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A PINT OF DIRT

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A PINT OF DIRT

by

Kristen E. Friesen

A THESIS

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A PINT OF DIRT

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University of Nebraska, 2019

Advisor: Stacey Waite

This collection of poetry consists of 50 pieces focused on events and observations experienced by the author: a midwestern, middle-aged teacher, wife, and mother of three now-grown daughters. As much as it is an attempt to process and package the ordinary and unexplainable, it is also a study in metaphor, description, and the ways in which specificity of time and place can, hopefully, render a piece universal.

Introduction on A Pint of Dirt

Although my journey of writing has been somewhat unconventional -- developed slowly over years of trial and error, for a long while without the benefit of formal education (which, for me, materialized later in life) and in the context primarily of journalism -- I consider myself a storyteller. As such, I follow closely the advice of longtime friend and mentor Roger Welch, who told me two things: 1. Only tell one story at a time; and 2. Only write what you know. And frankly, that is all I can do. My poetry is seeped in story-telling, primarily narrative in style, and gleaned from my own front porch ... which, of course, has its limitations.

Although I began writing poetry when I was in fourth grade (in math class, to be exact), I spent far too long without instruction. Even in high school and college, where I recklessly proclaimed myself a poet, there were precious few instructors who'd provide actual feedback on my craft. They'd either like it or wish it were about something else, but then they'd slap an A on it and hand it back without a single comment. I can only guess it offered them no point of entry or connection, or that they questioned, as so many do (and as I have so often, too), their own ability to assess a poem. Hungry for instruction, I instinctively became an avid reader of poetry. According to poet Mary Oliver -- who, herself, has unknowingly tutored me on metaphor -- "Good poems are the best teachers. Perhaps they are the only teachers" (Oliver 10).

Ditching Ambiguity

Aside from a brief summer fling with the ambiguous e.e. cummings (which occurred between my senior year and college when I was naive enough to believe that the best poetry would necessarily be difficult to understand), I have generally gravitated toward poems that paint unmistakable and unforgettable pictures using concrete, descriptive, and sometimes very ordinary language. However, early into the first semester of Ted Kooser's poetry tutorial -- wherein he assigned us to read and journal about 70 poems per week, I went to sources that contained poetry in quantity -- sources such as thick anthologies and loaded databases. It didn't take long for me to become frustrated, and shamefully, I admitted that I didn't understand a lot of the poetry I was reading. Kooser's response -- that poetry which is obscure fails in some way to do what poetry should do: create a shared experience between writer and reader -- was the encouragement I needed to read the poems I love and consider them mentors. Poets that quickly became favorites include Emily Dickinson (clearly ahead of her time in her use of concrete description and the juxtaposition of ordinary events alongside the mysterious) and more contemporary poets such as Connie Wanek, Billy Collins, Ted Kooser, and Mary Oliver.

As I studied poems that provided me a rich experience, my own writing began to improve and continues to improve. What intrigues me most is that, the more detailed the writer is, the more relatable the piece becomes. So when I write about the specifics of growing up on Cottonwood Drive, a sense of sameness begins to unite all of us who've ever lived on that street, in

that neighborhood, in that state, etc., but also those who lived somewhere else with similar rules or conditions, or who lived somewhere totally different or in a place that has different rules and conditions. The ideas of any system to which one might belong are transferable to any other system to which someone else might belong primarily through the details that make that first system tangible. Felt. Observed. Experienced. Heard.

A book that was particularly helpful to me in bringing storytelling into the context of poetry was Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*. Her text, which I read for the first time last summer, demonstrates the power of writing about the unknown in the context of the known, even ordinary. As *A Pint of Dirt* reflects the events that have molded me, and since I am a person with lots of unanswered questions, I find it natural to cling to the things I know in order to explore that which I don't know at all. However, I'm still learning to be comfortable sitting in the unsettled places, resisting the urge to be prescriptive (as I've been advised by mentors Stacey Waite and Ted Kooser that the best work knows better than to be prescriptive).

My desire, of course, is to write the sort of poetry that leaves room for people who are not me -- people Waite defines as "not parents, not in families, not white, not straight, etc." -- to connect with the work. The fact that she could so easily identify those "not me" characteristics demonstrated that my work, when first submitted, lacked a certain universality, which I do believe is attainable even in the context of poetry that is largely personal and narrative. I know this because I have seen it done well. Ted Kooser's poem entitled "In the Basement of the Goodwill Store" captures a specific place (unknown to me),

specific man (unseen by me), and specific garments the reader (not me) would likely throw out. And though the specifics of the poem are not entirely relatable to me, the fact that it's specific brings it to life, gives it steam to blow in my direction so that I feel the heat in the last section of the last stanza: "you too will look down over the years,/ when you have grown old and thin/ and no longer particular/ and the things you once thought/ you were rid of forever/ have taken you back in their arms" (Kooser).

In an effort to combat the egocentric nature of my first draft, I found myself doing more cutting than adding. All too often, I have been called out on a long wind up to what would be a much better start for a poem and/or an ending that seems hell bent on explaining the poem or instructing the reader on how he/she should feel upon reading it. The process of compiling an entire collection of poetry has sensitized me to this bad habit and also given me courage to kill my darlings, as Faulkner put it.

Discovering Metaphor

In addition to the hard work of finding the actual poem within the lengthy verbiage of my first and second drafts, employing metaphor well has been a particular challenge for me. Kooser's remedy was to have me draw the metaphor in question, which would quickly prove problematic when the metaphor was weak. This exercise demonstrated the importance of using metaphors that make sense visually as well as conceptually. As I was struggling through the artful use of metaphor, I attended a poetry reading by Tom Montag. "Those Days," (Montag 335-338) a series of numbered poems that, together, tell

the story of his father's dying, employs imagery of a train and fields and weather. While such imagery was likely actual backdrop to the event about which he writes, it serves doubly as metaphor for the passing of time in his piece.

Noticing the metaphor and pulling the poem from it takes less effort and results in poems and metaphor that works. Take, for instance, Connie Wanek's poem entitled "Pumpkin." In it, she simply takes characteristics of pumpkins that would present as enviable among humanity: "To write as a field grows pumpkins,/ ... to be heavy, and still to be chosen,/ ... to end the day full of light" (Wanek 100). It's a simple approach to metaphor that rewards observation and the willingness of a poet to remove his/her own intentions and let poetry happen.

In an explanation of her poem "A Bird Made of Birds," poet Sarah Kay credits fellow poet Kaveh Akbar for inspiration when he captioned a social media post with the following: "The universe has already written the poem you were planning on writing" (Kay). These words, which first appeared beneath a picture of a blue whale's heart, inside which a person can stand up fully, became not only impetus for Kay's poem, but also clarifying for me. Specifically, universe-provided metaphor shows itself in "Good Seed," "This Version of Us," and most of my poems in "Applaud the Sky" because the latter actually began with the metaphor.

So, as much as I love my sister, I no longer sit down to write a poem about her at will. Not even on her birthday. Instead, I see something, study it, and apply its characteristics and stories to the never-ending search for clarity and closure that consumes my life. And the poems that manifest themselves get written. Ironically, some of my best poems employing

metaphor have happened without much effort while others -- ones in which I wrestled a contrived metaphor to the ground -- were and are still painful. Nevertheless, as I continue to work on careful and yet risky use of metaphor, I believe I have a more solid understanding of its requirements.

Choosing Carefully

Perhaps the most difficult lesson the exercise of compiling a collection provided was in the actual selection and organization of texts. While I have a slew of other poems, those in this collection represent events and ideas that have shaped me. Perhaps this is why cutting out my own voice was so difficult ... and necessary. While writing about important moments enables me to preserve them, it also helps me understand them, make sense out of life. Stopping short of the tidy bows of explanation and prescription can feel unsettling, but poetry should be unsettling. It should exist as a space to work through questions and problems that might otherwise undo us. It should provide the concrete expression of what we can't quite attain, obtain, or even figure out. And as much as it should provide us practice for our craft, good poetry should write us.

My take quickly became about grouping poems according to the way in which they leave me unsettled. In the first section, "A Leggy Grasshopper in Her Small Beak" (the title of which comes from the poem "My Love"), the poems reflect undeserved grace that's been poured down on me. The next section, "Applaud the Sky," provides a space for poems that marvel in some way at the natural world. The title for the second section comes from "Ballet Lesson." Thirdly, "Snow Covers

It All” -- a line borrowed from “This Painting” -- contains poems dealing with difficult subjects that have left me with more questions than answers. Finally, because I hope this progression to represent my life as well, I end with a section entitled “The Breaking of Rocks” in which I feature poetry about perseverance. The title comes from the poem “A Pint of Dirt,” which is also the title of the entire collection.

According to Mary Oliver, “Writing a poem is ... a kind of possible love affair between something like the heart (that courageous but also shy factory of emotion) and the learned skills of the conscious mind. They make appointments with each other, and keep them, and something begins to happen. Or, they make appointments with each other but are casual and often fail to keep them: count on it, nothing happens” (Oliver 7). As I’ve worked on the writing and revising required for this collection, I’ve found Oliver’s words to be terribly true. And for every time my words failed to show up to carry a strong emotion (which resulted in too-sticky sentimentality), there were times when my heart wouldn’t come out of hiding. Or maybe my heart just hasn’t yet landed where some of my stories are concerned. Therefore, poems I’ve pulled from my collection are as important to the integrity of the collection as those I’ve included. Pieces about my sister’s stint in prison, the family we lost, the darker corners of my childhood, and a couple about my own children that incite emotions I just can’t quite articulate yet are works still in progress. Like me.

As excited as I am about this collection, I'm itching to keep writing my way to another. And more so than ever before, I'm comfortable with there being poems I write simply because, if I don't, I may never find my direction. And, somehow, throwing the words out into the universe, into the very face of God, is the only way to see what sticks.

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Part 1: A Leggy Grasshopper in Her Small Beak

“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them.”

(Matthew 6:26 ESV)

Mississippi River Reflections

My grandmother's face was a brown
paper sack having held its fair
share of ham sandwiches, lying,
just as we all did, on any
one of the plaid picnic blankets
littering Iowa's grassy
Mississippi shore. Her laugh --

a current rolling out rocks, smooth
and dark like fudge cookies she doled
out -- accompanied the stories
she told of those we'd never met
though, she insisted, their faces
resembled our own reflections
in the river. The sinking sun

always disappeared too early,
casting shadows over the deep
folds of her face as it traded
places with the moon; and stars,
like fireflies, showed up to dance
in the inky pools of her eyes --

all I could see as we faded,
more stories lost to the night sky.

Home Lunch

In elementary school, the options
were hot lunch, cold lunch, or home lunch.
For me, the latter was a sandwich cut
in squares, applesauce, and Weaver's Wavy
Style Potato Chips on a plastic plate
beside a napkin from some past holiday
set by my mother at just the right time
so it would be found waiting for me
at a table for one that, after school,
would become a piano bench again
but, at noon, was just the perfect height
for kneeling on orange shag carpeting
and watching TV. It was enough
to make me sprint out the double doors
of Ruth Pyrtle Elementary, down
the hill past a game of kickball, across

Cottonwood Drive, forgetting everything
else: namely mean kids, the rules of recess,
and even my blue Betsey Clark lunch box.

No Fair

I spent an entire summer of my childhood
watching the short-haired girl across the street
sit on the curb in front of the saggy, green house
wearing nothing but Wonder Woman Underoos
and smoking candy cigarettes. Sometimes she threw

rocks at cars or drowned her knock-off Barbie doll
in the soapy stream, which began in the bucket
Dad used to wash our car and which he dumped out
so that it ran down the street we shared -- but didn't --
and found its way to her bare summer feet.

Unlike me, she never got called in for dinner
or Saturday night baths but, rather, sat toasting
the night sky -- cool like grape Kool-Aid --
catching headlights like shooting stars in her eyes
long after I'd unjustly been sent to bed.

At the Bow of the Boat

Before I grew too tall, Dad purchased
a second-hand, two-man Sunfish sailboat
so I could lie feet first on its bow,
my neck a right angle against the mast—
like Cleopatra floating down the Nile.
Above my head, a faded sail conversed
with the wind, interrupted only
by Dad's occasional "come-'n'-about,"
a term he learned reading sailing books.

Our small vessel rode the wakes of bigger
boats on silver water, seemingly
scattered with jewels cast by the generous,
golden hand of August's sun. And at night,
beneath sapphire skies, we ascended
and fell with the waves as the mainsheet
attempted to thread the pearl of a moon.
Always, the shore appeared fragmented,
a kaleidoscope between my bronzed toes.

Curbside Finds

Sometime between our bedtime on Tuesday and Wednesday morning's sunrise, our parents would sneak out of the house wearing black jackets and cruise the neighborhood in search of cast-offs.

There! In the shadow of an elm, Mom would spy a small dresser minus its front leg. And there! She would make out a lopsided side table leaning, left to shed its paint in wet grass.

Mom's finger tapping the windshield was the cue for Dad to pull over, dim the lights, pop open the Toyota hatchback and pile all Mom's treasures in the back without making a sound.

In the morning, as neighbors stooped to pick up morning papers or scrape frosty windshields -- unaware that their trash piles had shrunk overnight -- our parents would already be scheming.

With hushed voices and hot coffee, they'd steam up the garage door windows as they tiptoed through sawdust, prepped their loot, and laid big plans for the stripping, repairing, and staining.

My mother, always ahead of herself, could see the Duncan Phyfe table with a new smooth coat of varnish holding up her prized fern in front of the picture window facing west.

And as soon as that last coat of varnish dried, she'd be sure to invite the neighbor ladies over for coffee cake and to wonder why our house always felt so much like home.

Paintbrush

This paintbrush's wooden handle is worn
smooth, blackened by years of use -- a shiny
patina born of sweaty palms. Rendered
useless by a rusty metal rim, tired,
delicate hardware, stripped and slipping,
threatens to separate top from bottom.

The sweet smell of trapped paint lingers still
in its mane, now frayed and freckled,
and whispers of weekend bedroom
makeovers and late night cleanups.

Hanging useless from a dusty pegboard,
it whispers of potential, fresh starts,
the many colors that were us.

Church Campfire

*Yet man is born unto trouble
as the sparks fly upward. Job 5:7*

She raises her left arm
as if catching fireflies,
but her fingers never close,
and her eyes never open.

Hot tears like ashes ride
the sackcloth of acne-pocked
cheeks before falling onto
her flat but penitent chest.

Singing surrender, she
grips the hand of the girl
to her right, who, herself,
awakens from distracted

worship of a bronzed boy
strumming a blonde guitar.

Row Houses

Remember when you and I,
with hardly a dime between us,
would put on our heavy coats
and take long walks from our
studio apartment
on Chicago and LaSalle
to Deerborn Avenue to see
the stately row houses,
whose wide brick steps spilled out
past ornamental gates to greet
the sidewalk and those of us
walking by, kicking leaves
and imagining a life
beneath high ceilings, behind
lace curtains and within walls
the color of warm pumpkin pie?

Your Eyes

Before you crack open your eyes
to the sting of morning light, I wonder:

Will they present as a winter sky -
cold blue interrupted only by clouds,
stretched threadbare, pulled across the expanse
and into your face like the down-filled
comforter drawn up around your chin?

Or will they glimmer green like late summer's
lake, deep and teeming with tangled algae
that pulls our ankles when we cannonball,
shutting our eyes tight, inviting crows feet,
which perch still in the crease of heavy lids?

Maybe they'll be deep as blueberries, rinsed
and piled on flour sack towels, tea-stained
and wrinkled like your tanned nose, which twitches
when I brush your cheek, so your face, at rest
in the white bowl of your pillowcase, stirs.

Baby at the Window

Baby at the window
attempts to stand on tiptoe --
a complicated feat
like the stacking of two-bakes
rolled tight, set one atop
another, then left to rise
on the counter. Her heels
are perfect balls of dough
that flatten upon contact
with the black rubber doormat --
a baking sheet corroded
by years of use -- holding sand
and crushed dried leaves that stick
to her feet like a dusting
of flour. Her finger and nose
are pressed against the glass

as she implores me to take
her “out!” But I am caught,
entranced by the tiny pink
O of her full lips. I smile
broadly, fold my arms across
my chest and lean against
the cupboards. Standing still,
I’m no less stirred within.

Braiding My Daughter's Hair

Tonight, my sixteen-year-old daughter
sits cross-legged between my knees
as I comb out tangles from her hair
and linger in the soft coolness
like suede gloves pulled from coat pockets,
pushed down between stiff fingers so I
can grab handfuls of willow branches
to lay, one over the other,
'til the weave of a basket
materializes -- another
soft thing we carry silently
between us.

Carried

My husband carried our babies
like footballs -- his thick hand cradling
their heads as he pulled them close, their knees
folded and their toes tucked in the crook
of his elbow. When they couldn't sleep
and he couldn't stay awake, he'd lay
them belly down on his chest. In time,
he'd carry them on his back, his shoulders,
on his toes when he danced and in both arms
up two flights of stairs when they fell asleep
in the car on the way home. Today,
he carries them in the catch of his voice
when he brags and in the fine lines
that have turned his face into a story.

Bedtime Stories

If I'm lucky, my tired daughter
will stop by after work wearing
blue scrubs and bags beneath her eyes.

I'll warm her up a plate while she
takes down her hair and rehearses
today's parade of characters:

There's Harriet, bent 90
degrees, who stole the butterfly
rings from Edith's birthday cake;

and "Doc," scribbling prescriptions,
directing nurses and far less
patient than all the others;

and let's not forget Viv, begging
for a ticket to Chicago
to see her long-gone ma.

These stories my daughter tells
are absent the happy endings
of stories I once told her

but made better by blankets
pulled up to wrinkled chins,
whispered good nights, sleep tights,

the image of her floating
from room to room -- a blue cloud
beneath humming fluorescent lights.

This Version of Us

The one where we live in a creaky-floored
bungalow and carpool downtown in your
Mini Cooper to jobs where you wear bowties
and I wear sandals, you push pennies and I
push pencils, where we both push large-framed
glasses up on our noses until four
thirty when, like clockwork, you pick me up
near the bus stop and we hurry home to eat
pasta and salad and drink wine on the front
porch while we discuss life and our place in it,

ideas, like balloons, sure to escape our minds
if we don't reach out and grab them the only
way we know how, with noses drawn into books
and newspapers and, most often, poetry,
until our eyelids fall like window shades
and our chins sink deeply into our chests -
your face a sun just setting in the valley
between the peaks of tweed lapels.

Home

The brush of your sleeve on my left arm,
the rhythm of your swaying shoulders
when you're thinking, how you rub your hand
over your beard when it's bad news
and over your belly when you're tired,

the gap between your two front teeth,
the dark hair on your knuckles that I
smooth with my right hand when you hold
my left, the permanent impression
a tin can lid made on your right thumb

and its story that still makes you laugh,
how you can walk around with one sock on
and one off and leave a trail of shoes
like a narrative of your comings
and goings throughout the day, the way

you lose your keys in the pockets of pants
and leave behind a ring of coffee
on the kitchen counter because you
overfill your cup, and how you're happy
as a clam with buttered saltines for dinner.

Your blue eyes that are swimming pools where
echoes of our children are still at play.

Empty Nesting

We're sorry to have missed your call.
But last night, we left without telling
anyone where we were going and drove
downtown with arms hanging out the windows
as if we might catch the wind. For dinner
we ate cheeseburgers and nothing green
and washed it down with refills of soda.
Something about our waitress reminded
us of you, so we tipped her big before
walking a few blocks in the direction
our shoes were pointed. A man playing
a guitar lured us into a bakery
where we ate cake and left your allowance
in his guitar case. On a whim, we scampered
off to the theatre to watch a scary

movie. When we finally got home,
it was way past our bedtime. We burst through
the front door without a thought toward containing
our laughter. And when we finally climbed
the staircase, resigning ourselves to bed,
the tow-headed sun was just beginning
to stir from its cover of clouds. "The day
will take care of itself," I whispered,
and so we slept it away.

Part II: Applaud the Sky

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place...”

(Psalm 8:3, ESV)

My Love

I long to liken love
to the graceful rise and fall
of a soaring eagle
against a clear blue sky,
or to the throaty garble
of a smoke grey dove
calling to her lover
from a sycamore tree,
or to the provocative
spread of color and scream
of a lonely peacock
out for a walk at night.

But alas, love, for me,
has always been this plain
brown robin, her heart laid
bare on her proud breast,
happy to dance in a mud
puddle, gripping a leggy
grasshopper in her small beak.

Breakfast Sky

Last night, the sun was a fried egg,
a glowing yolk clinging to its pile
of white, sunny side up but upside down,
sticking to the sky, challenging
the belief that the best breakfast should slide
right off your plate. By morning, the clouds
were scrambled, as if pulled apart
by a giant fork that was dripping
with Tabasco Sauce, so that the effect
was a deep and satisfying pink.

Instincts

When I was ten, Stephanie
double dog dared me to run
through a field of grasshoppers
wearing nothing more than tube
socks and short shorts to deflect
their advances. It would not
be the last time I batted
down the buzzing of my own
precautionary voice.

Summer Symphony

A kitchen radio plays Mozart
 to the metronome of a jump rope
 and the syncopated click and squeak
 of a rusty tricycle hell bent
 on hitting all the sidewalk cracks.

A garden hose hisses --
 a new reed absent its oboe --
 and drips at its partial connection
 to a thwapping tractor sprinkler.

A dog barks, and my father's strong arm
 answers with sure strokes of sandpaper
 to a bench he's been restoring.

The soprano across the street screams
 and scares a crowd of boys about
 to trample her prize impatiens.

With the finality of crashing
 symbol, she slams her screen door shut,
 and it's only Mozart again ... 'til
 the wind-up tune of an ice cream truck
 cues the percussive slap of flip flops
 and the hopeful jingle of change.

Lake Play

Today, the lake laid open her apron
as a cradle for seagulls and cupped
her hands around the cousins who rode
bellies down on a tube pulled by a boat
steered by their grandfather. As he made sharp
turns across his own wake, the lake played
along, tossing the cousins in the air
and always catching them on their way down.
The grandfather grinned, the cousins squealed,
and the small dog in my lap licked the air,
hopeful for the occasional spray
that she, in her benevolence, sent his
direction. As we wore ourselves out,
the face of the lake sparkled and winked
beneath the bright September sun.

Ballet Lesson

Heading south on Interstate 35,
mile marker 210, to be exact, we
find ourselves ushered to the best seats
in the house for an impromptu practice
of a school of wind turbines, beginning
ballerinas, all at different stages
of rotation, each reaching for the wind.
From a field nearby, a crop-dusting
helicopter propels pirouettes
with rhythmic precision. As if drawn in
by pure electricity, we pull
over, stand along the shoulder,
and applaud the sky.

Fog

Driving I-80 westbound
toward my parents' Johnson Lake
cabin, we sip steamy coffee
from a thermos and conjure up
old conversations that linger
in the air like this morning's fog --
an old fat-bottomed ghost
of a relative who's plopped down
in the surrounding fields, refusing
to lift so much as a finger
until we've licked clean each remaining
morsel from dry and brittle bones.

Dollhouse: June 18, 2009

The wind was found stirring the sweet, sticky
humidity just east of Locust Street
in Grand Island long past everyone's bedtime.
Instead of settling down, she threw back her head,
spun circles, and kept the neighborhood awake
with her raucous laughter.

Still unable to balance, she took off east,
running wildly, holding her arms straight out,
greedily grabbing at trees. She wandered
across roads and skipped across fields, but just
as often she dragged her feet, kicking up
as much dirt as she could.

Just four miles shy of Aurora, she was lured
by a pretty white farmhouse on the south side
of Hwy 34. She had the roof off
and was bending down to pick up the bathtub
and tiny twin beds when, suddenly, she
twisted and peered over her shoulder.

Perhaps she was called home to dinner or bed
or simply grew bored, but she hightailed it out
of there and back into the sky that minute.
By morning, the sky was a forgiving shade
of pink. A tiny patchwork quilt and rocker
laid on the front lawn where she left them.

Riding Out Storms

When Nebraska's July sky turned
to split pea soup and the tornado
siren forced us to the basement
with flashlights, Dad would wind up
the Victor Victrola and pull
"Aggravatin' Papa" from its
maple chest. The swinging beat
was our invitation to gather
the hems of our satin nightgowns
and, one at a time, climb barefoot
onto Dad's stocking-toed feet to spin
like cyclones across the brown shag
carpeting until the all clear
sounded and sent us sad to bed.

Summer Storm

Yesterday, the hot air of this town
became oppressive. Red-faced men
loosened neckties, women with swollen
ankles kicked off shoes, dogs and children
were still, and daylilies pointed
their crowns toward the ground. No one
was hungry, so all sat and stewed
in silence. Door handles and manhole
covers were so hot that folks wondered
if hell was underfoot or straight ahead.

Since no one could sleep anyway, God
called a cease fire, determined it time
to clean house, threw open the windows
of heaven, poured pail after pail
of cool water onto the street,

and stirred up the wind as he dragged
a mop bucket on wheels across
the floorboards of heaven. As leafy
branches scrubbed the windows of houses,
God washed out the mouths of the streets.

This morning, the daylilies along
the sidewalk are sitting up straight,
and the orphaned cars parked on the street
are dressed in their best despite having
had their ears boxed all night.

It's nearly noon, and yet we sit
on our front porches able to drink hot
coffee without breaking a sweat.

*How'd things ever get so heated
in the first place?* we wonder.

Part III: Snow Blankets it All

“He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?”

(Psalm 147:16-17, ESV)

Nails

At the sound of the bell on the door,
small, stooped women toss dark hair over
their shoulders, smile wide, say hello, promise
short waits and suggest colors. Amy -

sees me, waves me over. Though her towels
are too hot and her small hands are too firm,
I cannot disappoint her. We share
recipes and talk about her son

and my three daughters, whose pictures she asks
to see. Sometimes she speaks of Vietnam,
those who call her by another name,
those whose faces she remembers by heart.

Like old friends, we pass the time holding hands
across a towel, folded and smooth, green
like the Gulf of Tonkin, but faded --
worn thin from too many trips in the wash.

A Mother's Religion

Like plaster of Paris applied thick, smoothed
with the trowel of her firm hand, she covers
their rough edges, shields them from fear
and insecurity -- groundwater rising
through the foundation, threatening to wick up
walls draped in the blush of inexperience
and the pale blue of promise -- from pride piled high
on fragile rooftops like new snow whose runoff
could easily collect between shingles
and find a way across the joints and down
through the ceiling until their seams, exposed,
grow dark, leaving them to weep in corners.

The Chase

I was in fourth grade when Kipp Scott turned up
on my doorstep wearing a suit and bowtie,
holding a white shirt box of molasses
cookies he claimed to have made by himself.

It was May Day, and as my mother took
the cookies to the kitchen, I found myself
being chased around the maple tree
by a red-haired boy, hungry for a kiss.

That was only the first time he chased me.
For a year, he hunted me on the schoolyard,
and bribes of Halloween candy and all
my colored pencils wouldn't make him stop.

I eventually surrendered recess
to Ms. Sabin, who patrolled the playground
in stiletto heels and black leather skirts
but was, for all practical purposes, "Safe!"

It has been thirty-six years since Kipp trailed me
but just months since he became the third classmate
to jump the outer fence, leaving us all
to ponder the folly of running away.

Charles Bonnet Syndrome

By the time she turned 87,
my grandmother's round brown eyes had acquired
their own thick skin -- like twice-used cellophane,
and she began her tumble into blindness.

It happened gradually. Reading
became a chore, and then one day she thanked
my parents for the floral wallpaper
and asked who all the sweet children were.

My parents, who had neither hung wallpaper
nor could see the many small visitors
who made my grandmother bend down and wave,
worried she was losing more than her vision.

In hindsight, this disease that filled blindspots
with pieces from her memory was a neighbor
who came for tea one day and stayed a year
to reminisce and hold her parchment paper hand

until my grandmother fell asleep, having
never even noticed the impending dark.

Treasure Chest

When my grandmother grew unsteady
on her feet, my mother brought her
a wooden box painted the color
of the ocean with a map to nowhere
in particular superimposed
on its lid. In it, my grandmother kept
just what she needed at her fingertips:
three bottles of hand lotion;
two hair picks;
six emery boards;

a gold watch;
a green makeup bag
 containing 29 curlers;
four stretchy bracelets;
three tubes of chapstick;
one yellow pencil;
a scrap of paper upon which
 my parents' cell phone numbers
 were written in my mother's hand;
four Mother's Day cards; and
a purple embroidered coin purse
 that once housed her glasses
 and which is empty now.

This Painting

Though a city girl, my grandmother
was drawn to the brown barn on the left
and the carriage house on the right --
both the color of her eyes.

In the center, slightly to the left,
where the heart of the picture might be,
a yellow house with brown shutters pokes
its red chimney through slate blue clouds.
Snow blankets it all -- the carriage house,
the brown barn, the golden heart
of a home, and my grandmother, too.

Reactive Attachment Disorder

When she left -
abruptly and
of her own accord-
she took with her
a dozen or so
trash bags brimming
with clothes, shoes, books,
make-up, hair products,
stuffed animals,
and costume jewelry.

What she left behind -
in drawers, the closet,
and on the floor -
were family photos,
journals, her good
luggage, birthday gifts,
food she'd hidden,
and last year's Christmas
dress -- the one we bought
to match the others'.

Taking My Daughter to Therapy

On the radio, Michael Bubl  sings
“Holly, Jolly Christmas.” It’s seven
and pitch black. Lit trees and blow-up Santas
wave to the string of headlights parading
like tinsel before this package of daughter,
who, frankly, can’t stand another shake.
Staring out the passenger seat window,
she answers my questions with *uh-huhs*
and *I guesses*. Her right hand cradles her cheek,
and her left fidgets beneath her green sweater --
a skinny brown rabbit seeking warmth.
But it’s her eyes, dark as the night sky,
frozen wishing wells, that remind me there’s far
more I cannot give her than what I can.

Eclipse

Today, the sun beats down on my neck
as I pack my daughter's car with clothes
and things she'll need at college in St. Paul.
My back aches as I stretch to hold her, stand
on tiptoe to reach her, to remember
the weight of a sleeping child slung over
my shoulder. I whisper my goodbyes
and tuck a strand of blonde hair behind her
left ear, then watch her back out the drive,
Turn the corner, head over the hill,
obscured from my view on her way north.

On Your 20th Birthday

You insist on Facetime because you like
to see me. I like to see you too,
but the delay in our connection
distorts the coordination of your
belly laugh and your head thrown back. Then there's
a glitch and the screen times out just as you
lean forward to share a secret or rat
out your roommates. As practiced as I am
at thinking of you, I'm sure I could see
you more clearly in my mind's eye.

While we're talking, your roommate barges
in with a pet fish for you, and you squeal
in delight, mimicking the furious
nature of small fins in a gallon
of water. I watch you from the side

as you bend to gaze into the fishbowl,
and your head disappears from my view.
Suddenly you're six, and I'm standing
on the pool's edge applauding as you plug
your nose and plunge beneath the surface.

I want to carry your new pet to your
dresser top -- to remind you to put down
a towel to protect the furniture --
just like I did when you were eleven
and insisted upon bringing a toad
home from the park. But you know all this.
It's your twentieth birthday after all.

Trying not to appear disappointed,
I say good-bye as you blow a kiss

and freeze just like that before my eyes.

Thus another call ends with nothing more

than an index finger pressed upon

a piece of glass -- which is all anyone

can expect from fish or Facetime --

and without the appropriate

punctuation found in the click

of a receiver, the lick of a stamp,

or the slap of a screen door.

Advice

I have no problem giving advice.

Sometimes, my kids even ask for it.

But last week, my daughter called to tell me

that her roommate's brother — just a college

kid, nearly graduated, job lined up —

had suddenly, inexplicably died.

My daughter sobbed as she recalled the moans

erupting from her roommate, wide-eyed

and frantic, as she tore through the kitchen,

grabbed her car keys, flew out the back door, down
the interstate, back to her childhood home.

“What should I do?” my daughter asked me.

I could imagine my daughter's green eyes

growing wider with each second it took

for me to search within my memory

the annals of lifetime experience

and common sense only to come up

without a grain of advice for my child.

“I know you'll think of something,” I said,

which didn't satisfy my daughter

although I knew it to be true.

The Sad

The sad are often seen
running their hands over their chests
as if reading a letter in braille
or rehearsing the satin binding
of a well-loved blanket.

They're searching for a heartbeat
because their hearts have plunged
like broken elevators, too heavy
to be easily repaired and returned
to rightful places within their torsos.

The sad only long to exit
onto a well-lit floor.

Part IV: The Breaking of Rocks

“The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock.”

(Matthew 7:25, ESV)

A Pint of Dirt

“You’ve gotta eat a pint of dirt before you die,” she always said, most often in the church basement kitchen, where we’d gather before weddings and funerals to shake our heads and offer up ham sandwiches. I thought better of telling her that it was just a “peck” and not the 18th century anymore.

Had I done so, she would’ve laughed, thrown her head back, closed her black eyes, allowed a cackle like the breaking of rocks to erupt from her cracked lips.

She knew better. Knew it like she knew the back of her own hand -- knew it as a promise and a threat.

She’d been eating dirt her whole life. Instead of a silver spoon at birth, she’d been given a shovel and, on it, piles of Minnesota dirt, a mixture part clay —the color of copper pennies her husband would gamble away and the cups of liquor that would make him too brave for anyone’s good — part black dirt — the color of ink with which she’d yield not only stories but also rhubarb, which would grow as wild as her children and every bit as sour -- and part silt -- the weathering, undermining, waste that would, over the years, become her.

For she had not let the soil in which she
was planted turn her bitter. Rather, she'd
planted her legs a sturdy shoulder's width
apart, dug her toes and heels into dirt,
allowed her heart to break and branch out,
root itself in the blackest of places
if only to drink in their nutrients,
to let them flow into her own dense bones.

More than once, I watched
her wipe her pinecone hands on her apron
then extend them like the branches
of a giant red pine and wrap them
like a nest around the shoulders
of the grieving. She'd be sure to send
with them any leftover sandwiches,
she promised. And she always did.

Lasting Words:*Der dich behutet schlaft nicht.*

Dora, my husband's grandmother,
 welcomed me with her standard fare:
 bread and cheese laced with annis
 alongside garden cucumbers.

She was nothing fancy, always
 wearing blue polyester slacks
 and a worn, cable-knit sweater
 in whose ribbed cuffs she tucked tissues.

I recall laughter behind her
 conversation, like her old gold
 percolator chortling beside
 a fruit pie cooling on the counter.

Her favorite story to tell
 was of the tornado that just missed
 their dairy farm while she wrung
 her hands like dish towels and prayed.

She'd take us to the closet -- now
 a laundry room -- where they'd hidden
 and show us the cross-stitched verse, framed
 and hanging on the wood paneling.

When I joined the family, she made
 me the same cross stitch, which whispers,
 "The God who watches over us
 never sleeps," but in Low German.

Though I don't speak it, I understand
 the words: blue like her hopeful eyes,
 a rope of pastel flowers turned
 up like her smile underneath.

Good Seed

Fred Penner of Beatrice, whose farm lay low, hemmed in by fields of corn on all sides, got up before sunrise to milk Holsteins in a barn three times bigger than his house. He collected overalls in different stages of wear, but none as faded as his red-letter Bible. In droughts and seasons of growth defining forty-six years of marriage and the rearing of three children, he never raised his voice except in prayer.

One afternoon in April, he wiped the dirt from his shoes and came in from the barn to report on a newborn calf, to hold a cup of black coffee between both calloused hands, and before the second sip, to be quietly cut down. Were it not for the splash of coffee left to pool on worn carpet, his wife might not have noticed right away.

A few days later, a crop of cars carrying Fred's people arrived in town to pay their respects. They took the back roads, familiar as their hands, leaving those on the interstate none the wiser.

Fourth Grade

In Mrs. Cole's fourth grade classroom,
we read chapter books, raised baby chicks,
memorized states and capitals,
practiced cursive capital S's,
grew lima beans in the window sill,
and attempted long division.

But when we returned from Christmas break
to find Larry Mota's seat empty,
we all learned that fathers could drop dead.

Larry eventually came back
to school, carrying his dead father
in his sad eyes, which followed us
around the playground like dark clouds.
It took some time, but we taught Larry
how to play again.

December Grads

In one of a dozen folding
chairs lined up in the Home Ec.
classroom sits a fifth-year senior
and mother of three beside
a boy who took coursework from jail.
In front of them, dark hair spilling
down the back of a rented gown,
a girl who missed more school than she
ever attended -- not because
she was truant, but because she
was born with a shitty pair
of lungs -- breathes like a hummingbird.

The common denominator
is that nothing ever came
easy for these spiffed up close calls
and last ditch efforts, now taking
turns standing up, shaking hands,
and leaning head first and hopeful
into futures which, tonight,
at least, appear to be as cold
and dark as any other night
in December.

Mad

I have been mad at you since 9:00
last night. After fuming for an hour,
I headed to bed, where you were propped
with pillows, smugly reading a book.

Instead of saying goodnight, I rolled
over as close to the edge of the bed
as I could without falling off and tried
to fall asleep quickly. I could not.

And even when I finally nodded off,
you inserted yourself into my dreams
so that I tossed and turned and woke with
your worn-out baggage beneath my eyes.

I said good morning to you, but my words
were short and punctuated by objects
I picked up quickly and and set down loudly.
I don't even know if you responded.

As I headed out the door, I promised
myself that I wouldn't let your careless
words weigh on me, but I found myself
biting down on my own tongue all day long.

And when I drove home from work, not eager
to be greeted by your cold shoulder, I
took the long way. Now I'm out of gas,
heading into another restless night

that's all your fault. And I'm even more tired.

And all I can hope is that my body -

so accustomed to your nearness, so

expectant of your touch -- doesn't dare reach

for you beneath the sheets before you

come to your senses and apologize.

Because that's what happened last time, and I'm

still a little mad about that, too.

Afterbirth

Twenty years ago, a Michigan
midwife capped a thirty-two hour shift
*-- the exact time it took for pelvic
bones like tectonic plates to shift, split
wide open --* by pulling a baby
girl, slippery and pink, from a pool
of bloody afterbirth cooling between
bent legs, quivering still, and placing
her, heavy as hell, onto my breasts.
Beneath her weight, I exhaled and feared
I wouldn't have strength to fill my lungs
again. But I did. I swallowed air
greedily, and as my chest rose, I
lifted her squirming body high until
my dry lips met the top of her wet
head and her rooting reflex coaxed
gold colostrum from dirt brown nipples.

**To My Daughter on the Event of Her
Initiation to the 'Me Too' Movement**

“If I tell you something, do you promise
you won’t do anything?” you ask.

“No, but tell me anyway.” And you do.

Tell it in bits and pieces as you pick
away at the stone of your heart, tell it
in the order in which your heart breaks
so that we have to put the pieces back
together again like a jigsaw
puzzle, one painful question after
another. “It’s not your fault,” I say
dozens of times and wonder if saying
so is planting the seed that it is.

“He can’t hurt you anymore,” I lie.

Never mind the times his face will creep up
and eclipse the bright sun of new love

or the many times you’ll change your clothes
because you’ll wonder if the “yes” of one
outfit speaks more loudly than the “no”
of your own voice, which you are just learning
is only so strong, only means so much
in a world where a man’s desire can drown
out a symphony. You cry a little,
but not enough to wash away the stench
of betrayal and shame, both his, a plume
whose extent of contamination
remains to be seen. And as I rock you
in my arms the way I did when you
were small, I count off methods of vengeance
like the hairs on your head, the sheer number
of your days, full of promise, imagine

taking a torch to this monster's face
like the many birthday candles I have lit
each year and will continue to light
and upon which you have made wishes
before extinguishing them. And you
will extinguish him, too, my dear, even
if it must be done repeatedly --
a ritual we'll celebrate each year.

Getting Old

At 24th and O, there's a building
the color of pale winter skin. On its west
side, paint has conceded to exposed brick
in the shape of a woman sitting, her wide
posterior turned toward traffic. Only
a hot flash could've tempted her to peel off
all pretenses and hop naked into the night
sky to bathe herself in the pink of a late
November sunset and to break all the second
floor windows in her mad rush to cool off.

Airport Pick Up

A silver sedan pulls up.
From it an old man slowly
unfolds himself then, headfirst
into the wind, makes a beeline
toward an old woman sitting
in a wheelchair, her chin sinking
into her chest, her gaze fixed
on the square knot of her hands
across her lap. Upon reaching
her, he bows low, unlocks her wheels,
glides her from the cool of the shade
to the harsh spotlight of full sun
where he tips her back and weaves her
through the growing crowd to the car
door which he opens wide, lifting
her -- first her arms which he places

around his neck, and next her whole
body with his arms wrapped around
her middle. Holding her, he stops,
then shifts her weight to his left side
and takes her left hand in his right
as if, on any other day,
they might've shared a tango. Once
her fingers find the handle
above the window, he covers
her head with his hand, gently
pushes her down, and tucks her
into the front seat. Bending, he
scoops her feet from the curb and sets
them on the floor mat, then waits
until her hands find their place
across her lap again.

Grief

Grief is a fat old man

in a dark, musty coat.

Unable to walk, he

has climbed upon my back.

Only one of us will make

it. Either I will buckle

beneath the weight of him,

or the sun will beat down

until he dries up

like a black raisin, weightless.

Then I will pluck him

from my shoulder and devour

him and someday, perhaps,

say I found him sweet.

As Good a Day as Any

Usually I'm cautious. I pay bills
early, use my turn signal, eat green
things, and wear layers. My children's
vaccinations are bedfellows
with warranties kept in a box
on my closet floor beside a row
of practical shoes. I avoid
too much sun and too little sleep —
save sleeping in the sun or walking
in the rain. Those are the exceptions,
the days that find me barefoot as I
was today when I let my toes hang
over the edge of the curb despite
its being rush hour and even
as a truck sped by, interrupting
the hot, still air as if someone pulled

down from the line a heavy blanket
and snapped it on the pavement in front
of me so that my hair jumped behind
my shoulders, and right then and there,
I declared it a good day to write
a poem. As good a day as any.