of both worlds
Look white—play the race card
   for college and career”

I cried through his pride
   for a culture so trivial
I wonder if my sister-in-law
   feels the loss

When she says,
   “Call me Jane.”

A Lunch Ending Years of Denial

A sister sits facing her sister-in-law
In a dim restaurant
Shades filtering the heat outside
Steam from the stoneware a meek reminder
In the old restaurant
Of the old hurt
Family rejections

There were two beaded glasses of iced tea
To replenish the afternoon tears

And plenty of time jingling ice
Melting colored memories
Far from the bright swirling walls
And the woven chairs.
Upon Being Handed the Baby

She has two little bottom teeth
   together filling up so much
   of the gum spaced mouth
It looked like one giant tooth
   just like cartoon babies.

I held her—dangling rag-like
   before me
She smiled and cooed
   unaware of the parody.

I smiled too—laughed with her gurgling
   seeing a cartoon for the first time
Not at all sure why it was funny
And laughing anyway
CHAPTER 3

EDUCATION

A Sense of Self

Where do you look to find yourself?
What journey, what quest?
How could you ever be found
along a path you've never been?
Is it really a question—not of finding—but of making?

Once, back when I thought
I knew myself,
I helped a boy I liked
cheat in Math.
He had asked me, I had
never thought of someone asking me.

I had listened to teachers,
grown-ups, lecture.
Giving answers isn't helping—
isn't learning
I knew the answers and still
I wasn't sure what I had learned.

When he got caught
(a suspicious 'A' student)
the teacher asked me
why I had done it.
I told him that I
had had a crush on the boy.

So he lectured me
on developing self-esteem,
not letting boys use me,
that 'good boys' liked girls like me.
But I had only told him
what I knew he would forgive.
I could feel the guilt in his quivering, concerned voice. felt the regret of all the ‘good girls’ he had used. Had he thought he’d never have to face it?

I made him relive it, and never thought anything about self-esteem, good boys and bad boys. Never thought about the learning that was cheated —the boy’s, the teacher’s, or mine—

Can we fix the world? fix our mistakes? When is it that we first think about the ‘who’ and the ‘why’ of our making? Don’t we even cheat that?

The Worldly Pleasures of A Kindergartener: Zebra Striped Chewing

I hid huddling my small knees on the cold edges of the toilet I knew Teacher would come for me knowing I was there hating me

I had no wishing abilities my time-stopping watch didn’t work She would come with the teacher guilt the example guilt the Mother’s gift— they lied to me when they said the Mother’s gift was mercy mercy has me frozen in the toilet so far from the kindergarten
I bet Gretchen didn't get caught chewing my gum
   I almost had the strength to tell on her
My knees would not lose their grip.

I wished I had another piece now, my last had been grape
   wasted in one guilty swallow when I was caught
   How many minutes ago? No reply from my watch.
I chewed on the feeling of my gum
and slipped the left knee off to test the ground
   while the right splashed—crashing
I bit my tongue           kissed my knee
   held the green plastic watch
guilty
   wet
   wishing

Who is the patron saint of bathroom hiding?
of gum chewing?
   wishing—even for a prayer to say
But—the hands
   the neon-plastic-cereal-box-watch hands
supposed to be magic
   like Lucky Charms magic
and numb little girl hands
little hands that rubbed           and did not pray
rubbing knees
   thinking of Aladdin’s Lamp
in an empty
   kindergarten bathroom
wishing—
   but all the hands were still.
My childhood playground
harborer of
  the drinking fountain
    (of course girls only)
    no cooties allowed
dress-up time with six tiny Charlie’s Angels
    (taping rocks to tennis shoes making make believe red pumps)
    but no Charlie
and three giant cement barrels
    (painted with animals)
for hide and seek wild time
    which now are such tiny, faded,
    quiet spaces
    from slipping memories
Interpretations of a Report Card

a good student— for a world of definitions
well mannered— with a smile of encouragement
bright enough— willing to slide unchallenged
so quiet— like she's not even there
always friendly— envious of the very best children
generous— and the very worst
dependable— destined to be nothing to either
a happy child— and a fraud to herself.

Popular Spaces

The new girl looked around the locker room.
    shielded by the quiet girl
    oblivious to the glares
She didn’t want to watch her—watching
    the growing pyramid of toiletries
    of the neighboring locker instead
Her own was empty—not even
    an assigned uniform yet
Looking into that contrast
    the emptiness—then through the air vents
    to the blurs of movement the row beyond
"Could I return that extra towel for you?
    You must’ve forgotten it yesterday."
She pointed to the towel hanging
    down the back of the locker.
“You’d do better to steal an extra of your own.”

She didn’t know how to answer—
    she would’ve stolen a towel
    as soon as return one
    if that’s what was expected.

“What do you mean?”

“Move it and see.”

The damp towel felt heavy on the hook.

She looked closely at the vents she uncovered
    then at the yellow and brown
    stains of the towel.

Reaching to return it—the foamy spray,
    powder fresh scent deodorant,
    hissed through the vents.

The Glarers giggled

The silent sat together on their bench
    neither speaking until
    they were alone.

More alone.

---

Junior High

It all began with an innocent bump
somewhere between Algebra and English
somewhere between innocence and absurdity

She asked me if I was a coward
I was too much of one to say I was
too much of one to know that I was

They knew without my saying
A sad story told by my silence
While I was deceived, comforted, by their laughing.
A Young Girl Refuses to do Her Outlining Exercises and is Suspended

"I know you can do this, but we all need to practice this until EVERYONE gets it right."

"They can practice until they get it right. I'm done."

"There's no question that your daughter is bright enough, but she's also a little lazy and unmotivated.

We just don't know what to do with her."

Class

chalk—dust—yellow walls
living mute and blind
among deep brows, sweating
the rhyme, rhythm, and design
pounding and resounding
in empty, staring minds

The Elegance of Old Poetry

But what could I say?
There was a certain longness about her
That could almost disguise her bulk.

That head hovering around her motionless body
Imprisoning her quick, blunt eyes
That would not concede their bounds

Yes, she was elegant
But I would not tell her so
Could not even shake her hand.
CHAPTER 4

ENVIRONMENT

Gods and Beasts

I call my desert a beast
Leviathan—and sometimes God
Burdened with scales.
Shedding dust clouds for the wind
Cracked skin—sediment washed
and baked white seasonally
My beast is smart—evolved
She—
beige-white
never holding or spreading the deadly heat
A mother who harbors shade and life and water
beneath—within her own fragile skin.

I have lived amongst this beast
my life—felt the pain of smothering
blacktop roads
Roads do not kill her
They follow her rules
bleaching white—grey they survive
Becoming the desert.

I watched the old brick houses and
shiny metal and plastic businesses
melt into stucco and pastel adobe walls.
Waves skyscrape their radiated heat
Blurring the Las Vegas Strip
Becoming more mountain-like every year.

If ever I was to worship a God
Why would I choose one whose lessons
are fighting, resisting, conquering nature?
Even the rich nature within ourselves?

I worship my deserts—though barren
harsh cruel demanding
I chose to learn the lessons of struggle
for and not against
and to love what I can see—can know—
Can feel

Do feel
with the world’s dusty breath on my face
With the moist cool layer of world a mere handful of sand
beneath my feet.

The Watering Can

I stared at the dripping bathtub faucet through the mirror. I couldn’t even brush
my teeth first—I had to know. I turned around and watched it. Empty. The watering
can was empty and now that I knew it, the drips reverberated into the empty can
much louder. I would just have to write her a note.

I did write it. It said something like:

Mom,

Please don’t dump out the water in my watering can when you take a
shower. I am trying to conserve the water that would be wasted from the
dripping at night.

But I didn’t leave it for her on the mirror like our normal correspondence. It
didn’t seem to fit with our usual ‘grocery list’ and ‘by-the-way’ talk of the bathroom
mirror. I thought that I would have to talk to her about it in person. I never even
did that. How could I accuse her?

I know that the casinos waste water on fountains and fake volcanos. So many
people water their lawns and wash their cars in the middle of the day even with
the conservation mailings and the fines. When we have a desert city full of golf
courses, unnecessary lawns, pools, and private lakes, how could my one gallon of water dripping down the drain each night matter? I haven’t been able to make the logic angle work out, but for some reason I know that it just has to matter. How silly I must sound, trying to save the world through a gallon of water. But I just want to believe that there is something worth saving, worth any small effort of not giving up. And I want her to want that too.

The other day she asked me what I wanted for my birthday. And even though I had long since decided that I wanted a mountain bike for my birthday, I heard myself blurting, “a plumber.” At first I was proud of my unconscious mind for such courage; then I realized that I didn’t have the courage to say what I really meant, even accidentally: “Would you please help me conserve water?”

I couldn’t even correct her when she asked me where I wanted to go for this dinner. To get the whole family dressed up like I was getting married and go have calamary at The Tillerman was about as far as I could’ve gotten from a weekend biking through Red Rock Canyon. But it wasn’t until the very end of dinner that I realized this was an obsession that was ruining my life. The check came. Out of the new-born money curiosity of a teenager working fast food, I peeked at our total as I passed it around. I was sure that a month ago the price of a nice meal wouldn’t have bothered me, but today I choked my water back; how easily we wasted. And the thought of spewing my water across the table only made me wish I had my watering can.

Why was it that we could spend so much on one night when we couldn’t pay a plumber to fix a leak that was costing money every day? I was told that you just didn’t throw money away to have something fixed when you had a good man around to fix it. Dad would fix it. Of course I don’t even think Dad realized that it needed to be fixed. He wouldn’t unless that small increase had a really big impact on the bill.

For a week I got up two hours early to remove the can before Mom got to the
bathroom. I filled up the dog’s water dish, watered the plants, and whatever else I could think of to do with it. I know it’s stupid, but I really felt that I mattered. I made a difference.

And then Dad fixed it. Well, not precisely ‘fixed.’ I don’t know what it was that he did. Now it is possible to turn off, but it’s so tight that it’s really hard to turn it all the way off. Apparently, Mom can’t do it, but I haven’t asked her about it... I wonder how much a plumber would cost, anyway.

Sunbathing

The tingling warmth of morning sun
breaking through the mist
A tangled web of sprinklers

Spreading across my legs
heating the fresh water drops
mixing with sweat
soft reminder of life
In the cruelest of seasons

The Flood and the Sinner

It was raining—storming like only it does in the desert
We drove and drove
in our little truck
searching for a crossing without flares
I stopped, watching instead the blurred sidescape
dull grey moving in deep swirls around us
I saw a church and bitterly reflected on our inconvenience in the flooding
“Great, and they have their sprinklers on.”
I watched the extra water add a new trickle on the street
   felt the wet heat of each minute their oversight would cost us
And he answered, “Would you ask them to recross the flood to shut them off?”
I didn’t say it
   but I thought I wouldn’t be thinking about turning them off
   if I worked there
   if I lived there
Every time I look at a church I find a hypocrite
And sometimes
   it’s me.

What Matters
I saw that bird again.
I don’t know why he comes
last time I thought was last.
But here he was—I’ve no doubt—
chased away from a crumb.
Still smaller than the others and shriller too,
outrage and war cry in every breath.
I almost threw him some bread.
Probably wouldn’t have helped
just gotten it taken away.
But still, maybe next time...
if he comes back.
Space and Other Comforts

I confess.

I use the disabled stalls in bathrooms.

I guess that’s not as bad as parking in disabled parking places (which I would never do) because if it were as bad there would certainly be a fine for it.

Not that the only reason I don’t park in disabled spaces is because of the fine.

I readily understand that it is not a nice thing to do.

Someone whose whole life is full of difficulty in getting around should get a break getting into stores and such.

But I don’t park for long in the bathroom.

I’m not sure that I understand why, when there is a mile line outside a bathroom, no one will use the disabled stall.

What is the proper bathroom etiquette?

I think that if a disabled person approached such a bathroom, no one would expect her to wait in line.

And waiting a minute for the one stall that could be used isn’t so bad.

But I have found that I like to use the disabled stall even if another one is open.

After intense bathroom research I have found that there is often real toilet paper in the disabled stall.

My theory on this phenomenon:

Less people use the disabled stall, so businesses don’t have to install those giant four feet diameter rolls of one-ply to last a day.

One or two regular rolls will do.
I suppose now that the word is out there will be no two-ply anywhere.
But I have another reason for my stall preference.
Space.

Ever wonder why people can't resist writing those hostile, degrading,
and/or inane messages on bathroom stalls?
I don't think it's exclusively to kill a couple of minutes.
I think that when a person doesn't have room to breathe, combined with
all the inevitable odors and nothing but a fragile (if unbroken) lever as
their sole protector of privacy, people are bound to be a little unstable.

Yes, I think we all could use a little more personal space.
Unfortunately, those enviable few minutes of peace will always be inter-
rupted by flushing.
But there is something to be said about having too much of a good thing.
Especially in bathrooms.
A Daughter of Immigration Imagines Employment Opportunities

No great start in life
   no parades or cheering crowds
Not a single Orient King
   with offerings of blessings and honor.
Unexceptional, unextraordinary
   struggling to exist—persist.
Seasons bring these swarms of faces
   groping, yearning, and unsure
Searching for the hope—the faith in the promise
   of individuality and equality
Only to find that this bitter lie
   is a bitter truth.

Gaining Teaching Experience

Friday—7th grade spelling test
some middle school in The City
in any city

The officer watched, impatiently, at the door—
what’s a spelling test to him?
“Excuse me, Ms. Schierhoff?
Have you seen Rosa Lately?”
“She hasn’t been in class all week.”

“Yes, but have you seen her?”

“No.”

“If you do, would you call me immediately?”

“Yes.”

“It’s important.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, you know how these things can get.”

“What things?”

“We arrested her pimp for murder on Saturday.”

“Her what?”

I watched the children’s faces, they only whispered to each other, faces unchanging

watching the officer closely

“Her brother says she’s run away.”

Noticing the class for the first time he said,

“So if any of you see Rosa, you better call me.”

“I’m sure Ms. Schierhoff will write the number on the board.”

I wrote the number.

“The last word was ‘bureau.’

I placed the pen on the bureau.

‘Bureau.’”
Losing the In-Between Job

"I told you that you couldn't expect it to last forever." My mother's usual 'I told you so' tone was magnified by the statiky receiver.

"But why when everything was working out? I wanted a job until I get my teaching assistantship and they needed me. All of the customers love me."

"Don't you think it's time you joined the real world? Aren't you even applying for real teaching jobs anymore? You should apply to St. Viators. Naomie's daughter says they need teachers."

"I thought that they would need me more than ever now. What are they going to do when Vickie has her baby and can't work all day?"

"They probably just need to cut back on their expenses because of the baby."

"If they had needed to cut back, I would've thought that they wouldn't have just given us all raises."

She paused and I waited quietly for her to begin the next round. I heard her release a long distorted breath.

I wondered how much longer my abused phone would last.

"I know you don't want to hear this but how do you expect to live without either of you with a steady job? How are you going to support yourselves? Aren't you thinking about a family?"

Family. That's a good one. The only "family" concern on my mind is why my sister and brother-in-law had fired me two weeks before Christmas. And Steve has had the same job for years... Not that she considers anything we do "real work."

Silence. Had I said that out loud? Why should I care if I hurt her; she doesn't care how she hurts me. It is all so clear to them. Make money, have children.

Steve's mom was almost too angry about my forced, and still uncertain, career change. "Why do you have to take all the presents back? You deserve to have Christmas, too."
“It’s not important.”

I knew Steve’s mom wouldn’t let me return the gifts and I’m not sure I wanted her to. She’d give me the money to pay off my credit cards and we’d have a happy little Christmas just like always.

Money for Christmas.

“Is your mom there?” Even half asleep I understood that she meant Steve’s mom. I checked her room and the bathroom mirror for a note.

“No, she probably just went to the store.” It had been awhile since Gwen had called.

“Would you tell her I called?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, by the way... I heard on the news that there are small towns all over the mid-west that are in desperate need of teachers.”

“Could be.”

“And in cities something like half the teachers can’t pass the competency exams.”

“I’ll have to look into that.”

“And tell Nancy I called.”

I wrote Gwen’s name and number on the phone pad and went back to bed.

“You bought the girls presents?” Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned it, but if my mom was already sending them something...

“I thought I would have some money this year.”

“It’ll cost more to send ’em then it cost to buy ’em.”

I was still mad at Vickie for firing me last week, but I was tired of talking about it. Tired of all these money talks.

“I was just going to send money this year, but I guess we can make peanut brittle and stollen so the shipping’s worth it,” my mom finally conceded.

I didn’t see the need, but I allowed her her martyrdom.
“Baking just inflames my arthritis.”

_I rang my sister’s doorbell, still unsure how I would survive dinner._

“Where’s Steve?” Every Christmas they asked.

“I told you he wasn’t going to make it.” Every year.

They looked at me as though I would break down and confess at any moment.

“I almost get the feeling he doesn’t like us.”

I was stronger than Steve would have been. I thrust the small packages into my sister’s hands and pushed past, flashing the season’s smiles. “It’s not much, we were a little short this year.” I found that I could even say it without clenching my teeth.

My father arrived after the “fancy sit down dinner” just to have coffee. He slipped me some bills and whispered his usual holiday complaints. “How’d Steve get out of this?” He touched his huge fist to my shoulder. It felt delicate. I told him I bought him a hat to replace the one my dog ate. He said that that was OK as long as it’s not a Christmas present. I had known better than to wrap it.

_It was really cold on the patio, but it was more comfortable than inside._

My Mom said, “No, really, how much did you spend? I’ll write you a check.”

I had hurt Vickie’s feelings with my earlier remark and my mother had yet to “fix everything.”

“I didn’t spend anything. I crocheted them Christmas ornaments like I do every year. I’m still using the yarn you gave me three years ago.”

“And you used nothing but yarn?”

“I had the ribbon already too.”

“Well, we just all agreed not to spend a lot this year.” She turned like she was finally going back inside, then she stopped. “Do you need money for your truck?”

I didn’t answer. She wrote the check and we went inside. We opened presents and were all surprised. My brother-in-law’s mother gave me very expensive underwear about five sizes too big. They looked just a little too small for her, but I didn’t say
anything. I hadn’t gotten her anything. We had all spent more than we said.

*I showered immediately at home.* The swelling around my eyes wouldn’t go away until the cigarette smell was out of my hair. I was surprised that the cats hadn’t really bothered me this year. They must’ve just shampooed the rug. Steve put my discarded clothes in the garage and we watched *A Christmas Story* on the old broken couch that wouldn’t be replaced until the next year. Steve’s mom asked about my family and if my father had come, and then went to bed. Our dogs laid on our feet and begged for the smells still hanging all around us. Some things are better without money.

Without children.
Finding My Niche

I trail my finger through the
trembling shelves of dust

The lip of a book catches me,
colored the dimness of experience.

I hold the book suspiciously
a finger, a thumb—no more.

I do not trust its lusty words
or myself to know the language.

How was their syntax bred—spanning,
encompassing infinity?

Mine has come from infinities,
pain and love and need and hope.

The book falls back again in place
soiled by my young, oil-print presence,

While I search for the new colors
of easier longing,

Finding, loving, and sighing
a hollow sanctuary,
the next row over.
CHAPTER 6

DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS

To Want

My mother always told me that I'd better marry a rich man because I had such expensive tastes. She'd say that whenever I had second helpings of peeled shrimp at the local casino's buffet—seafood night. I never asked her why she hadn't married a rich man. Apparently she is allergic to shrimp so money didn't matter.

Sometimes when I dated in high school, I wondered how rich his parents were, and how rich he might someday become. But mostly I decided that I had had my fill of peeled shrimp, and I never really even liked cocktail sauce much. Now I really like fried shrimp, but I'm not sure that that is enough to base a life on. Maybe lobster....

I constantly hear about all the stuff I'm supposed to want, and everything that would make my life easy and comfortable. (I do watch T.V. even though, as a writer, I am supposed to deny it to my dying breath.) But I'm not excited about having any of it. In fact, everything has been rather disappointing since toys in the cereal box.

I remember that I always did relish beating my sister to the worthless, plastic treasures, though.

I used to watch M*A*S*H when I was growing up. There was this episode where Klinger was trying to go AWOL by hang gliding to the ocean. Of course he attempted this in a women's bathrobe and slippers and witnesses said that they saw a big, red bird with fuzzy, pink feet. I was hysterical with laughter and actually asked Santa for a pair of fuzzy, pink house-shoes.
As with most Christmas gifts the amusement wore off with the novelty. In my case I suddenly realized that it didn't seem exactly normal for a teenage girl to consider a fictional, cross-dressing character of sitcom a role model. They were warm house-shoes anyway. Maybe I should have asked for the hang-glider instead.

So, what is it that I want? Most the world around me has children to fill up the emptiness of maturity as it strikes. I'm not sure how successful such endeavors are, but at least children fill up the time that would be otherwise spent in contemplating the emptiness. Of course, it hurts so much worse when parents realize that their children have emptiness too—that shrimp and house-shoes can't satisfy them forever.

... and where it stops, nobody knows....

My Version of the Same 'Ol Dream

I have a dream
   (or I had one last night)
I don't have any crowds to share mine with
   but I think
      we are all pretty tired of dreams
Anyway

I was walking down this street
   all King's children were holding hands
      (you know...of all colors and all that)
And there was this woman looking at the circle from her window
      (I couldn't tell what color she was)
Above the street
      so solemn
The children weren't playing
  (I don't know if they knew how to play)
They were just holding hands
  as if that were enough
  I could see it wasn't.
The woman pulled her blinds
I stood in the street and waited
  (I knew that climax always followed tension)

So, here's the really weird part
The town crier
  (it's weird because we don't have town criers anymore—and no, he
doesn't turn into a monster or anything)
Cries
Out his John Donne
But there wasn't a church bell ringing
  the crier didn't even have a bell.

I kept waiting for the woman to come down and ask him
"For whom the bell tolls"
But she didn't (of course no bell had tolled)
  and I was only visiting in this dream
So he cried on by the children
And he didn't even ask
To whom they belonged

So now I'm trying to figure out why churches
don't ring their bells anymore
And I'm waiting
  (not for an answer to my dream; everyone knows that dreams don't
  mean anything)
For a new dream
Fresh and happy
  and all my own

We only share the sad ones.
We only hear the sad.
We only.
Weddings and Other Nightmares

I get some pretty good ideas from nightmares—not about becoming a serial-killing-monster-with-quicksand-squirting vision, but more like how to deal with day-to-day sort of problems that you weren't even aware were bothering you.

Say you were getting married and your mother was going to make you a cake. For whatever reason, you'd rather buy a cake, but you know you could never tell your mother not to make you one. Maybe you can't even think of any good reason at all, maybe you know that everyone at the reception would love her cake, but that you just want to lavish in the extravagance of buying one. Now this doesn't torment your every waking thought, probably you don't think about it consciously at all. But if you'd have a nightmare about it. It would go something like this ....

No matter where you are actually going to have your wedding and reception, in your dream you're walking down a spiraling staircase with your thirty foot satin train and your kazillion bridesmaids trailing. Everyone is lined up and waiting in folding chairs below, and the cake is prominently displayed on a table by itself along the far wall. Well, right as you reach the bottom, one of your bridesmaids trips on your train, falls over the rail, and lands in the middle of the cake. Even if this is a nightmare, no one gets hurt, the tragedy is that you end up not having a cake at all, and for a minute you feel pretty reprehensible that you didn't appreciate your mother's cake. But then the idea part sinks in.

It's the realization that accidents happen, and no one would really call off a wedding because of this, no matter how nightmarish it might be for a sitcom bride or how humiliating in the Funniest Home Video world. Actually, someone would just make a few phone calls while the wedding went on, and somehow would arrange a fast substitute cake from a local grocery store bakery. Oh yeah, they would clean off your bridesmaid and rush her to the hospital if need be. We are talking reality now and in reality when people fly over staircase railing into cakes they sometimes break.
their arms and such. Now you might think that this would still be a truly awful thing (even if nothing was broken), because no matter what you thought of your mother’s cake, it would just have to be better than a thrown-together-grocery-store-bakery cake. But the idea part isn’t complete.

You see, now that you realize a substitution could be made, you could plan to make it to your specifications. You could have the perfect cake waiting for just the right moment. (Probably you wouldn’t be able to cross your fingers and make a bridesmaid fly into your cake, but a small bribe might be all you would need.) And what is even more perfect is that since everyone would be expecting a pretty awful cake at this point, everyone would be amazed. Of course everyone for the rest of the evening would be telling you how well you were taking everything, but with the perfect cake sitting on the far table, I’m sure you could live with the little lies.

That brings me to another little thought on this whole dream inspired wedding topic. I had an actual dream the other night about my wedding. I dreamt that all my friends and family got together and threw me a surprise wedding. No, this was not a nightmare, although I suspect that it would have been quite a nightmare for all my friends and relatives... It was the perfect dream. No hassles, no worries, and I never once had to smooth over any of the little irreconcilable demands from each and every relative with all their various religions and expectations. I wish I could see our families duke it out over the color of the napkins, especially knowing that I would never be called in as the final judge to settle what has escalated into a personal vendetta, or possibly a political conspiracy by the persons involved. I could afford two weddings just by selling tickets.

Unfortunately, there is no practical way to translate this dream into reality. What priest or justice of the peace would come out to marry a couple for a surprise wedding? How could this person know the couple meant to get married at all? No, a surprise wedding would never work, but it does bring up a good point. It seems
to me that if I’m worrying about having to make all the decisions and preparations for my wedding enough to have this dream, and to be so wistful that it could never be, this says something about the true beneficiaries of weddings. Certainly the bride and groom would benefit more from a quick and easy elopement. Why are the bride and groom so easily reduced to miniature, painted cake decorations? Why are they the silenced insignificant figurines that family members are so fascinated with taking pictures of? What does a wedding mean anyway? Maybe weddings have always been like this, but I find myself wishing to be more than a posing doll at the start of my marriage. I think marriage is more than appearances, more than the standardizing and marketing of traditions. Certainly it is more than having the perfect cake, but perhaps that is a good place to start.
A Sob, Dreaming

Walking through the gates
  graveyard bubbling out
  heavy stones with brief chislings
  mocking the lives below
  mocking even the thick seedy soil
  loose and alive above

The Mourners sing to them
  chanting the chislings
  remembering—No not remembering
  immortalizing—ignoring
  the fat worms and
  the cleansing, living things

Poetry is a sob
  a loss
  a want
  that can’t be buried
  held
  saved

Poetry is born on the knees of mourners
  pounding from hunched shoulders
  and tense limbs
  and grainy eyes
  and from the stillness of children in black

Without chisel or stone
  it rips the gates wide
  a mouthless song of feeling
  beyond the rows
  of graven—preserved
  words
A Quest

On a regular, average day
full of the same ol’ same ol’
I walked outside, past the concrete,
paint, and fluorescent lighting
I had no reason to
no reason not to either.
I walked on the grass
and looked at some trees.
I guess I should tell you that
they were Maple or that
they were losing their bark
But all I did was look at them
and try not to think about anything.
I breathed the tingly, hot air
and sighed in the breeze.
I laid down in the grass and watched
the clouds move into forever.
Then this bouncy little girl plopped
down beside me and asked if I were dead
and should she call 9–1–1.
I told her that I was fine,
and thanked her for asking.
The clouds never hesitated on their exodus,
nor did the girl in her bouncing.
I wish there were more
such regular, average days.
Looking for Flaws

I found it on the rusted wardrobe pole
marked two for five dollars

A nice black one
rich silk, classy modern style

Patterns of fuzzy diamonds
along simple cloth covered buttons

I checked the seams and underarms
and I found the flaw

Two bright bleach dots
below the collar on back

What a pity—
nothing could be done

If it were black spots on white
then bleach maybe...

But no—
there was nothing that could be done.
A Little Girl with Thick Black Hair

Driving by
That corner house with the basketball court
Two little kids were on the street court
Hardly old enough to hold the ball
They played—ducked back and forth
He a head higher than the girl
They wore each other’s smiles
I wondered if he would let her win
As I slowly coasted the corner
Her heavy hair pulled loose
Into the streaming, swirling flag
Confidence
A victory I
Drove by.

Remembering Innocence

A loop of brown twirled around a finger
Fingers through shorter, limp strands
A casual hand sweeping the forehead
Again
and again
in idleness

The sudden shake and careful fluff
The flip over the shoulder that promptly falls back
Smoothing it all tight or loosening a pony tail
Again
and again
such idleness
A Kiss Goodnight from a First Date

He must know that I can’t explain.
    The gum crackles a cinnamon appeal
    and stale popcorn spills along the street.

He must know it does no good to repeat.
    The eyes wait for anything more
    and headlights flicker a retreat.

He shouldn’t... no sense wondering now.
    The feet shift and strain in shadows
    and shoes dance beyond the light.

Why won’t he admit he understands?
    The mouth alive with want
    and We—
    —our wants—
    —goodnight.

Pride

My mind raced
    but couldn’t catch my heart
Pounding growing pounding
    stealing each breath
To feed the pounding
    I gasped—fought
The tight stinging belt
    PANIC
It struck and struck
    and I could not speak
Could not reason with the whip
    could not say
I’m sorry.
"Oh, nothing."

What do you say when someone asks

"What's wrong?"

I've found it easy to say

"Nothing."

It's not so easy to smile

as I do...

Sometimes that someone will notice,

"Really, I know it's something."

But it's hard to say anything

because knowing it's something

is not the same as caring

and how can I know which is meant?

But how can I risk a "nothing" now

when I really want that someone cares.

So I say nothing the other way, with silence, and wait

for the polite questions to run dry

If only he could say something then...

but it's just so easy to say

Nothing

Sometimes.
The Uncertain Future Reflected in a
Dark Room after a Silly Fight

Have you ever cried to yourself
   in a dark room—
Held a pillow like a teddy bear?

Who are you waiting for—
   what kind word
Could come through such self-loathing?

Still I wait, rubbing puffy eyes
   and curled knees—
When will he come

   to me?
WORKS CITED


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