1990

The blossom and the coffin (a book of poetry)

Richard L. Solly
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/14

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
The blossom and the coffin

(A book of poetry)

by

Richard L. Solly

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

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Approved:

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1990
TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION ONE
AFTER THE HOSPITAL
REpetition
DRIVING
EVERYONE HAS A POEM THEY'D RATHER NOT WRITE
THE DAY OF THE DEAD
MY TURN
FALLING TOGETHER
AT THE CURB
ALL THIS

SECTION TWO
HOMESICK
A FAIRY TALE
MIGRATION
THE GIFT
HIS SHOES
INHERITANCE
ASTHMA
PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER
CONVINCING ROSE
INSOMNIA
IT IS NOT MUSIC THE CROW PLAYS
FROM THIS DISTANCE
AT FAIRVIEW HILL
RUNG BY RUNG
MARY

SECTION THREE
SISTER ROSE
SPELLING LESSONS
EVERY NIGHT
A DARKENING
THE DEATH OF A TWELVE YEAR OLD FARMBOY
BARI, ITALY, 1943
THE DAY I STOPPED SMOKING
FOR GWEN
A WIFE'S CONFESSION
RIGHT THERE
A WAY OF SEEING
THIS IS HOW
THE STORY OF THE GOLD STAR
CHAPTER SEVEN
THE BLOSSOM AND THE COFFIN
SECTION ONE
AFTER THE HOSPITAL

Forced to study
the intricacies of webs
of snow crystals
formed on the window,

I've come
to look closely
at details, say,
the curve of the handle
to this blue teacup,
and how my finger, too,
curves and hooks
under my thumb.

I'm lifting much more
than water, steam,
and rose hips
to my lips,
because at any moment
the phone could ring,
or pain, like a rope
suddenly cinched

and knotted
inside my abdomen,
could scatter chips
of porcelain

across the floor.
That's why the cup
on the saucer now
is the first

and last cup
in this house,
on this whole earth,
the only one that matters.
DRIVING

Maybe
I've gone too far
to unlock the car door,
grip the window ledge,
the steering wheel
and swing myself in.

I never dreamed of turning
this ignition again
when I lay under hospital sheets
for those 90 days
the IV fed me, and morphine
trickled into a vein.

The engine sputters
and coughs as if sensing
how strange it is to have me
behind the wheel again.
My foot on the clutch hesitates;
the incision that circles
around my navel, down
to my pubic hair like a question
mark, might burst open.
But the knowledge I gain
from illness tells me the worst
never happens when I expect it

and I ease the clutch out,
reverse the car,
like the first time
I backed father's 1960 Chrysler
down the driveway, oblivious
of the life I was driving into.
EVERYONE HAS A POEM THEY'D RATHER NOT WRITE

Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry.

- Susan Sontag

The title of mine
is "Ileostomy."
The word,
cured and salted,
sizzles on my tongue.

This is shame:
standing at the sink
unsnapping the pouch,
peeling off the adhesive plate
from my abdomen.

I couldn't have imagined
the stoma, the red
glistening intestine.
Peristalsis moves the stoma
like a caterpillar.
It gurgles: "Listen to me,"
and I place my hand over it,
even when I'm alone.
THE DAY OF THE DEAD

I, too, am dressed:
Lazarus, wrapped
in gown of white light,
and I can see

below, as if looking
through binoculars,
the surgeons stooped,
the backs of their heads

covered in white caps.
A gloved hand, knuckles
gleaming under the tight
rubber, slices open

the abdomen like a cantaloupe
and peels back
thick rolls of skin.
Clinks of steel

in long silver trays
sound in a room of glaring
lights, cold, and a red
thumbprint is smeared

on the chest. Everyone stares
into the body, mumbling
in another language,
their voices urging

its soul to come back.
Leaning against the walls
are people I love,
only they are dressed

in Halloween costumes:
Robin Hood, Cinderella, Hanzel
and Gretel, Mother Hubbard,
and Papa Bear; they are

waiting to accompany
the body. Or maybe
they are witnesses,
here to testify
that I once lived,
but I want to return and cry out: 
O Jesus, call my name.
Gazing at the ceiling,
trying to dream of another life
than this one, as the nurse unties
Montgomery straps, lifting
gauzes and dressings out

of my abdominal wound,
large enough to lay a hand inside. 
"Look," she says, wanting me
to see what is unbearably red,
a fistula pulsating in the viscera,

but I'm in the sky
where the constellations
are dotted in the tiles,
trying to sort
Orion from The Great Bear
in the dark.

She insists because I will have to
clean the wound, wear rubber gloves,
like she does, pour cold Saline solution
into the wound, then suck the solution
out with a hose that gurgles

as it spits a thick discharge.
She holds a Q-tip like a baton,
inserts it into a tiny tunnel
that burrows deeper into my body
until the stick nearly disappears.

I concentrate, try to connect the dots
as I did as a child to find a deer,
a clown, and a kite with a tail of bows
that Father showed me how to fly.
"Like this:" she twirls the Q-tip to gather

the drainage, then takes her hand
out of my body, and says just what
Father says when, after the kite
is flying, he hands me the string,
"it's your turn."
FALLING TOGETHER

I am only weeks out
of the hospital when the first
thud at the top of the stairs,
her cry, and my quick start
from the kitchen happen,
and suddenly we are each falling,
quietly, into our own shadows,
 hers sprawling below
at the landing and mine waiting
on the floor. I flail my arms,
grabbing at nothing,
unable to see the chair,
the oak floor that pounds
my head and face,
pushing blood through
my nose and lip, popping small
but important bones.
Not until I see red fingers,
wiped across my mouth,
does the world rush back
into my ears, my daughter's crying
at the foot of the stairs
where she must be untangling
her legs and arms.
I want to shout Rosie, Rosie,
as she shouts Dad, Dad,
the two of us calling
for each other, but then realize
the silence of falling alone
is over for now,
and though I can't get up,
my voice, trying to sound
like father, tells her she must
come to this giant
she could never before
have imagined falling,
and as her little black shoes
shuffle into the room,
stopping at my head,
I look up from the floor
to see her standing above me,
and I think, when the phone rings
at that moment and she turns
to answer it, that yes,
she's handling this well,
though she has to point to me as she describes to the caller how far I've fallen, how tall she is now.
AT THE CURB

After four months
in a hospital bed when each day
commenced with blood
and concluded with morphine,
I'm ready to drive again,
down unpredictable streets.
I have to leave behind
the other man who's afraid to go out
and shut the door
to this invalid's house
and all his complaints.
I'm tired of waking up
to his grinding teeth,
his doting. He tells me
which pill to take
and when, whines
on the phone to doctors,
and finds me wherever I am
in the house. Be patient,
he says. Please.

As I lower myself
into the car, I glance
in the back seat, out of habit,
effecting to see him there,
his brow furled.
One of us, I say out loud,
has to go out and stand in line
with people tonight,
even if the movie isn't any good.

If I look up to his
bedroom window, he'll be standing
there, swallowing pills, wringing
his hands, and praying
that God keep tonight's crowd
from jostling me.
I shake him out
of my head, shift into gear,
and, pulling away from the curb,
wave and holler:
we're getting well.
ALL THIS

After a year of rain,
four months of lying
in the hospital,
after shedding
forty pounds
and awakening each morning
to a stranger
tapping a vein
in my arm,
snapping a rubber tourniquet,
after a horde of nurses
with needles, stethoscopes
and thermometers,
introducing themselves,
Terry, Shannon, Pat,
each shift, each day
of the week,
after my abdomen,
soft as a pear,
is sliced open, stapled,
four different times,
until finally
an open wound is left,
large enough
to lay my hand
down inside,
after friends file
one by one
into my room
before each surgery
to whisper,
to kiss my cheek,
after tubes plunge
down into my throat,
to my stomach, into my nose
and penis, through holes
the surgeons drill,
after months of holding
a pillow
against my abdomen
so it doesn't spill
out onto the floor
when I walk
down corridors,
after listening
to my dead father
say: if you cross over,
we'll meet you
and alongside him,
my sister in her yellow nightgown
at the foot of my bed,
after pain
becomes my only prayer,
and my body, moaning for God,
no longer cares who hears me,
after hypnotic drugs
convince me I am wounded
in the Civil War,
pleading that they
not amputate,
after five operations,
shaved, then scrubbed
with washcloths,
and waking up, soaking
with urine, delirious
and haunted, not knowing
whether it is winter or spring,
after all this,
    the maple tree,
the red outside my window,
leaves me stunned.
SECTION TWO
HOMESICK

I'm surprised to hear the train
cross the soybean field,
its single headlamp,
a ghostly eye, driving a beam

of light ahead, to be sitting
at that window again,
looking across vineyards
and dark hills in upstate New York.

Fourteen years old,
traveling to boarding school,
I peer into the night
where the beast must live,

and wish I were home
with my brothers and sisters,
instead of among men, sitting
on the train, wearing hats

pulled down over their brows
as if asleep, while their eyes,
reflected in the window glass,
stare. In the morning,

I'll tell the woman
across the aisle in a flowered,
cotton dress my parents died in a car
spinning off an icy road in Ohio,

and a toothless aunt,
who wouldn't buy me a pair of shoes
or even come to the station
to wave good-bye, sent me away.

Strange to meet that orphan boy
twenty-five years later, here in Iowa,
where my table and room rattle
as if moving with the train.
A FAIRY TALE

Mother calls me into her room, promising to read me a story as I lie across the bed, brush her hair from front to back, slowly, through thick gray and black, down to her neck. The brush snags a web I untangle, lift in the light. I massage her scalp, the soft curve, and rub the throbbing temple where the ghost, she says, talks of my dead sister. My brothers pass by the door, having no time for her headaches. Good boy, mother sighs. Now I am the one calling her, saying, yes, yes, thirty years later on the phone, a thousand miles away, as she names each headache after my brothers and sisters. Whatever I say will only resonate on the farthest edge of her memory tonight, when she lifts the phone off the hook and sleeps with Valium. If she awakes, high as a star, her speech slurred, like today, wanting me to fly home, I know I'm talking to Tagament and Empirin, a happy couple. I write down their names, like license numbers of suspects' cars when I am fifteen, inspecting the medicine cabinet, learning milligrams regulate the miles per hour she travels. Or like a clock with only so many hours in a day, so many are in a capsule. Each drug I spell carefully, then consult the PDR for evidence. I warn mother, year after year, until one day she is 73 and I no longer expect anything, but when she talks, I listen hard to hear that voice, distant and soft, and she is reading to me, a fairy tale, one more time.
MIGRATION

1.

In the living room, Mother stands me, eleven years old, in front of Louise. Because her crutches are left out, she uses my shoulders like the back of a chair to balance herself. Mother aims the camera, hollers coocoo, coocoo, as we hold perfectly still, together, in a flash of white brilliance.

2.

Sister, your cancer turns me into a bird in blue pajamas, with dark beady eyes, flying in my sleep, down the hallway to your room. The tremendous pounding of wings and the smell of wet feathers wake me, upright in bed, crying: Louise, Louise, open the door.

3.

We are wood and stone, in prayer. The priest tries to break out. His mouth opens and closes as my sister is lowered into eternity through a hole in the earth. Dirt is sprinkled like rain. The wind blows through our bodies. Hands, here and there, lift
and scour salt under the eyes.
Black veils mother's face.
Her arm is over my shoulder.
If I move, it would separate
from her body. Its curved wood
lies on my neck, and clamps down.

4.

Mother talks for ten years
of the night Louise dies
as if that hour
is still living,
a black flight.
I nod, over and over,
listen until her hands open
on her lap and she sleeps
in the rocking chair,
the house, the canyon.

5.

As the clock ticks past
1:00 a.m., Mother
is in the dark memory
of the window glass,
laying me down in bed.
My fingers twist
in her yellow loops of hair,
and trace the neck
of the swan on her gown.
She reads to me, then
stands alongside my bed
and again the story ends.
I hear her tiptoeing out,
shuffling down the hall,
while the clock chimes
downstairs on the mantel:
all is well, all is well.

If only I could sleep now,
but I see her again,
a ghost in the glass
standing over Louise,
washing her back, the scar
left by the surgeon.
Only eleven, I'm standing at the door.  
She hollers, slams it shut  
with her foot. I press my mouth  
against the wood and wish  
that my sister were dead.

Later, Mother will lie  
in her room with a headache  
only Valium can relieve.

It's taken me this long  
to forgive you, Mother.  
The quarter moon outside  
this window is a cradle  
in the summer sky.

6.

Stay out, she says.  
Louise is an angel.

I don't remember wings  
when I open the door,  
only the crutches,  
the blanket just below  
her bare shoulder,  
the scarf over her bald head.

She is facing the wall,  
but then she rolls over.  
Her eyes, too large,  
float in front of her face.  
She smiles, patting  
the bed's edge  
for me to sit. We hear  
Mother outside  
in the hall, her shoes  
pacing over the wooden floor.

The breeze lifting  
the curtains is Louise's hand  
in my hair, her white sleeves  
circle me as we rock  
and she tells me  
about a boat on a lake  
where the water is warm,
where wings color the sky.

Mother, I cry, open the door.
Louise is rowing us home.
THE GIFT

For a boy,
under an elm, whittling,
there is joy
in the moment the bark
and stick become
what he imagines
as he gazes across the field
one Saturday.

I sit quietly in the glow
of the summer morning
yellowing the grass,
as I study the bird
lifting off the fence post
into blue.

My gaze could last forever
if I did not stand,
brush the dust from my jeans,
and begin walking home
to tell my sister
about the spear I carved
and flung like a Trojan boy
into the heart of a Mongol,
about the smell of dust
and August, about a view
she can't see from her bed.

I want to tell her
that sometimes being nine
is like being a stone
endlessly skipping across the water.
I want her to know,
before she dies
during my tenth year,
who this boy is
standing at her bedside
as she naps, and the breeze
from the open window
blows over her body.

I nudge her shoulder,
and whisper, Louise, Louise,
wake up, I'm holding
this butterfly for you.
HIS SHOES

There's a place,
under the dining room table,
behind the veil of tablecloth,

where I hide from the sheriff
and his posse. I peek
through the eyelets

at the eerie white eye
of the vacuum cleaner,
the straw hand of the broom

and press thumbprints into the wood,
draw my finger across the dust
and smear it like warpaint

over my cheeks when Father
comes into the room,
asking, where's that bandit?

He stands so close to me
I lean out over his polished
shoes, see my face

smiling in the dark leather.
INHERITANCE

Out of your body into mine,
sorrow passed
the way a father's dream
can pass into his son's sleep,

from one generation
to another. Now I can't distinguish
your hand from mine any longer.
This could be you,

tuning the stereo
in the living room
on Saybrook Avenue in Cleveland
to hear Mozart's Requiem

as you smoke an El Producto.
That's why I'm opening
the window now, to let out
this longing in my chest

that makes me cough.
Maybe what I hear is only
the prayers you recite
on each black rosary bead

at six-thirty every morning
in St. Timothy's Church.
I am a boy, kneeling alongside,
before the sun rises

and children fill the streets
on their way to school.
In the pew, we bow our heads
while the bells ring, and I see

the same ghosts:
your first wife and child.
I've learned to see her
in the hospital bed,

the infant on her chest.
After genuflecting
for years, it's easy
to close my eyes,
see the long dark hair
of this woman you loved
and your first child,
as if I, too, am standing
at their bedside.
You explained the cold,
taught me how to dress
in black wool
those winter mornings when
I followed you
to the communion rail.
You'd kneel, and as the priest
stood before you, his fingers
dipping into the chalice,
you'd lift your head back
to take the host
on your tongue, the way
I took you like food
into my body. Father, this morning,
the music can keep us warm.
ASTHMA

My daughter's cough
echoes in the hallway
like feet of the elderly
occupying the house.
She wheezes and the radiator hisses
in the room.
When her lungs sputter,
I race down the hall

remembering my father,
the heels of his slippers
flapping against the floor,
and the moaning
coming from my sister's room.

He knows a prayer:
two hands unfolding. They cover
his face. God,

I know why he shut the door,
leaving only a crack
of light behind him.

I know a father
laying the child back into bed.
I know him, sitting alongside her
weaving fingers
through her hair,
circling her temple
until she is, for that moment,
asleep.
She opens her mouth to speak:
stick, glide, or go,
but swallows a fist of air.
If spirit is breath, then speak
in this body: Rosie, Rosie.

Her breath is a hundred years old,
air braided through bronchial tubes
spongy as microscopic fish.
Only a stethoscope can hear
the words wheezing in her lungs.

Sitting at her bedside, praying,
I see us, the entire room,
reflected in the dark window glass.
The white bed sheet is a flag
against the dark sky,
signaling we wish to pass
safely through this darkness.
CONVINCING ROSE

Breakfast is like this:
open the capsule of theophylline
over her bowl of applesauce,

stir in the sprinkles,
then motor the spoon like an airplane
down the table's runway,

lifting it into the kitchen's sky.
When the plane sputters
and becomes just a spoon,

Rose shakes her head no.
Watch, I say, raising the spoon
to Lucy's mouth, her doll,

still wearing over her stuffed arm
a bandaid left from rehearsing
a doctor's visit.

Even the nebulizer on the shelf
sprays a cloud
of medicines she inhales

into bronchial tubes.
Maybe it's the prayer I taped
to the wall that keeps me believing,

as she swallows the applesauce
and wheezes into my ear now,
that some Tuesday in the future,

I won't have to say:
it's all right, Rosie,
It's all right.
The wind circles the house
and the rattling keeps me from sleep,
like a punishment that will go on
for years. I untie the sheets
from my legs, turn on the lamp,
when I hear what sounds like
my name pronounced in a world
far away, a syllable no louder
than the splash of a fish.

It's my wife floating up
from sleep. A man in her dreams,
wearing a hat with a wide brim
pulled down over his dark eyes,
is threatening her.
Has this ever happened to you,
she asks? Then falls back to sleep,
while the fist of the wind
resumes its pounding on the glass.
IT IS NOT MUSIC THE CROW PLAYS

In the field is a piano,
and at night, when I'm trying to sleep,
a crow roosting in a nearby tree
will raise its dark wings, lift off
a branch, and land on the keyboard.
It's not music the crow plays
with its beak, chipping at random,
note to note, all night,
as if the crow didn't want me to sleep
but sit at the open window and listen.
Once I got up, aimed a .22
out the window, and though I saw nothing
but darkness, I squeezed the trigger.

I'm anxious to have the only sound
at night be the wind rattling
a window pane, to have snow
like a white sheet cover the piano
the way a mourner will cover
a mirror to forget.

Once I dreamt of her red scarf,
the one she wore in the fall,
floating in midair, and when I awoke
my hand was reaching back
into the sky of the dream,
trying to pull the scarf
into this world. A voice
in the room said "let go,"
but it was only the black thing
pecking at the keyboard.

My neighbors say these things
take time, the crow will tire,
leave, and another bird will come.
FROM THIS DISTANCE

How can I be sure,
squinting, one eye
sorting you out from all
that brilliance
clinging to your silhouette?
Crowned with the sun
and spiked with light,
you are one of Suso's angels.

Leaning against the tree
to catch my breath
and watching the swing
of your arms as you approach,
I become certain.
That blouse is the one
you draped over the chair
long ago

in the room
with the stained wallpaper,
the empty drawer
in the bureau,
the closed window,
and I hear the hush.

You've returned
in someone else's body.
To stop you now,
to touch your arm,
and say Elizabeth,
would snap this moment
like a twig.

This is how it must be.
A smile, a nod,
an imperceptible rise
of blood, and
this shudder.
AT FAIRVIEW HILL

That night Father sat
in the car, idling at the top
of the hill, where all the fathers
parked in a cloud of exhaust,
reading newspapers,
listening to Polish waltzes
on the radio while their children
shouted, Here we are,
sledding in a kingdom of snow.

Always the snow
slipped under the sleeve,
inside a boot,
to burn along the wrist
and ankle. I'd run back
to Father, folding the newspaper,
flicking the heater onto high,
and taking my hands, rubbing them
until the warmth passed
from his hands into mine.

I'd glance away
from his lovely hands
polishing mine, look outside
to the other children,
and pull away to open the car door.
Father must have watched me
running back

the way I'm watching
my daughter now
race back outside to the swing
after I soothed a bump
on her head until the ache
was gone. She didn't say,
Q Gracious Father,
Q Great Love. And when I called
back to Father,

it wasn't to thank him,
but to have him watch,
one more time, as I sledded
down the hill he gave me.
RUNG BY RUNG

I climb into the sky
at dawn, rung by
rung, onto the shingled
slope, and with my pitchfork
begin peeling the scalp off
the house's skull.

I hum and hammer nails
into the beams, sweat
steams off my shoulders.
My legs dangle over
the roof's edge as I sip
from a water jug.
I have no time for falling
as I step from scaffolding
to scaffolding, wearing
denim, a blue bandana
and a mask of dust and dirt.
My virtues ripple
across my back muscles
and chest. I am invincible.

Those condemned
to the narrow street below,
see me, if they aspire,
waving at the day's end,
pitching a beer can
over the edge
as I saddle the roof's peak,
with my legs over its haunches,
riding a new,
shingled horse in the sky.
MARY

Your name is blessed
on my lips like Mary,
Mother of God, Mary
Magdalene. Your name,
called across the fields
of Czechoslovakia,
scrubs, irons and cooks
in the homes of foundry
and steel workers.
Mary, maid to my mother's
eight children, you are Martha
of the New Testament,
your hips sway all morning
at the ironing board
while the steam whistles
nursery rhymes.
I fold handkerchiefs
into clouds for you,
the towels are capes
that let me fly,
the clothesbasket
a wicker boat
you help me row.
Mary, you are Merlin
teaching wooden spoons
to clap and dance in bowls,
teaching dough to dream
of cinnamon and sugar,
teaching my fingers obedience
as I tie your apron's bow
or the babushka
under your chin.
Mary, I am always a boy
in your lap, laying my head
on your breasts
where the hoofs of a horse
trot in your chest
and I fall asleep
in a meadow.
Mary, Angel of Mercy
to my dying sister Louise,
Moth of Light
and Scrubber of Floors,
a Marmalade Queen,
Mermaid in the sea
of our family,
I carry your name
in my blood. Milkovich,
I call your name
when I am drowning
in a wave of fever,
and you are the warm tea,
the white sheet tucked
under the sick boy
inhaling your breath
until there is nothing
left of you. All
the children in Ohio
you feed and nurture
become young men and women
who lift your casket.
It is your name, Mary,
Mary Milkovich,
no one calls
to iron anymore.
SISTER ROSE

Just a child in the snow
making wings, but when she stands
above the cold angel, her arms
ache and grow heavy. Inside,
mother explains how God tugs
on the arms and legs of girls
until they are grown.

Older, expected to turn mattresses,
lift kettles of boiling water,
she calls the pain bubbles
that burst under the skin,
spiders that crawl inside her bones —
and tries to scratch them out.
The pain is an offering she makes
on swollen knees as she scrubs
wood floors in the convent
until, confined to a chair
with wheels propelled by a machine,
she tires of praying and closes
her eyes to see again the green arch
of the two elms, their branches,
forming above her in Grant Park
where she stood for the last time.
It isn't a matter of deep love, but simply two children, bookbags slung over their shoulders, walking down E. 136th street to St. Timothy's. Every step we take is right. At our desks, with our pencils and tablets, we have the answers. We're the first to raise our hands.

Standing in front of the class, you spell four syllable words while Sister Kiernan folds her arms, approving each letter with a nod. I root for you. It's *chrysanthemum* you misspell, the flower my father grows in the backyard. In the afternoon, I grate wax over the wood floor, sprinkle sawdust up and down the aisles, being sure a handful falls and freckles your buckled shoes. You frown and I smile, a game our faces play on Fridays. Or I might lift from my chair as the teacher writes on the board and peek at your test, just to see you lunge over it, cover your answers with your hands and scowl as I sit back, my paper already finished. During geography, in a blue blazer, white blouse and pleated skirt, you lay your hand over an entire continent on the globe, and point to the island of Crete, while I draw Minoan bulls and Sister tells the class: *Very Good.* Minutes before the bell buzzes in the halls, we fold our hands on our desks, look to the front like angels, hoping Sister will call our row first so we might burst into the sunlight,
outside, before anyone else.

And the following morning,
the doors open again to this world
of long division and multiplication,
starred papers and squeaky chalk,
a world clearly marked right
and wrong, a world that is kind to us.
Not like it is for me later
in military boarding school

where I'm hit across the head
for gazing out the window,
for writing letters home that ask
for train fare back. After school,
I march with a nine pound M1 rifle
because of my scuffed shoes,
an unbuttoned shirt sleeve,
the tie too loose around my neck.

Therese, I'd like us to pack
our suitcases, take the Greyhound bus
back to where we started,
and at E. 136th street and Saybrook Avenue,
begin walking, this May,
early in the morning
when the light is soft and studious,
spelling chocolate, licorice, petunias,...
EVERY NIGHT

From the oath, he sees
his wife in the kitchen window
in the summer farmhouse
across the alfalfa field
where the light is flickering,
and twenty years is flashing by.
She's lifting the kettle,
pouring hot water over teabags
in blue cups, setting out
matching saucers, the honey bowl,
and two spoons as if her business
in this world isn't finished,
as if she's returning
to spend the evening with him,
to see his jacket again
on the back of the chair,
his hat on the table.
But as he steps onto the porch,
opens the screen door,
letting it slam behind him,
he rubs her out of your eyes
because he finds her
on the kitchen floor,
the chair tipped on its back,
her finger locked in the cup's handle.
A DARKENING

She doesn't know and blames
the carpet's edge for her broken hip,
a careless step any old woman can make.

A month after the doctor explains
bone marrow cancer,
she lies in a hospital bed,
circles her forefinger and thumb
together into the size of a dime
to show the holes her disease digs
into her body. She discusses her body
as if it's a drawing in a textbook.
The ulna bone in her arm snaps
like a twig in a child's hand
when she grips the bedrail
to pull herself over

for a shot of morphine.
Days later, a warning is posted
on her door, and only her husband
can visit while her body,
implodes and crumbles
like a darkening star.
THE DEATH OF A TWELVE YEAR OLD FARMBOY

In Phil's bar, holding
a pair of king's, the man
calls the tractor an iron beast
that dragged the boy on its hitch
through the black soil.

Another, discarding,
blames the father, calls him
Lucifer for whipping
the boy with a switch until black
and blue erupted
over his body, and the boy
screamed in the rain.
He draws two cards, and says
tree limbs cracked all day
in front of the house.

Smoking a cigar,
standing at the table,
the fireman who untwisted
the spiked steering wheel
wrapped around him and got sick
and drunk that night,
claims when the tractor
reached the top of the hill,
the ground under the wheels lifted,
as if the ground possessed
dark intention,
and somersaulted the tractor
back down.

The oldest man, chewing Skoal,
spits, says devil talk is crazy.
It was an accident,
or maybe, yes, at the crest
of the hill the boy simply
pulled back on the wheel
and rode up into the sky:
there, outside the open door,
blue, white and silent as now.
BARI, ITALY, 1943

for Katie

I remember the red bottle,
lifting it to my mouth every night
in my room at Mussolini Military Hospital —
it's five floors, the wards,
the cracked plaster — and carrying
the wounded on litters
up marble stairs. My foot fits
so easily into each grooved step.

I carry them, holding bottles
of blood above them, bandaging them,
amputating, then later
I bring them back down, dead.

This is when German bombs fall
on the orphanage across the street
where a child's hand is sticking up
between splintered beams,
as if reaching for one of us,
and pushing away the wood and rocks,
I find only an arm. And later, a boy
breathing with a stone, the size
of a fist, embedded in his skull,
ilike the casing for a second brain.
He lives to balance the stone on his head
like a jug, complaining of its weight,

until one morning after the sun
rises over the hills, the doctor
removes the stone, and he dies.
And there is the soldier,

blinded by bullets, who gets up
quietly from his cot, stumbles
across the hall, towards the window
that must be only a smudge

of light, then hurls himself out.
Air raids are frequent. The town closes
its shutters, pull shades and blinds.
Darkness protects us, like blackouts from drinking too much wine protect me from remembering what happens, what I say, what falls.
THE DAY I STOPPED SMOKING

for Jim Lindsay

Under an elm
on Summit Avenue

you roll up your pants legs,
show me the scar

beginning at the ankle,
stitched up the calf

and thigh to your groin
from where they took the vein
to sew around your heart.
My hand, lifting to my chest,
is astonished as you
unbutton your shirt,

show me two peepholes
drilled into your stomach.

Drainpipes, you call them.
As you tuck your shirt back in,

I'm convinced.
FOR GWEN

One hour you are happy
and stir tomato soup
on the burner. You lay
the wooden spoon down
on the stove top
to answer the phone
when a thud upstairs and glass
shattering on the floor
changes your life.
Your husband's nitroglycerine
can't be found, until later when
you put your hand in his jacket.

Now the morning wind groans
under the eaves while you sit
at the table, stir your tea.
Outside the window,

the maple tree
is barren, a few leaves
are clinging. Trees
further down the street
are ready to walk away.
What was once green and kind

your neighbor rakes
into a pile for fire.

He leans on the pole,
glances at you and calls.

Realizing that you don't even like
answering to your own name,

you sip from the cup,
nod, and look away.
A WIFE'S CONFESSION

I was like a whitetail
in a wooded clearing,
sniffing gunpowder, his finger
hooked on the trigger.
I held still as he calibrated
cross hairs over my chest:
fired. I fell, but never died.
I got back up on my feet and he'd
accuse me of forcing him to shoot.

I'm willing to agree now.
I was the shooter and the target.
After he'd take aim,

I'd step out of the scope,
run with the cross hairs
on my chest to where he stood.

I'd pull the trigger,
then race the bullet back
so it would have a target.
RIGHT THERE

I didn't notice, like the medics, his lips blue as berries, only the one eye, magnified by a single lens of his bifocals half off his face. That eye stared up at the ceiling as if fixed upon a vision. I looked up to see for myself.

The plumber lay on the floor while his wrench, still on the pipe under the sink, as if waiting for his hand to lift off his chest and grip it the way he gripped his heart, was clamped to the joint. I had shuffled into the kitchen but the silence, the hiss of the kettle, his legs motionless across the linoleum like the limbs of a marionette alarmed me. Was he joking? Come on, What are you doing, I asked, then tapped his boot, stooped, and grabbed his ankles to pull him out.

Though months have passed, that eye, encased in a lens, will open in a nightmare, or when I'm buttering toast at the table, I may look again at the ceiling or cock my head under the sink to inspect the pipes because it happened right there, in the curve of the trap, in the gleam of the steel, in the jaw of the wrench.
A WAY OF SEEING

Even the floorboards,
used to her stocking feet
for forty years,
still creak with her step
in the hall.

The widower
awakes after midnight,
feeling the sheets tugged,
and he rolls over,
lays his arm across the pillow
next to him.
Sorrow is a way of seeing
his room differently.
In the dark,
a heap of clothes
lying on the chair
is an animal, asleep,
its back hunched
into a ball.
Even the clock
is unfriendly,
reminding him how long
he lay alongside her,
and still hears
the labored breathing,
the cough, and says
out loud, it's okay,
you'll be all right.
Getting out
of bed, he notices
a dark figure moving
in the mirror,
he opens her drawer
though his children
warn him
there are stages
to grief and he's taking
too long to empty
the bureau and closet.
He reaches in to handle
her jewelry, trying to remember
which ring she'd wear
for which birthday,
and what year it was,
how old she was then.
THIS IS HOW

On evenings like this,
when regrets in my heart
mumble like a scolded boy
standing in a corner of the room,
I sit on my bed, close my eyes,
and imagine never leaving home,
never traveling away from you.

It's summer again and you are
the girl next door,
sitting on her front steps,
waving to me. I can hear
your jump rope slapping
the concrete, your feet
skipping to a song.

I've brought you here
to a room a thousand miles away
where the walls are too white
and the cold wind is squealing
in a window crack
so we might sit again
on your front porch,
on a cool summer evening,
an afghan across our laps.
Older, we have forgiven ourselves,
and know which of all the stars
the night offers is important.
We listen to crickets while
lightning bugs flash yellow
jewels. My fingertips brush your cheek,
your eyes, over your lips. This
is how I keep you close.
THE STORY OF THE GOLD STAR

Nothing significant happens to me, sitting on a bar stool in Eddies Club, as I listen to old men like Harry explain how one night he stumbled, dizzy from Tequila, into his house and found his wife asleep in bed with another man. Quietly opening the closet door and taking out his hunting gun, he lifted it to his shoulder, aiming at the man's jaw, then swinging the barrel, focusing the bead between his wife's breasts. The next thing I knew, he says, I shot my own dog, Chief. My own dog, he repeated. He blamed Chief for not chewing the man's leg off at the door, for sleeping at the foot of the bed while the two of them did what they did. A month later Harry fell asleep, dead in a snowbank up in Patti Canyon.

A gold star was pasted on his photograph hanging on the wall in Eddies where everyone who drinks here long enough has his picture taken and hung. One of the old men will come in and sit in front of his own photo, drinking, remembering old stories, maybe.

thinking of the gold.
CHAPTER SEVEN

from Marie Cardinal's book, The Words To Say It

Marie remembers Rue Michelet,
the afternoon sun, walking,
only eleven years old,
behind her mother,
trying to pin the shadow
under her shoes, rip it
from Mother's body.
They stop at the bakery,
and Marie listens to how Mother
tries to abort her during the divorce:

walking, overtired,
down a steep flight of stairs
without holding onto the
banister...

Marie lowers her head,
notes the spittle
on the street, a cigarette
flattened under a shoe:

a rusty bike from the shed
to ride over potholes, tree roots,
across fields and ditches...

She hears a twig snap
in a boy's hand. Seagulls
scream above the harbor
where beggars squabble.
Cranes claw out holes
like graves and she dreams
of being cradled in the arms
of the shopwindow's mannequin:

trotting on horseback,
feeding you bottles of aspirin, but
not even quining...

And now, older, walking the street again,
Marie's womb drips blood
uncontrollably, as if murderous,
trying to do Mother's work for her.
THE BLOSSOM AND THE COFFIN

For Ted

1.

It could be you
wincing at the sun,
pulling the visor down
and tuning the radio.
How often you reached
your stubby thumb
and finger to adjust
the treble, like I do now,
resonating with memory.

The speakers
out at your farmhouse
have their mouths wide open
and full
on your front porch:

Liszt is playing
St. Francis on a piano
in a concert hall,
or is the piano out there
in the pasture
where the music fills
the alfalfa field
and you walk
in rippling purple flowers
and a crescendo
of wind ruffles your long
black hair.
The cows follow you, moo
double bass in the moonlight
as they cross
into rows of corn.
The stalks are clefs
marking a path for your soul,
for the beasts.
We are stunned by the piano
that has brought us here,
playing now
in the thirteenth century.
We live everywhere
all at once.
2.

As I drive past
your house, I see us
up on the roof, hammers
hung from our pants' loops
and you, under your blue sky
challenging God
to a theological debate,
believing in music,
not prayer, while we shingle
to Beethoven on the radio
propped against the chimney.

You climb up here,
a Jacob's ladder
in every rung,
but still insist paradise
is held in your hand,
the grooved handle
to your hammer,
or smelled in the bushes
of lilacs, heard when Chagall
plays a violin in his bathtub.

Here, at the peak
of the roof, you only need
to stand, you say,
to touch the sky,
see there is no afterlife.
Joy is a plum tree in the yard,
fuchsia blossoms on earth.

3.

This pine tree I drive past
every Tuesday morning
could be the tree
you pointed out to me
in Montana
along the Bitterroot River
when our twenty year old bodies
drank from the rivers
of the Rockies.

Ponderosa, you said.
And there, too, you pointed,
calling the crocus a haiku,
the first wildflower
that spring.

I may still have years
to walk that trail
we took into Patti Canyon
before I understand
what that moment is
before your eyes close

and you are done with living.
You know what it is like
to be a child again
swinging on vines, bending
the boughs of a tree,
and at the same time
to be able to let go
of candlelight,
the tender flowers
that blossomed
all through your life.
In one glance, you see
how the blossom
and the coffin
come from the same tree.