

1991

Leaps

Ellen Grace Satrom
Iowa State University

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Leaps

by

Ellen Grace Satrom

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1991

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. LEAPS	1
Leaps	2
Chapel of Peace, California	3
Whale Watching Off the Coast of California	4
On White Horse Hill	5
Burial	6
The Fifth of November	7
Liquid Nitrogen	8
University Church of St. Mary's, Oxford	9
Moving Home After Six Years Abroad	10
II. IN THE KISII HILLS	11
Thirsty Crow	12
Spring Rains	13
Scorpions Under a Raised Rock	14
Bus to Nairobi	15
In the Kisii Hills	16
Where the Sun Spins Dry	17
Water-Keeper	18
The Woman Who Had Three Children	19
What a Man Wants	20
Women from Atu	21
Going Home	22
Gathering Rocks	23
III. TRANSFORMATIONS	24
Relocations	25
Death in Winter	26
My Grandmother's Clothes Don't Dance	27
Grandpa Jacob Wrestles With the Angel	28
Diving From the Godstowe Bridge	29
Night Swimming	30
Solstice	31
The Sculptor	32
Left-Sided Angel	33

Belladonna	34
Gumbo Ya Ya	35
In the Tornado's Eye	36
The Silent World	37
Blue	38
Last July's Sky	39
Visiting My Brother at Merriter Methodist	40
Morphine Dreams	41
Heavy Wings	42
His Deliberate Drowning	43
Salt	44
Growing Season	45
Where I Walk	47
Brass Rubbing, St. Mary's Chapel	48
Flight	49
Transformations	50

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

51

I. LEAPS

Leaps

The summer the brown grasshoppers
leapt from dry grass
in numbers that my grandpa said
seemed like an Egyptian plague,
my brother and I galloped
through the yard, our knees
angling up to imitate
the shape of these
straw-armored creatures whose legs
could launch them higher and further
than our heavy feet
would ever go.
We chased them down, clapped
our small, soft palms around them,
cupped them in a protective
darkness, delighting in
the delicate kicks we felt
inside our hands,
and took them to where grandpa stood.
Shears in hand, he cut off their heads,
and we watched them jump their
crazy headless jumps,
loved them, leapt eagerly away,
too quick to see how their
jumps came lower and lower
to the ground, how they
finally slowed and lay on their sides.

Chapel of Peace, California

In this dry,
silently bleached
California heat,
Pastor Egge, white
as the walls of his church,
thumps hard on his pulpit,
yells, while
from an aisle behind me
Kristi runs dark
fingers through my hair.

The fat flies
buzz and land and buzz
from head to head.

Relentless as a metronome,
Pastor Egge's gaveled
fist slams down
to call his sinners
back from sleep.
Still faithfully alert,
I hang back my head
to Kristi's wandering hands.

Whale Watching Off the Coast of California

I wanted most to see
inside the blacks
of their ocean eyes

to see the secret
seaweed rooted lightly
to cold floors,
crabs picking their way
across forgotten boulders,
fish speeding blind
in an unlighted world.

When they finally came,
it was only a few
grey backs I saw.
Their fountains spouted
straight and high,
and all I could know
was that they swam like waves
in their low, smooth swells.

On White Horse Hill

we flew kites along the ridge,
our gawky legs stumbling,
stamping impatiently those
moments without wind
when our plastic contraptions
crashed and dragged.

Below, our parents paced
the lines of the huge chalk horse
whose ancient profile
climbed the edges of the hill
in mysterious steps,
etched like long white bones.

And when the winds returned,
while our parents studied
the horse's diamond-shaped eye,

we danced our earthbound feet,
strained our eyes toward the sky,
wondering how high and far
beyond us the tails would fly.

Burial

(The long barrow at Long Hanborough, England, is a large mass burial site dating back to neolithic times)

The beech trees circle evenly
at the long barrow,
dropping their seeds
in scatterings at our feet
while we run the length
of the grave and then back,
clambering over the earth
that's mounded in lumps
and knots like the back
of a grandmother's worn hand.

We are looking for bones
wedged beneath dirt and weeds
(our parents say for them
to have lasted this long,
they must be buried deep),
but all we find are seeds.

And so, instead, crawling
across the mound,
pushing our thumbs down
into the hardened dirt,
brushing the seeds
into their new-made beds,
we bury these.

The Fifth of November

we stood silently
in Helen Wright's back garden,
seven pairs
of nine-year-old feet heavy
on the ground,
crushing the frost-
covered blades,
as we sipped our mugs
of tomato soup.

Circling the bonfire,
we watched entranced at how
the red-flavored steam
lifted past lips,
how frozen roses,
locked behind night,
still sprang into light
and then back,
how the Guy Fawkes
we had made of hessian cloth
blazed in our fire,
crackled, shrank,
disappeared like guilt into night.

Liquid Nitrogen

The second day Mr. Lind
sent us out for dandelions and buttercups,
had us tug them up
by their supple stems,
for what was to be our first experiment.

We held our bouquets,
golden heads drooping
down toward the steaming vat
in the center of the room,
at his command dipped them in,
lifted them back up.

And as he traced diagrams
of nitrogen's bonding on the board,
we each snapped frosted heads
from stems, seeing
the ease with which heads broke
from bodies,
the grace with which they fell,
making barely a sound.

University Church of St. Mary's, Oxford

Instead of listening,
I trace the woodworms'
paths with my eyes
in the shadowy damp
of this gothic church,
follow the way
the chairbacks wave steeply
down and then up,
following their line
from Miss Josephine's
white, ruffled hair,
down the slumping pink shoulders
of her coat,
and across to Mrs. Steinitz
who nods her head
to the beat of each word
from the pulpit
where my father speaks.

Mrs. Steinitz's hair
is whitening too, her veins
lifting, deep blue,
to harden in place
like the tunnels
the woodworms have dug.
With the tips of my fingers
I feel the smooth
of my hands,
read like braille
how the veins stand
invisible, hidden
beneath layers of skin.

Moving Home After Six Years Abroad

Of course I may be remembering it all
wrong after, after--how many years?

Elizabeth Bishop

I remember not wanting to be there:
robin's egg blue walls, long customs
lines, suitcases, white pressed shirts,
polyester trousers, boxes, carts, and
the buzz and the clatter of the luggage
carousel.

I remember outside, grey and bloated
air, I remember not seeing green, I
remember my cotton skirt, hot and helium
filled, lifting away from my legs, I
remember concrete the same color as the
air, expanding. I remember a brown van
and an aunt I had seen six years before,
her hair, brown, sunglasses, brown.

I remember the road widening around us
as we moved, lanes pushing away lanes,
cars stretching long and broad,
billboard pictures blaring tans and
cigarettes, equally rationed trees
on boulevards, scattering lawns, squat
houses, their colors thinning and light.

And I remember the greenhouses, brittle
and glazed, as my aunt said we were
nearly there, the uneven rows of houses,
the orange-berried tree, the white rail,
and my grandfather's head, shaped like
a bulb, deaf, alone, unmoving, framed
in the window of our home.

II. IN THE KISII HILLS

Thirsty Crow

I have watched that thirsty crow flying,
dropping pebble after pebble
into the thin-necked jug made of clay,
waiting for the water inside to rise, sighing
through his hollow beak that waits
to drink like a vein from the clay.
He jerks his head while his eyes stay locked
to the jug's shaded throat, and his eyes glitter
like the water which he thinks ripples
when he drops each pebble down.

Didn't he hear that first pebble
crack against the clay bottom?
Didn't he notice that thin trickle
which the sun sucked up?

Spring Rains

The chameleon shines green
on dust red earth,
placed flat on his side
like a puzzle piece,
crushed exactly,
one eye watching
from his place of death.

Skin brilliant against red,
he waits for iron smells,
sliding grey clouds,
shadows deepening red to rust,

waits for rain falling moist,
sprouting new green blades
concealing him,
new green legs to walk.

Scorpions Under a Raised Rock

Their tails cock up like fists.
Knives sewn into their grips,
they stand silently,
having no words, no language,
other than bodies
that angle and shape,
eyes always fixed,
unable to see from side to side
without movement
of their jointed legs.
But their legs run straight
with the line of their eyes,
of their tails arching
at equal heights.
Sharp, a tail
hooks high and in,
another daggers deep.
Legs stutter. The poison
reaching their segmented legs,
they sway from side to side.
There is no longer a line,
a direction to run or strike.
There is only a dizzy collapse
as the waiting sky
falls black and heavy as a rock.

Bus to Nairobi

Hip packed to hip, thighs
crushing, cramped,
squatting.

Squawk.

The chicken extends
its wings and stares
out the bus's front window.

Down in the aisle
my eyes hit a man's
back, ahead of me, his
checkered coat sagging
as he tries to sleep
these hours away.

Another squawk.

Clicks. Pacing
at the front.

A knee lodges
in my back, each bump
from the road
gashing further.

Wings flutter.

Flap.

My arm aches
perched against
a sleeping baby falling
from the lap
of a mother sliding
off her seat.

An upward shudder.

Wings flash.

The bird flies
for a foot and falls.

The woman squeezes
to the front, holds
the bird, its neck
more frantic
in her experienced grip.

And when she sits,
the bird dangles at the front,
its feet tied to the rail.

In the Kisii Hills

- i. The sun is steady there
 where the passion fruit hangs bitter.
 My mother has one spoon.
 My father's 60's glasses are broken.
 My brother is playing with a dead porcupine.
 My sister's stomach warps
 like the blister on my thumbs
 from shucking dried kernels off the corn.
 And while the smoke stings
 from the hut's three-stone fire,
 the rains come once a day.

- ii. After four hours in church,
 this benchwood is beating back
 at me. My uncle preaches
 long and loud, and just when
 he seems to be ending, the rain bullets
 on the tin roof so fast and hard
 that no one can leave.
 So he starts again.
 And as the rains flood more and more,
 I know why people pray to God
 and why we are in this church: his fury
 or disinterest will drown us.
 And I am jealous of Noah and his Ark
 and the people on the Channel 11 News at home
 who are rescued by rubber firemen in lifeboats
 from the roofs of concrete houses.

- iii. I knew before I came
 that the continent of Africa
 has perfect pitch.
 But the church guitar
 had a string already missing
 when I broke the third one down.
 It was so out of tune
 and I wanted it to sound right.

*I lived in the Kisii region for three weeks with a family. (Father, mother, etc. refer to my Kenyan father and mother.)

Where the Sun Spins Dry

Cattle come grazing
their straight lines:
nose to shoulder,
shoulder to shoulder,
thin as the grass they eat.
Skull to ribs to hooves,
their bones show,
muscles wound
around in twine.

The Maasai man comes behind,
strung by the sun,
by the pull of muscles wound taut.
His skull, ribs, leg bones show.

Legs sway stiff
but straight, no weight,
while in their sockets
hip joints twist dry.

Water-Keeper

The woman with the sickle bends low,
her back curving farther every day,
her neck reaching for her hips,
her hips sinking to the earth
as she slices at the stems of rice.
A baobab stands wide behind her,
its trunk bulging lumpily
into the ground,
running its roots beneath fields.
Between the stems of rice,
frogs squirm at her toes.
Their water drained, they leap homeless,
like insect swarms, while she cuts.

Miles away, at dusk,
if someone happens in passing
to glance across fields,
eyes might cross thin branches
extended like witches' fingers,
the fat trunk high
above indistinct shapes who move
unaware of tunnels below them,
of clumsy, water-holding roots.

The Woman Who Had Three Children

I am coming with a story.

I am a woman
and I had three children:
one with a very large head
one with very thin legs
one with distended stomach.
My first tried to climb a tree
but his head was too heavy
and he fell and broke his head.
My second tried to run
but his legs were too thin
and they broke.
My third ate much food
and his stomach
burst.

I am a woman
and I am coming to tell you
you with your many children
that your child with the head large
like the ostrich's egg
will fall
that his head is soft
and it will break
and the shell will be too much cracked
to carry your water.
I am coming to tell you
that your child's thin legs
are as brittle
as the kindling wood
but they break
and do not burn.
I am coming to tell you
that your child's stomach
is as deep and as round
as your cooking pot
but its emptiness
will explode.

I am a woman
and I had three children
and that is the end of my story.

What a Man Wants

Men have come at night.
The trader came to the East African coast,
eyes blue as the Indian Ocean he sailed,
visiting her grandmother in the darkness
under thick fronds of palms
that clattered their leaves,
covering violence.
The revolutionary came at night,
dark skin, dark clothes concealing
moonlit glints of weapons
as his shadow-body leapt
from cover behind trees
to the thatch of her mother's hut,
leapt under her, deep
brown eyes demanding silence
for the revolution's sake.
The white man came at night
searching for those hiding, tossing
her things, her body to the ground, finding
her hut empty, finding only her.
And now the husband comes at night.
His pombe drained, his mistress tired,
he comes to Muthoni's bed at dawn.

Muthoni knows what a man wants,
like her mother, grandmother before her.

Muthoni's day begins at dawn.
With the rooster's crow, the cow
is milked, the calf fed, firewood
gathered, carried, chopped.
She feeds her young son, his suckling
draining her blood, muscles, bones,
as she cooks her husband's uji breakfast.
But her daughter she teaches to watch.
Brown, ringed with blue, her eyes pierce
large, open like the lemur who goes at night.

Women from Atu

We women from Atu swing our hips,
bright colored cloths swishing,
swing our heads, gold earrings jingling
in defiance to you
our men who no longer keep us.

Watch Tabita's eyes.
She looks south down the blue-water-white-
sand coast, already sees Mombasa's
white towers glazed with the full moon's light,
rich merchants lingering down narrow streets
between mosques, she smells their clean
cotton clothes. Sees tourists, white businessmen
holding her on their laps, feels their soft-
fleshed legs pillowing her bones, watches
ships docking with navies, hears bars
crowded with sailors' laughs,
while electric lights keep nights as days.

Maybe there are bruises. Bruises when
the businessman grabs her arm too tightly,
his short-trimmed fingernails, hard wedding band
digging at her skin as she turns away from him,
bruises when the sailor throws her across the room,
her eyes fearing his, his eyes red, leaded
with smoke, with pombe, bruises when
the merchant rams himself down
between her brittle legs.

But our skin is dark to hide the marks.

Gold chains unlatch from their necks.
Heavy coins slip from their pockets.

Going Home

Students' hands hold the stones
easily, stones picked from the road,
edges uneven, sharp.
Blue policemen come first, black
plastic helmets, black wooden sticks
clattering on small shields.
Rocks float at them loose from students'
hands, loose in the air,
crash hard on foreheads, cheekbones.
The blue policemen are old,
old like fathers,
like stones, but not as hard.
Tired, holding their wounds,
they go back down the road,
go back to their homes.

By a pile of bricks the students wait,
the shapes of bricks more square
and awkward in their hands.
Hearing engines, their fingers tighten,
they see red berets
carried fast on camouflage trucks,
young faces too, young like brothers,
cousins, but faces hard,
firing black guns, splitting
trees, shattering bricks,
exploding tear gas which chokes,
then dissolves.
And holding their wounds,
the students dissolve too.
Banned, they empty from the city,
go back to their homes.

Gathering Rocks

(while building a school in
Emali, Machakos District, Kenya)

On this hill
the air hums still and calm.
Underneath these rocks
live scorpions,
jointed, bloodless
in their fierce orange colors
as they hide from a midday sun.
How easily does the sun
become an angry heat,
do the dried grasses
turn to blades,
scythed and dangerous,
do insects' sounds
become jumbled, foreign,
the terse mutterings
of a gathering troop.

As I bend to lift each rock,
I kick it, flip it over,
peer down,
eyes almost eager to see
a segmented body freeze
for that instant
then scramble toward my feet
with its armored body,
arching tail,
this warrior, this enemy
whose mere presence
nearly justifies the rage
with which I snatch
a sharpened stone,
the violence I seethe
as I crash down my fist
again and again.

III. TRANSFORMATIONS

Relocations

Emptying box by cardboard box, my arms hang light, almost limp, no longer weighted down by the pans and books I stubbornly freight from place to newfound place.

Sharp, from a dark corner, a spider dashes, and I start, alarmed by the smooth, furtive movements made by so many legs. Such an instant hate, repulsion I feel, watching its worried but steady race across my room as it looks for just one empty place to lodge itself, one dark, calm corner where it won't be disturbed.

Crossing slowly toward it, I stand, foot hovering, watching, while from thin legs already come the spinnings of silk.

Death in Winter

Great-grandpa died
mid-February.
Snows piled so high that day
around the North Dakota farmhouse
no one could go outside;
so they built his coffin
in the front room,
laid him out between chairs where
the neighbors sat and chatted
when they came to visit,
their conversations drifting
back and forth over
his face whose motionless
expression comforted them.

Few had ever liked him
while alive,
finding him too secretive,
too quiet for their town.
But after a time,
they came to confide in him,
sighed their debts,
desires over him,
whispered their lies,
accepting now his silence
as an approving sign.

My Grandmother's Clothes Don't Dance

they hang loose
in her closet, loose
as her skin and her thoughts,
she can't remember
names or times
because it takes all her mind
just to stay alive,
she says, and her mantelpiece
chimes are wearing,
sounding dim and
thin like pins
knocking into a wall,
but wait, I
do remember
some . . . I am
dancing, dancing
with . . . some name,
but it's gone, in her mind
she sees a blank grey wall,
she says, like concrete,
hard and cold, but it's gone,
everything's going, she says,
they're putting me
in their photo albums,
packing up my things,
taking them away,
until all I'll have left
are my bed and my clothes.

Grandpa Jacob Wrestles with the Angel

Lying underneath
the blue '75 Dodge Dart,
his arms and hands
flicker between parts
as he tries again
to start the dead car.

Angels ascend and descend
in front of his eyes,
crossing the blackened
engine above his head.
His breath catches.
He squints his eyes.
Dizzy, he readjusts himself.

His white cotton undershirt
stretches tight
caught between the bone
of his thin body and the
garage's concrete floor.

His flashlight drops,
and in this dimming light
he sees the shadow
of arms arching towards him,
wings beating back.

Muscles straining,
arms struggling,
tangling above him,
he grunts, he sweats,
he twists at his wrench
until finally he hears
the engine's whir.

Diving from the Godstowe Bridge

Each dive is terrifying
as the first, water snatching,
snagging around
the stone pillars so far below.
Bare feet tingle, scratched
by jagging pebbles
as I wait for breath to even.

There is that dizzying
of never having
seen this meadow's grasses
so precisely before,
purple-green thistles
suddenly new
in the short-matted grass.

There is that dizzying
of knowing this
place too well, knowing
I will never sneeze
these itching pollens again
or feel this riverbank's mud
oozing between toes.

A voice is calling.
Ponies fly the meadow's length.
Manes and tails flicker loose.
Riderless, they are
harnessed in only
by familiar sounds
and promises of food.

There is no promise
in my dive.
Feet leave stone
as if I have been pushed.
Gasping air, I fly toward
the tall-stemmed weeds
that sway below
the riverwater's glassy top.

Night Swimming

We swim at night
when there is no moon,
plunge deep,
far out from the docks,
so no ripples
will send impulses
of our outlines
back to shore.

No semaphore
or morse uncoding,
no light:
we go unread,
our shapes washed wide
by straying tides.

Solstice

From my front porch
we are watching the longest
day of the year become night.
It is that time in a late June evening
when all colors become scents,
and even though I
sit close to you,
the blacks and browns of your shirt
are fading.
Colors are traveling.
We are entering another country now.
And from shadows under your eyes
I begin to smell
traces of my childhood, places
I thought you had never been--
the dull odor of burning rubber
from the dump, decaying leaves
of the compost, soil loose
above freshly planted tulip bulbs--
even sounds come now--
the whistle-calls of birds
I have not heard for years.
You stroke the side of my body
through thin cotton,
your thumb climbing the rise
of each rib, lingering
in the slopes
and finally I remember,
as dusk comes,
that we have always been here,
our bodies' borders
melting in the blurring sky.

The Sculptor

On this empty beach
where only gulls
are left,
I mold sand,
still wet, like a cast
across your body,
cover the scar
on your knee,
the crater your navel makes,
smooth out dips
between ribs.

I reach your face,
with my fingers trace
the way the wind
has swept sand
into the ridges of your cheeks,
the caves of your eyes,
while my skin
tingles under the scraping
texture of your grit.
I wonder
at this perfect continent.

As you move,
a line spiders, spreads,
and too quickly sand
crumbles, paths
falling deep to crevices.
I prod, shift,
sculpt this landscape
back again,
smoothing your imperfections in
under layers of shifting sand.

Left-Sided Angel

(Left-Sided Angel is a bronze sculpture by
Stephen DeStaebler)

She disintegrates
in front of our eyes.

Minutes

wear away limbs
leaving only stumps
of arms, a frail
left leg, crumpled
left wing.

Still, she tries
to rise.

Arching her foot,
she braces ankle
under calf,
steadies brittling
hips, lifts
crumpled wing
and air-bronzed chest
as though
she doesn't know
the permanent weight
of loss.

Belladonna

The men who see her
call her lavender girl,
tulip girl, girl who
looks sweet as pea-
pods taste in the rain.
They think when their
noses or throats
or fingers or eyes
get dry they can
dial-to-order her
fresh from the florist's
lists. And she comes
to them, sweet flower girl
that she is, arches
her neck in a vine,
offers her lips like
purple-red bells and
dangles her thick,
black-juiced berries
in front of their eyes.

Gumbo Ya Ya

She looks like a picture done fell out the frame.

Everybody talks
about how she fell down the well,
got stuck with those
moss green walls sliding,
sick sweet water
pulling her back down,
how her face looked up,
bright white framed in black
like an angel.

Now they pulled her up,
everybody talks
about how she's there every day
watching her angel-
faced reflection,
how she wants to jump,
to slip on that moss,
go back to her frame.

*"Gumbo ya ya" and "She looks like a picture done
fell out the frame" are taken from a list of
phrases of Robert Hayden's. Gumbo ya ya means
"everybody talks" in Creole.

In the Tornado's Eye

No thundering train
or ocean,
no tempests
of swirling cloud,
just stillness
as I sit
in my dark green Ford
suspended:

a world complete
in the smell
of the seat's vinyl,
the stickiness
of my bare legs,
the shine
of the steering wheel,
the black dashboard,
the blinking blue
of the digital clock,
the crater
and cracked line
where sometime,
years ago,
a pebble
hit glass.

The Silent World

I turn my head,
meet the stare of my cat,
the cat I call Christopher.
His unblinking,
tail-twitching poise
snaps from granite
to electric
as he streaks out the door;
and in that silent world
I am nameless.

Blue

Readjusting the tubes
that run
from the humming blue machine
to her nose,
my grandmother asks me
what I smell.
Grass from the lawn
my brother mowed
this afternoon,
I tell her, leaks
of gas from the garage.
But she can smell further.

Closing her eyes,
she winds her way out
on Spearfish Canyon Drive,
and she tells me
about the dry of beating
weeds along the road,
the mustiness of toads,
silent, brown,
crouching as tires fly by,
the orange and tart
of sarvisberries,
half way up Terry Peak,
hidden coyly under leaves
that only she,
after years of hiking here,
knows where to find,

she tells me how
with each step up
smells filter away,
until at the top,
dust settling low
on stones,
earth separating
in a clean line from the sky,
she is left with
air's cool scent of blue.

Last July's Sky

I remember, only four months ago,
the slightness of her young body

underneath the cotton skirt that lifted
with the July breeze, her clothing

loose as her corn-tasseled hair.
Now in November, she is heavy.

Bundled with sweaters
with long woolen underwear,

she cries while I stroke her hair.
She sits back on her heels,

looks down at her stomach,
tries to imagine herself huge

and round. She asks me if her baby
will show, I tell her it won't,

not knowing, knowing only
as I curl my arms around her like

nets to catch her slumping
body, wrap her in close

to my stomach and breasts,
that I want to push the winter back

with its sharp and heavy ice,
to haul out the freezing knot

that grows inside of her,
to dissolve it down

to an impossible gas that,
lighter even than helium,

floats loose
in last July's sky.

Visiting My Brother at Merriter Methodist Hospital

What am I to think
of these respirators,
ventilators, machines
the nurses tell me
are giving you air to breathe?
The air in here doesn't move,
and the only color I see
is the gold of sun
washed weak
through window glass.

Even Maine, two years ago
and hundreds of miles away,
seems closer to me now.
There, I can picture you
beside the wild woodgrain face
of your diningroom table,
the Fiestaware dishes,
the jam jars turned
to glasses for drinking;
I can smell the mustiness
of dust mixed with the wet
of freshly watered plants,
can feel the tug of your hand
on my long-braided hair.

Here, I have not seen
the color of any wall
against which I can test
the pigment of your skin.
All I know of you now
is the way your hair
has always curled, the flat
and smooth of your nails,
your butterfly frailty of limbs.

Morphine Dreams

My brother's left eye
lies against the hospital-
starched pillow
while his right eye
stares across the room,
face wide and distracted
like a gargoyle
as he tries clumsily
to balance on his side,
struggling not to fall
on the sickle-shaped scar,
still fresh, that tears
at his shoulder blade.

After two weeks here
he looks frail and dry,
the curls of his hair crushed,
bones barely holding skin
to his cheeks, arms, ribs.

Suddenly he is still.
I can hear only
his heaviness of breath.
Then whispering,
he tells me he is seeing,
in his left eye,
an Egyptian scene:
workers at a dock,
ships sliding silently
out and in,
slaves, pharaohs;
and now a butterfly,
huge, its wings brilliant
with powders
glittering orange, black,
gold, opened to the sun
then shutting slowly
and solidly as doors.

Heavy Wings

He wrote that the wings were heavy
but he managed to fly with them.

Alvin Greenberg, Heavy Wings

Finally, you are sitting up
on your hospital bed,
and the way your gown folds forward
I can see the definition of every rib
as soft to my eyes
as the feathering of a bird,
soft, despite the lean, sharp lines
of your bones, because you are alive.
Your shoulder blades fight up
and back like wings
as you move your arms to gesture,
and I remember the way the hawks
kept at the zoo would flap
their muscle-tight wings
inside their tiny cage,
the way you'd try to imitate
their moves although you knew
you'd never be caught in any cage
as stifling as theirs.

Your breath comes hard to you now,
and I wince at the sounds
in your chest and throat
that clog like mud.
Your wings are heavy now,
the air you breathe is dense
with this responsibility of life
you have so suddenly taken on.

His Deliberate Drowning

It was mid-December
and he must not

have believed he could
really hear those soft

drips of thaw as he
walked down River Road.

The few leaves left
on trees were beyond

any hope themselves,
frozen to stiff forms

as they waited
for a sign--

the snap of buttons
on his jacket's flaps,

the subtler slap of water
against ankles and then calves

--any fatal sign to send
them skimming down.

It was mid-December
and he must not

have smelled the damp
of recovering soil,

his body too frail
after twenty-four years

to carry more weight,
knowing how soon

grass would
smother under snow.

Salt

Mid-July:
heat invades
every pore.
I watch a drop
of sweat fall
heavy, deliberate
as mercury
from your chin
to your collarbone.

I remember on my school trip
to the Lyon Salt Factory when I was twelve,
how cautiously I dipped my hand down
to the crystallizing vat, how the salt
sliced through open grasscuts
and the tiny wounds reddened and stung.

It is a strange
and awkward
angle our
bodies have chosen
across my bed
our first
night together,
my head
on your ribs, our
legs cutting sharp
diagonals away.

And on the Dead Sea I remember how my
fourteen year old body floated, my legs
pushed up, separated by resisting water,
how the salt blinded my eyes,
the smell lingering even after a shower.

I smell you
thick as
an ocean
on my skin,
and I brace against
that seep
and sting
as finally
we come together.

Growing Season

Engrossed in the ways
our fingers meshed and
wove our hands, my

left to your right,
we never saw
the fields of corn

crossing in lines
as we drove this
road every day,

your house to mine.
We made silences
by only

clutching hands;
words fell swallowed
back to throats,

and our silences
hardened the bones
of your fingers,

straightened them,
to wefts pulling away.
Today I have come,

alone, to look
at these fields.
I see that the corn,

too, has grown
brittle this year.
Stalks lured thin

and tall by
too much sun,
too little rain,

sway their
separate distances.
Words rise then fall

in rhythmic rows
of unopened grains.
Solitary cars pass by.

Where I Walk

On the black pavement
of a Minneapolis street
three men's bodies
lie outlined, yellow chalk
tracing the designs
they made as they fell.

As I walk by I see
how sharply their arms
angle out, disjointed
from shoulders and chests,
how awkwardly their
legs and feet are flung.

Only two blocks away,
I've forgotten how the men
had flesh, had noses,
mouths, how they must
have stood before falling
to their places on the ground.

It's late October,
and the leaves
are shedding from trees,
their random patterns
of yellows and reds
covering everything.

Brass Rubbing, St. Mary's Chapel

I can hear the brass-
frozen creak of bones--
she reaches
as I etch her stiff form,
linking lines
from toes to elbow
to head-piece to toes.

Beginning with her feet,
I work gold-colored strokes
evenly, listen
entranced to the click
of her soles,
familiar sounds here
four hundred years before,

move through the serpent
and vine design
of her gown,
hear the swish of freed cloth,
hem brushing through weeds,
catching on twigs,
in the wooded chapel grounds.

Now color rises through flesh,
shoots past praying hands,
flames to her neck,
and I can feel her sigh
as her chin, lips, eyes appear.

She speaks to me, eases
her body's edges
eagerly through black paper,
whispers them out
to the softs of my fingertips,
and together we find
the lines my wax follows.

I lift the page to admire
her form, hear whispers
of her voice again,
but suddenly she is still,
silent, frozen to gold
in her new black frame.

Flight

Her body bloating,
losing its bones,
my grandmother sits
in her cubicle room
at the Woodbury Nursing Home.
Only her eyes moving,
tracing the wallpaper's lines,
she reads the petals of violets,
etches their bruised veins
into the backs of her eyes
that the doctors say
will soon be blind.
She follows spear-shaped leaves
and vines that climb
their way to mildew.

"Aren't there any plugs
you can pull?" she asks.
"You're not plugged in,"
I tell her, "there's
nothing holding you down."

Her skin is sagging.
With sandbags she
ties her body down;
she waits to let go.
And as her eyes climb,
I hear the hollow sounds of
cords ripped from walls, I
feel the tautening of strings
that hold her skin to mine.
Ties pull, fray,
snap, and I watch as she rises
through the ceiling's cracks
out to an open sky.

Transformations

(for Ella Mae Campbell)

Sitting in her nursing home chair,
she splotted turquoise over our bland sky,
brushed rusted red thick
across the ditch that ran behind her window,
her oil-textured sight
transforming a dulled scene
into a picture so vivid that even I
could nearly see this Grand Canyon
she told me she looked at every day.

I came to look at her eyes
as she would look at the Grand Canyon.
Even though she had been going
blind for months
I'd try to read her eyes like
the Pharaoh's dreams,
try to read the ears of grain reflected
down in the blacks of her eyes to see
whether she had seven years of fat or lean,
whether she had seven years;
but all that I could see
was what she told me,
street lamps becoming lines of tall cactus,
the wooden bench, a juniper tree.

After so many years of perfect vision
it seems strange
that her eyes could ever close.
There is not the slightest strain in her face
as I touch the waxy forehead,
feel the swollen cold of her fingers,
see the colors of her dress,
the purples, the blues,
the turquoise stripes,
covering her body in lengths of skies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks go to my advisor Neal Bowers for his guidance throughout my two years at Iowa State University as well as for all of his help in putting this project together. I would like to thank my committee members Zora Zimmerman and Joanna Courteau for their time and help, and I would also like to thank Mary Swander for her instruction and for letting me live in her great house while she was gone.

This project is dedicated to my brother, Brian Satrom, and to my grandmother, Ella Mae Campbell Olsen, who died March 4, 1990.