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Down Elk: A Collection of Poems.

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DOWN ELK:

A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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The Honors College

Midway Honors Scholars Program

East Tennessee State University

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Dedication

My parents, the late Rev. Sonny Pritchard and Angela Hicks, and my siblings laid the foundation on which I still firmly stand. They are the memories to which I return again and again in my poems. My husband, Patrick Childress, built secure and loving walls around me and, with our children, Luke, Mallory, and Jed, makes a home where I am daily sustained and empowered to tell the stories of my heart. I love you all without measure.

Acknowledgements

I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to the people who accompanied me on this necessary journey. I am particularly indebted to my thesis advisor, Dr. Jesse Graves. He made my path straight with the example of his own fine poetry, his honest assessment of my work, and his unwavering support of this project. He believed in me on days when I barely had courage to put pencil to paper. Many poems were born over three o'clock coffee as we shared stories of strikingly similar upbringings. I would like to thank Dr. Clay Matthews for reading not only my first bad poem, but also practically every poem I have written since. His insightful observations and suggestions never fail to improve my craft. I am grateful to Dr. Michael Cody for always having an empty seat on a comfy couch when the pressure gets too high. His commitment to put words on paper, whether in mass e-mails, his personal blog, or set to music, inspires me never to give up. The meticulous eye of Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes enhanced these pages, just as I knew it would. I am thankful for the bar he set for this, and all my writing. I would like to thank Dr. Ted Olson for graciously giving his time to this project. I count it an honor to place my work in his care.

Many professors have been instrumental in opening my eyes to my own potential and to the opportunities that are available to me. I am thankful for the financial support of the Honors College and the moral support of Dean Rebecca Pyles. Professor Kathleen Grover refused to let me settle; for this I am forever grateful. Dr. Don Johnson provides a breadth of knowledge of poetry that is unparalleled and sets an example that any poet would desire to emulate. His insistence upon excellence makes me a better student.

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Down Elk: An Introduction

Growing up in the Appalachian Mountains has influenced my character and my writing in ways that are far-reaching and constantly evolving. At different points in my life I have been equally enamored with the red dirt of my childhood and determined to dig my way out of its clutches. I have spread my wings in large cities and invariably found that I longed to get back to my roots. My experiences of mothering and of being someone's wife, someone's daughter, as well as my own self are all bound in my ongoing effort to reconcile my relationship with the people, places, and values of Southern Appalachia that make these mountains both stifling and liberating. Within this juxtaposition I situate this collection of poems – poems born not only of a childhood steeped in the love of family and secured in the tradition of growing up in the Appalachian South, but also of a life marked with great loss – too much, too soon – and finally, the ways in which all these experiences continue to shape how I now live and raise children in these mountains.

Just like my mother and grandmothers before me, I began early filling the cedar hope chest that had been passed to me. However, I don't think my contents were quite what my foremothers had in mind. The knotted boards that easily held their quilts and lace now groan under the weight of my books and journals. I have always known that I would be a writer of something. The smart-mouthed personal essays that fill my early journals, the ones intended to be the bones of this project, led me to read Mary Karr's trilogy of memoirs, *Liars Club*, *Cherry*, and *Lit: A Memoir*. While I am captivated by the stories Karr tells in her series of memoirs, I am consumed by the re-telling of the same stories in the poems that fill her *Viper Rum* and

Sinners Welcome. A summer spent with Mary Karr not only changed the face of this project, but also directed the turn my writing would take, compelling me to tell my own stories in meter, rhyme, and stanza.

To discuss the influences on my writing is a daunting and humbling task; to compare my style or subject matter to any particular poet might seem impossibly vain, particularly when I feel that as a Southern Appalachian poet, a simple geographic distinction, I am in some of the greatest company in contemporary poetry, including Robert Morgan, Jeff Daniel Marion, Linda Parsons Marion, and Ron Rash. However out of place I feel among such distinguished poets, I share with each of them a heritage that consistently finds its way onto all of our pages.

In Linda Parsons Marion, I find an unexpected inspiration, role model, and friend. Upon first hearing her read, I realized that, in order to successfully write poetry, I must be willing to dig to the same deep, raw places. In the poem “Unearthed,” Marion writes, “I dig to weed out, / reveal what remains of my early uprooting” (4-5). Marion’s offering of herself on the pages of *Motherland* sets a standard for honesty that I seek in every poem, though I sometimes fall short. Like Marion’s, the stories I offer in my poems aren’t mine alone, but ones I share with my family. I struggle particularly with telling the stories as I have experienced them while being mindful that the same memories belong to others who may construct them differently. Too often, I let this struggle stand in the way of writing well and writing with integrity. In *Motherland*, Marion courageously plunges head first into a storehouse of painful memories and tells stories of complex relationships with grace, while preserving the dignity of those with whose memories she is charged. Far greater than the risk of exposing others is the risk of exposing myself to others and to dormant feelings. However, each time I read through the pages of *Motherland* or recall the author’s voice reading from “Rosemary for Remembrance,” the lines

“I had awakened to the gloss of morning, finding / I had weathered the worst” (21-22), I am satisfied that truth, no matter the pain or personal sacrifice, is necessary to the stories I need to tell.

Perhaps more than any other poem in this collection, “Instead of You” embodies my fear of exposure. In many ways, it also celebrates my triumph over that fear, personally and in my poetry. Part of my experience of growing up in the Appalachian Mountains was the nagging desire to get away and experience what I believed to be an infinitely better life in the city. As a young adult I did leave, only to find the hold home had on me (has on me still) was stronger than the mesmerizing lights of the city. Even now, there are days when I’m certain that I left something behind, a feeling that epitomizes my sense of being both a native Southern Appalachian and an outsider all at once. To the extent that one poem can, “Instead of You” represents the life I longed for as a teenager trapped in my rural mountain town, the new life I found then chose to leave behind, and ultimately one that calls to me on days when I don’t feel at home in my home. When this poem came to me, an uninvited guest, it was insistent upon being written. I initially resisted the unexpected feelings that are bound in “Instead of You,” choosing rather not to risk the chance that its implications would be hurtful to those who inspired its subject matter, and not to risk unearthing feelings that have been at rest. Ultimately, “Instead of You” did not relent, and I, too, had to “dig to weed out, / reveal what remains of my early uprooting” (4-5). Releasing myself from fear and committing to Linda Parsons Marion’s example of truth resulted in “Instead of You” and an outpouring of other poems – each insisting to be written.

In *Nine Gates* Jane Hirshfield writes, “If a poem would describe joy, it must also hold joy’s shadow” (163). Certainly this is true, because the experiences and relationships that so

often lend themselves to poetry are marked by each. The amalgamation of joy and pain is never more present for me than in the memory of my father. His life's calling as a minister provided the foundation that shaped my childhood. His life's work as a tractor and trailer driver crumbled that footing when he died from heart disease at age fifty-three, a victim of the stressful, sedentary lifestyle of a long-haul trucker. I was seventeen. He was the love of my life. Although I sentimentalize his memory on these pages, I am careful not to do so in the poems about him. My intent, rather, particularly in "The Circuit Rider," is to take an undaunted look at a man, the deliberate choices he made, and the effects those decisions had on his family. My first attempt at "The Circuit Rider" produced the images in the poem, particular memories that were easy to summon, but difficult to place in the appropriate context, leaving this poem without its necessary shadow for longer than I care to admit. Hirshfield also observes that successful artists "have consistently endeavored to look at what is difficult to see...into the realms of sorrow, chaos, indeterminacy, anger; to see out the places where madness and imagination meet" (154), so I determined to see what is most difficult to see about my father and his ministry. The obvious difficult knowledge of my father is simply that he is dead, but the driving force behind the poem is the question of faith and religion that his death brought about for me, particularly the fact that according to the very principles of the faith he touted, the same God to whom he dedicated his life, arbitrarily snuffed it out. In her critique of a draft of "The Circuit Rider," Linda Parsons Marion summarizes my struggle, "his failing heart going unanswered, while his heart's quest to save others had never faltered," capturing in a single statement both the joy and the shadow of the poem.

Additionally, writing "The Circuit Rider" led me to a better understanding of my father's difficult, yet chosen, mission. I am reminded of Robert Hayden's speaker in "Those Winter

Sundays,” who articulates my own feelings when he asks, “What did I know, what did I know / of love’s austere and lonely offices?” (13-14). As a young child, I wasn’t able to understand the offices of Christianity that were so much a part of my life; neither was I aware of the responsibility that accompanied not only my father’s position in the church, but also the burden of the obligatory tasks he performed out of love, even when they went unappreciated by his congregation and by his family. As an adult I realize that my father’s journey as a minister was as necessary as my own as a writer. I hope that I have articulated that understanding, as well as an appreciation for his “austere and lonely offices,” in the lines of “The Circuit Rider.”

Because of its obvious relationship to Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” it seems necessary to focus attention to the second poem in this collection, “Housewife’s Howl.” During a particularly unproductive time for me creatively, I looked to Dr. Clay Matthews for encouragement and advice. His suggestion, “If all else fails, you can try rewriting the first ten lines of ‘Howl,’” resulted in this poem. Undoubtedly, Ginsberg’s opening line, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by / madness...,” is a tough act to follow. However, it isn’t difficult for me to identify whom I consider a subculture of great minds – the generation of women, including my own mother, who are victims of a societal expectation that they be submissive to their husbands, placing his needs and those of practically every other person before themselves, a burden that is rooted in the fundamentalist religious beliefs of our region.

In *The Paradox of Howl*, Stephen Burt writes that in “Howl,” Ginsberg “decries the tactic and overt restrictions on passion, self-expression, and free thought.” While Ginsberg is lamenting the marginalization of those we consider the Beat generation, and Carl Solomon in particular, there is certainly merit in applying his observations to other marginalized groups. In fact, Burt also posits that although “Howl” has come “to represent an enduring counterculture, it

can be all things to all readers.” For me, the screaming, crying, subject of “Howl” is my mother, who gave up her own dreams to spend her life in submission to her husband, served her children and my father’s congregation, and did so gracefully.

Some may say that a poem that is the product of an impromptu writing assignment, especially one that depends so heavily on another poem for its structure, has no place in a final collection of work. I would argue that despite the origin of “Housewife’s Howl,” the subject matter isn’t particular to me, and is in fact a primary theme in Southern Appalachian literature, a claim that Rita Sims Quillen supports in her poem “My Mother, She Was Very Old-Fashioned,” with the lines,

Knew she shouldn’t belong
To him but that she would
Stay, keep the home fires burning
While her soul turned to ashes
Never knowing the closeness
The connection to a twin heart
Because she was very old-fashioned
My mother.

(30-38)

So, just as Ginsberg used his platform to challenge the status quo, I gladly join Rita Sims Quillen and others like her to challenge the Southern Appalachian tradition of perpetuating generation after generation of self-sacrificing women.

I hold Mary Karr as an example, not only because she is a woman writing both poetry and memoir, but also because her later work specifically addresses her own relationship with

faith and organized religion. Most poems I read, to the extent that they address spirituality and religiosity, treat matters of faith with skepticism at best. However, in *Sinners Welcome*, Karr candidly discusses her personal faith and its relationship to her poetry. In the Afterword of *Sinners Welcome*, “Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer,” Karr posits that a love of language makes words like sacraments (77). Karr’s position that faith and language are intrinsically related captures both the role that religion assumes in my life and the purpose that poetry has provided. She continues: “Church language works that way among believers, whether prayer or hymn” (77), a position that I echo in “Down Elk.” The banks of Elk River are part of my most vivid memories - Saturday afternoon with my older brother, fishing poles and fresh-dug night crawlers in tow, and back again some Sundays with an entire congregation bearing hymnals and sinners who had come forward to be baptized. No matter the day, time spent at Elk River was a time of communion with nature, family, and a body of believers who were consolidated as a congregation by “uttering the same noises in unison (along with shared rituals like baptisms and weddings, which are mostly words)” (77), like the notes of “Shall We Gather at the River,” which echo in the lines of “Down Elk,” and in my mind, bringing me the same solace I often seek in the words of Whitman and Yeats. This poem also represents for me the phenomena that my mentor, Jesse Graves, calls “the gift,” the same essential component of writing poetry that Louise Glück refers to as “the haunting... as if the finished poem already exists somewhere” (16). I have been fortunate to receive this gift on occasion, including while writing “Down Elk.”

Largely, this is a collection of elegies. Like the early Greek elegy, “The Circuit Rider,” is meant “as a poem of mourning and lamentation,” however its similarity to Greek elegy is only in its subject matter. “The Circuit Rider” lacks the technical requirements of alternating couplets and specific meter that are associated with the Greek elegy (Baker, Townsend, xiii). The elegiac

form has evolved into our modern construction, which, in its broadest sense suggests a poem about something ending, not only life, but also love, or even a moment in time, as depicted in “Down the Bank,” which addresses both the passing of innocence and childhood. The losses confronted in my poems, particularly the death of my father, occurred when I was a teenager; therefore my expression of grief, while perhaps expected, was nontraditional: flowers and songs were replaced with tirades and shot glasses. Naturally, the particular ways in which I mourned inform the content my work, resulting in elegies that look less like “bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths” (11), the accouterments of grief in Walt Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!,” and more like the “gravy boat / with a hard, brown / drop of gravy still / on the porcelain lip” (4-7), the unlikely conduit to grief, in Jane Kenyon’s “What Came to Me.” While its elements are not as tangible as Kenyon’s “dusty piece of china,” (2), “Father Figure” explores my desperation to remain connected to my father, as well as my improbable journey through sorrow. In its original form, the lines of “Father Figure” maintained a consistent syllabic form; however, the revisions proved that in order to maintain the integrity of the subject matter, it would be necessary to sacrifice a specific form.

I’m not certain that any one definition can be applied to poetic voice. Still, one of the goals of this project is to begin to define my own distinct voice, as I imagine it is a goal for most developing writers. Poetic voice is described as “that sense of a unique something present on a page – an unmistakable something that becomes the mark of a writer, a way of saying things that is a writer’s own”(Addonizio, Laux, 115). Part of what makes every writer’s voice unique is subject matter, “the raw material of our experiences” that we transform into language in order to “reach beyond the self-involvement of the writer, so that what we know becomes shared knowledge” (21). However, most days I have a pretty ordinary, even boring life, so believing

that my everyday experiences will translate into something convincing and engaging for readers has been difficult. The truth is, some of the great poems began with ordinary objects or experiences. Keats wrote about an urn, and in doing so gives one of the most quoted, referenced, and analyzed lines in poetry, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-50). Likewise, William Carlos Williams produced arguably the most talked about poem in Modern American poetry, from the image of a red wheelbarrow. “Putting Up Corn” is my attempt to turn a mundane activity into something that reaches beyond the personal experience and actual object to connect to the broader concerns of marriage and domesticity, and how husband and wife often view it differently.

In many ways, my goal for this project was not to master specific forms or to capture a particular tone or mood, but simply to turn the nagging thoughts in my head into something that makes sense on paper, and to be able to do so consistently. Some of the poems in this collection, like “Watch Night Service,” have taken shape simply by committing a specific memory to paper. Others, like “Wedding Vows,” are meant to process and articulate fleeting emotions or to capture the images of a dream as I have done in “Composing.” Still others, like “Elegy for June Cleaver,” are intended simply to balance the dark tone of other poems in this collection.

Regardless of the catalysts for these poems or the ways in which they ultimately reveal themselves, in writing each of these poems, I determined to remain true to a piece of advice gleaned from the pages of a second-hand book found on the dusty shelves of a used book store. In *Writing Personal Poetry*, Shelia Bender admonishes, “you must write the poems that offer themselves to be written – all of them, and when they come” (Introduction). I am content that I received every gift of word, line, and image and committed them to the pages of this project. I

am satisfied that I have written, to various degrees of success, every poem that has offered itself to me so far.

Part of reflecting on this collection of poems is seeing where I have fallen short – things I would change, poems I didn't finish, goals I haven't met. Looking beyond this project, it is my immediate goal to write within more formal structural guidelines, an objective I don't expect to meet easily, still a necessary one if I hope to grow as a writer. In addition, I have been urged to look outside of my own biography for inspiration, a task I expect to cause even greater difficulty, indeed a suggestion that I initially brushed aside, figuring that all poets write about what they know. To a degree, it is true that we each return to what we know in creative writing, still I am confident that everything I need to say as a poet isn't totally bound in my particular life experiences. To bring this project full circle, I return again to the friendship, inspiration, work, and words of Linda Parsons Marion. Each time I open *Motherland* the personal inscription Linda penned greets me, "great admiration for your necessary journey." Every word on every page has been one small step in my journey to reconcile my past with my present and to flesh out who I want to be among all I am expected to be – a necessary journey indeed.

“In this South I lived as a child, and now live, and it is of it that my story is made.”

~ Lillian Smith

The Circuit Rider

*Till lo! a herald hastens neigh;
He come the tale of woe to tell,
How he, their prop and glory fell;
How died he in a stranger's room,
How strangers laid him in the tomb,
How spoke he with his latest breath,
And loved and blessed them all in death.*

~Samuel Wakefield

He rode from town to town on eighteen wheels,
cordovan cowboy boots gleaming,
From a dab of Kiwi shoe polish,
scratch of brush, swoosh of soft rag.
Delivered his message from the crackling, cursing
waves of a CB radio, from a store-front church,
whose basement he dug by hand,
hauling dirt one wheelbarrow load at a time.
A ten-four good buddy benediction served as often as Amen.
His load was delivered on time and just
in time to study his worn King James a few hours
before callused hands with grease-stained fingernails
rang in Sunday morning worship for a meager congregation.
Sweat beaded on his high, proud forehead as he preached
the love of Jesus and the filth of sin.
He stopped only to reach into the pocket of his pin-striped suit
for the same red bandana that he used to wipe his face
clean from the grime of the road until he reached his next bath,
Same one he waved from a roadside ditch
praying to the God he served and served
that someone would see, would stop, would save
a preacher-man whose heart had failed him
though he had never failed
to minister to folks sick in body and in sin,
grease the axles on that old semi bound
to make one more trip, earn another pay-check,
feed his family, and feed his sheep.
His rig waited beside a country road, still picking up
The Old Time Gospel Hour with its AM signal.
A ditty bag packed by loving hands in the cab,
his tattered black Bible and logbook riding shotgun.

Housewife's Howl

For Angela Hicks

I watched the strongest woman I'd known crumbled by convention. Exhausted cotton shift dragging down narrow, hardwood stairs at rooster-crow to satisfy a hungry family. Coal-eyed babies draining her clean as the patterned linoleum she mopped in the moonlight. Submitting, per the instruction of The Apostle Paul, to a head of household husband, whose heart was filled with love for her and with arteries wasted by the goldflake biscuits and sausage gravy he demanded, even when he knew it would kill him. Staggering her with the burden of children, checkbook, and chopped wood that wouldn't burn if it was too green, too wet, or from a locust tree. Lessons a city-coddled girl had no use for, meant survival in the blue mountain home of a woman, who bared her soul to a long-haul trucker when she jumped from her Daddy's window, bound for York, South Carolina, and a marriage license, who poured powdered formula for the babies, and poured pints of liquor down the drain every time he promised to quit, who praised the Lord when he found Jesus, and faithfully followed, three babies in tow, to build a church and a life, to be a pastor's wife, who gave to the poorer, who fell on her knees to pray for the lost, witness to backsliders, visit the sick, who gave up her dream of healing animals only to lose the husband whose heart she couldn't heal. Spent her life serving others, serving meals, washing clothes and smart-mouths with soap, cleaning up our house and our acts. Teaching accidental lessons to a daughter bound to put right the heart of this women she hoped never to become.

Down the Bank

Red dirt held a promise that mattered
to a girl and boy looking to spend the day
digging for night-crawlers with sticks
and spoons snuck from the same drawer
where Mama thought her Mr. Goodbars
were hidden,

Clay-stained seats of cutoff jeans told
bumpy adventures down the bank where
crusty-lipped RC bottles mined from neighbor's
trash and roadside ditches became shiny dimes
to spend on two-cent bubble gum and Cokes
at Hughes's Store

where cats slept beside the blade set for cutting
thick slices of bologna and where inability
to back down from a big brother's dare pulled me
down the candy aisle to fill my pudgy, rusty hands
with treats I wouldn't pay for
but knew I should,

Red Dirt held a promise that mattered
to a girl home-grown on The Ten Commandments,
The Golden Rule, and a black leather belt
with a glowering brass buckle, used liberally
by strong, loving hands with a lesson
in each lick.

The weight of dirty pockets measured the trip
across a plank bridge through the mire
towards home, where the brother I adored waited
to receive his portion of the spoils, to show
approval that I longed for
but didn't deserve.

Down Elk

We stood beside Elk river
as often as the Good Lord allowed.
Women teetered on rocky banks
in wobbly high heels, singing
"Shall We Gather at the River,"
which always struck me funny,
seeing as we were already gathered there.
Men traded their polished wing-tips for waders
and the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy
down in their hearts that could only come
from dunking a fellow believer
under the frigid water.
While the old -timers led the new convert
to the preacher who'd led them to the Lord,
my brother and I dared other kids
to join us as we edged closer and closer
into the swirling, saving, water.
Our Sunday shoes were wet
by the time we bowed our heads to pray.
but when Daddy raised his King James
high in the air and baptized this his brother
or that his sister in the name of the Father,
The Son and The Holy Ghost, we paid
attention. We paid respect
to our father and The Son who paid for our sins.
We watched with wonder
as the water washed clean, and
when the sinner who Daddy submerged,
emerged a soaking-wet saint
tears streamed down my face.

Watch Night Service

Lecherous kisses were planted on lips of young girls
who meant only to shake hands.
We heard a midnight kiss meant marriage,
hoped it wasn't true.
wiped the spit of a toothless man from our faces,
tried to avoid the front pew
where he sat, knees crossed, pasty shin exposed,
square-toed ankle boots zipped up the side.

Blue-black crocodile tears were fixed in our minds,
streaming down the face of a woman
who confessed her yearly quota of sins
to an attentive congregation.
We listened as she boasted her transgressions,
prayed we wouldn't be escorted outside
by some pious deacon determined
to ruin our only New Year's Eve fun.

Seeds of fear were sown in our hearts
by tag-team preachers, each assigned one hour
between seven p.m. and midnight
to recite Revelation and preach prophecy.
We anxiously counted down seconds,
listened for the trump to sound
another year, the Second Coming
for which I am still watching.

Imprints

The boy wore one expression,
somber and steady. Careful
never to reveal too much terror
to a stepfather expected to love him,
but instead beat him with braided switches
cut from hickory trees by Curtis's Creek
where sometimes he could play, sometimes
drown puppies that Tom wouldn't let him keep.
That, or follow a rifle's roar to a blood-trail
spilled red on fresh snow, to find them
already dead, needing buried.
Neither a job for a small boy.

Bound and determined to hide his desire
to choose first from bags of hard candy
Tom carried home for the children
he wanted. Bright, broken shards
of cinnamon, butterscotch, horehound
left behind for the boy on lucky days.
To taste the white meat of chicken breast
on all the other plates when he bit
into the gristle of dark leg.

Put on a mask of hope that violet and sapphire
Bruises imprinted on his body like tattoos
are bright enough to present to his Mama
to make her love him more,
and to the social worker who needed
black, glaring proof to do her job,
give him a family like the boys who play
basketball on the playground til dark,
those in Walt Disney movies on Sunday night,
the single thing that made him smile.

Cow Bingo

TICKETS! ON SALE NOW!

Twenty dollars buys a fifty-yard line
parcel lettered and numbered
aerosol white against the spring-green,
impatient, high school football field.

Gridiron painted in three-by-three
squares that embody this town. Today
natives are known by digits on golden
stubs waiting to be torn in two

once their place in the meandering line
finds them positioned inside the gate,
elbowing their way to corndogs and concrete
bleachers to stake a vinyl-cushioned claim

on a seat left six months ago Friday night.
Hope that before noon their block will hold
a five hundred dollar, pungent pile of manure
expelled by Principal Birchfield's heifer

Now weighted down in the end zone,
prodded by the desperate crowd
To take a public dump,
The only chance they've ever taken.

Father Figure

When Daddy died, I went away
as near as I could pretend was far,
so far I would never be near
the chair where he would brood,
eyes closed, ten minutes past curfew.
Or passed down piano where I played
his wishes every afternoon.
Away from the fresh mound of earth
that held his hand, his heart, his boots,
to where you found me searching
for anything like life – like him,
though he could never be replaced.
You built a pedestal that stood high
enough so I would bleed each time
you showed your age, knocked me down
with a twelve-pack, an older woman, an
angry left-hook.
You painted my unmade face,
cut my childish curls,
turned Chicken Shit to Chicken Salad,
you said as I dangled like a bauble
from your arm. I served Bourbon
and Branch to the money-parade
that swaggered through
your stained-glass dream, made small talk
with single minds who watched my ass
as I walked away to leave
business to the grown-ups.
I closed my eyes tight to kiss
your whiskered face goodnight,
laid my head against your chest,
your salt and pepper chest,
like the chest that holds the resting heart
that hollowed a hole in mine.

Instead of You

I buried the wild oats,
ones I'd sown with you
on the wrong side of a bar,
in the wrong bed,
deep in the dark familiar soil of home.

Covered them over
with a patchwork quilt
pulled from a chest
filled with every hope except my own.
Forgot them

when I wore Mama's white lace,
set a farmhouse table
with Wedgewood china
and three highchairs,
made supper, made love, put away dishes,

put down roots
with a boy who was raised right,
right here
in this place where I returned
when I left you by the murky water

you loved so much
though I never knew why
before we held hands on the pier
then plunged to the secret bottom,
our toes in sultry mud,

tangled legs and hearts
moved by a current
too strong for a hidden cove and
a sheltered girl,
lying bare beside you

and the water we shared.
Holding hands, we said
good-bye
to a possibility

that wouldn't be veiled in white,

where sometimes I return
and dig deep in the mire
to exhume a desire
that can't be contained in a cedar box
at the foot of this wrong bed.

I'm Putting Away Laundry

And then you come,
when snow drops a whispered prayer
outside my bedroom window, memories
mud-puddle in my eyes, threaten to spill
over and expose me again.
Thanksgiving turkey deep-fried
in your Daddy's backyard.
A new tradition, new family,
new facet of you.
Determined to please him, yet
bound to fail, you soak
your shame in cases of beer.
Each Michelob Light you chunked
into the trash in our tiny kitchen
overlooking the lake
(another of your aims to please)
made jagged bits of one more dream;
a Saturday afternoon at St. Mary's Chapel,
April, to share an anniversary with my folks,
smashed like the cans that surrounded you
when I tried to bring you to bed at night.
Hope of a baby, a girl we'd call Robyn Rae
for you, and of course your Dad,
vanished like days you were sober.
Yellow hand-towels in an unused room
prepared in case we had guests,
just in case I could keep pretending
to make a home with you,
one I knew I would someday leave.
Behind the glass in my yellow bedroom,
I watch you fall
in line after line of white powder
arranged on the kitchen table
with a blade that still cuts.

Wedding Vows

When she stood before God and all those witnesses to say I Do
What she really meant was *I Don't. I Won't.*
She meant *You've got to be kidding me.*
Who really wants to spend the rest of her life with some poor, old, sick guy?
What she meant is *I don't intend to wash your clothes or wear lipstick anymore.*
I won't walk barefoot in your kitchen.
I promise to gain as least twenty pounds, to honor my Daddy's name,
And to obey a plethora of self-help books.
She could have meant I Do.
I do have a mind of my own, my own life, friends, and taste in music.
I do know how to order take out and maintain separate accounts,
She meant *with this ring I will have a headache often.*
I will leave the lights on so I can read and snore while you sleep.
I will constantly breathe down your neck and in your face with morning breath.
I will forsake shaving my legs from the knee up
Until Death Do Us Part.

Elegy for June Cleaver

It took only thirty minutes, once each week
for you to set the bar I try to hurdle but
limbo at best, finding how low I can go.
If not for you, he would never expect a kiss
and cold drink at the door, receiving instead
juice-box and crying child.
You taught them that six p.m. brings meatloaf,
mashed potatoes, bread from scratch, a lesson
I un-teach with cardboard boxes of pizza.
Thanks to you, the woman of my husband's dreams,
he thinks he married Roseanne.
Patiently, you nurtured Wally and The Beaver,
hosted play-dates for boys with funny names
like the ones I call my own boys behind their backs,
over the wrinkled laundry that I don't iron.
Finally you can get some rest
in a hard-wood box, polished lemon fresh.
Kick off your heels, while I kick up mine.
Shed those pearls, lose the lipstick.
But be sure not to leave your apron behind.

Composing

I dreamed you in another life, red shirt
striped with blues. Braided brown
suspenders crossed sinewy shoulders
still bearing the toil of your ancestral farm,
met denim and your wiry waist.
Close and cropped replaced bohemian wheat
tresses. Bearded face, free of silver that
marks it now like streak'ed meat
simmering in your mama's bean pot.
Hands not yet an instrument of
stirring words, but tanned tools,
toughened by hoe and plow,
tender on my skin. Surveying
the lay of the land with cornflower
eyes that now peruse my pages
for a soul I once shared with you
not contained between hard-bound
covers, words on top of words
just past your gaze,
windowless walls, or propriety.
We grew together, each kneading
new ground, harvesting meaning,
a lexis to carry into this life
where we pass fingertip to fingertip
across a sturdy wooden desk.
Paper and ink whispering
what mustn't be said aloud.

Putting Up Corn

In August, he places a bushel bag at my feet
bursting with pride at the sweet corn he brings
from the rusty bed of an old man's truck.
Three dollars a dozen will cost me
eight hours. Shucking, silking, washing, cutting
cooking what could be bought
from the freezer section where I find
green beans our mothers would plant
pick, cook and can, planning
for hard winter which might not come,
hungry children who would.

I peel back rough, green husks to reveal
so many teeth that need brushing, smiling
knowing smiles because he has delivered
my submission.

I strip silk with a small brush
turning each ear over in my hand,
rosary said to the blessed mother
whose purity he thinks I lack.

*Our Father who art in Heaven, I didn't do the dishes today.
Hail Mary, full of grace, I don't own an iron.
Glory be to the Father, I speak my mind.
Hail Holy Queen, I called for take out again.*

I cut each kernel lose with a sharp blade.
Shave away what I believe in, what he would change,
scrape the cob and my soul clean
leaving nothing behind.

I place a dozen gallon bags at his feet
bursting with my sweet-corn yield,
in a kitchen where I don't belong, planning
for hard winter which might not come,
hungry children who will.
Made as reparation for being
the woman I am, placed in a freezer
where each time a bag is removed
he will be reminded that once, in August,
I was the wife he wished for.

Cadillac Script

He branded me on his left shoulder,
black *Cadillac Script*. A present
to himself, to me, to commemorate
his fortieth birthday at Panama Beach.

A boardwalk stroll with our son ended
in a parlor crawling with spring-breakers,
flyboys stationed at Tyndall, all waiting
for the needle artist to leave his mark.

Barely-there hearts on gilded hips of girls
almost rebelling. Chevron stripes and stars
bulging from biceps of Airman with rank.
My name pierced into *his* skin, asserting

She is mine forever. Whether or not
I wanted to be carried on his shoulder,
indelibly linked to him. Dripping blood,
my essence oozing from his flesh.

Singing Lessons

In Aisle 5
sugar, flour, spices,
cake mixes 2/\$1.89.

Sing along with the radio.
Loud.
The driver beside you does.

If you have a hairbrush, curling iron,
or a wooden spoon, use it.
You have a microphone.

In the shower
because someone said you should,
and don't forget in the rain.

If artless karaoke happens
in your kitchen
be thankful for your doo-wop girls.

Sing to your swaddled babies.
It's the only time you can
hold all of them with all of you.

When your best friend promises
till death do us part, sing.
When your song is over, so is the friendship.

At high school graduation,
"Friends Are Friends Forever,"
expect they're not.

When you are seventeen,
sing at your Daddy's funeral.
You promised the night before he died.

Sunday School

Sunday morning and I am washed in nothing
more than light, heat, and guilt
planted deep by my Daddy's voice, saying,
Get up! We go to church on Sunday morning.
Not to races, not to ballgames, not to the beach.

Still, I dig my feet into the white powder,
keeping time with the tide and their heads,
two dark like my own, one a sun-kissed mystery,
bobbing like bottled notes on the foamy peaks.
free from clip-on ties, patent leather, and tradition.

Sunday morning and I worship at an altar
where my winter whitewash goes golden,
foolish children build houses upon the sand
never knowing, as I once learned in a hymn,
that the house on the sand when splat.

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