

1984

# Cracking open the fields

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Cracking open the fields

by

Peggy Sue Alberhasky

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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This thesis has been accepted by the Department of English in lieu of the research thesis prescribed by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

## INTRODUCTION

The magical / mystic genesis of my poetry may be seen better if first my work is absorbed. My poems are not the type to be intellectualized but, like primitive art, their ideas are "felt" rather than rationalized. The psychoanalytic content or poetry of personal relationships contributes lyric energy to the work. The reader should be able to experience the "imagery," the "singing" of words but, also "feel" the ideas as they speak to the reader's subconscious. The poet may become an instrument of change because of the directness of communication the poetry makes. When the reader attempts to rationalize my poetry the subliminal content, by being pushed into a plane that it does not function on, becomes extremely difficult to understand.

"The skeleton of my trapdoor moves / like an old spider across / dusty floor boards." I view myself as a trapdoor-writer. Poetry writing is magical, more of a mystical experience than the monotony of human emotion. Magic comes from feelings and ideas deep inside me. The trapdoor enables me to release select emotions that I have decided are ready for the reader. On the other side, like a spider, I am able to catch and keep ideas and feelings that come near me. I can incubate these ideas warm and deep inside me, roll them over until I have made them ready. This verifies my belief that the writer is the most necessary component / ingredient in the creation of poetry because I do not feel that a muse comes and sprinkles flakes of inspiration, and then something beautiful happens on paper. For me as a writer there is more of a human control over creative power than a mystical energy. This

does not mean that the magical / mystical elements are not important. The magical / mystical parts are vital but it takes human emotion to bring the power "down to earth" and make the ideas and feelings accessible to everyone while at the same time allowing me to express my most private ideas into concrete universal meanings.

The use of abstraction in my poetry reveals the relationships between women and men, the family and its members, art and life, and finally reveals the writer acting as prophet. My first reaction is to slip into image and metaphor to describe the complexity of the issues I explore. I do this because I find it very difficult at times to put into words the exactness of my feelings and ideas. Poetry demands precision in all its descriptions and analyzations. Without the investment of well defined emotions and events the focus of the meaning of the poem may become trivialized.

I feel as a writer I have a responsibility to point out faults, flaws and the goodness in the life surrounding us. At times I feel I am some type of instrument with the power of change for good or bad. The power of the writing is there, and strong. Somehow we all are caught up by the change. Once the writer accepts that she is a part of the world, not a bystander, then many ideas begin to fall into place, and feelings of despair and frustration will be among the first emotions to be reckoned with.

The writer belongs to all areas of society, to those who are articulate and especially to those who are not. The following lines are from a poem concentrating on a family's interaction on the frightening feeling of growing old together. The speaker of the poem after

recounting much of the family's history comes to the conclusion: "The erosion that wipes the land / has become embedded firmly / on top of my family." The use of these lines is an example of the writer becoming an integral part of the family. The speaker of the poem is the writer / story-teller. This illustrates the blending of reader and writer.

Words, it seems, can no longer be used simply and naturally. At times we all seem to try to overcompensate for our lack of communication and end up saying bundles of words that hardly make any sense. Words seem to have become so inadequate that we are unable to express even our most simple and ordinary feelings reasonably. I fear at times because of this breakdown of word usage and understanding that poetry too may become an obsolete form of writing.

It may seem easier to view a writer in one dimension and produce a convenient label. It is not always necessary for the reader to know if the speaker of the poem is female or male. If the poem is sturdy enough, the reader will grasp the meaning whether or not the speaker can be given a gender. These next lines could be said by a woman or a man. I want to show that it is not necessary to view the writer through the attributes of female or male in order to enjoy the poetry: "I dream of zippers / and in my dreams I unzip / everything you have ever touched."

"The nights you could not sleep it off / I would stand and watch the cows / eat, sleep and listen to them moan." These lines seem fairly typical of writing describing lost love. Though these lines restrict themselves because of the approach, I do not feel that this is enough reason to discuss the poem only through gender. I want my



writing to transcend the limiting labels. I am asking the readers to dissociate themselves from group belief and deal with my poetry with a personal energy and allow for impulse to guide when doubt enters.

Women and men are compatible; though at times there seems to be a strain for them to share their writing and ideas without stigmas being attached. As writers we must put aside gender in order to do quality work and keep the flow of writing and exchange moving in a forward direction. In the poem "Buckling the Grave" it is through the combined fighting forces of women and men that they are able to save what is left of their own sources of humanity. The poem focuses on the strength of the unity between the sexes to resist the invading force(s). "The weapons are circles and the machines are vicious. / Men and women swarm together in one hot bunch / and try to scatter the forming explosive sounds." These lines attempt to draw the reader deep into the poem through visual metaphor; metaphor that recreates war in simple tones of circle and sound. But with the power of both men and women there seems to be hope; hope that the state of well being will be maintained for all.

I want as many preconceptions dissolved as possible about me, as a woman writer, and poetry in general. I do not want criticism to be based solely on which sex the writer is; rather I would like to see criticism expand and explore the writer as an individual. At times it is very easy for a reader to first categorize a work then explore it. I am afraid that approaching a writer's work through gender only is to believe in the same way that all girls should be pretty and all

boys strong. Mostly I do not want to see criticism as a limiting condition or labeling factor.

Many of my poems celebrate the sharing of men and women. I try to show the tenderness and difficulty in decision-making both go through in a working relationship. I am not trying to alienate men just as I am not trying to alienate any women. The poem "Never Give Away Your Name" is a plea for both sexes to band together. The women and men in this poem are required first to recognize themselves as individuals in society. The message is strong and simple: we must have faith in order to produce trust.

Today as a poet I feel I must speak more directly of my own personal experiences. I must be willing to merge the poem with the poet while at the same time not excluding the reader. The poet should begin by reinstating the importance of emotions. The problem in giving emotions importance and strength all their own is that it creates paradoxes. Sometimes these paradoxes are explained whether the writer is female or male. What I feel is most important about these paradoxes is that they create writer overlap. By this I mean that both men and women are writing on the same subject and not only influencing each other but giving each other new and fresh ideas. The following lines are an example of what I mean by gender overlap: "Ghost smoke seems to be the abundant / material for the houses full of families / and laughter. If I had to be house / I would be attached over a train / and use the track to tell time and make / distance." This poem was written after I had read books and interviews with American Indian

medicine men. I used the information from men to write a poem with a woman's point of view.

My vision of poetry does not involve female or male segments. It seems impossible to me to break myself down into two separate categories: woman and writer. I believe poetry should represent a realm of emotional truth and full consciousness. Poetry should express the complete experience of the individual with the surrounding world. When there is no emotional investment in the poetry by the writer or reader then this form of "reading and writing" is painless and bloodless. There are no stakes so there is nothing to lose and nothing to gain. Poetry is based on the intensity of emotion and once that is taken away then it becomes nothing but an empty egg shell.

In the poem "Country Woman" the framework is its physical setting but the writing extends itself into metaphor to better explain the internal symbolism. The poem focuses on the strength and timidity of farm people to bring alive the "old woman." The farm people give her power. Good and evil are approached as something as simple as the difference between black and white. The lines "The farm people say the country woman / can punch the earth cold" illustrate the fear and respect the farm people possess for the "old woman" while simultaneously showing their feelings of estrangement from their own land.

To achieve synthesis not only in the final stanza but throughout the poem is my goal. A cohesive statement that focuses on one single emotion is more accessible to the reader than a gallery of mediocrity based on all reservoirs of emotion. Poetry has to have endurance, experience and a strong grasp of all matters approached. This in one

small simple word means comprehension. That is why it is so important in the poem "Country Woman" to investigate, from all angles, the relationships among the farm people, the country woman and the land itself to understand fully the meaning of necessary attachment.

The continuing debate of what poetry means could be somewhat solved if we would consider poetry in more personal terms. We should think of poetry as something planted deep inside us similar to our soul. This would enable us to explain the abstractness of image and metaphor that poetry opens up for us. Reinforcing the individualism of life parallels the comprehension of poetry. Poetry in other words becomes the individual's philosophy of living. Not only do I find it extremely difficult to separate myself from writer to woman, I find it even more impossible to separate my art from my life. Poetry is the written painting: the canvas that does not limit itself to colors, textures and shapes but expands to nonvisual messages. Words may be abstract while at the same time being overly concrete. My poetry artwork does imitate my life. I believe any information received from within the creator should never be discredited. The writer's duty is to shuffle through all the feelings and develop the best and most cognizant plan to present the ideas to the reader. It is then the reader's duty to invest personal feelings to capture the intent of the message.

PART ONE

Waiting for Things That Hang Flat in the Sky

Heat breaks all skin  
and sweat alone can not  
smooth out  
the splintered cracks.

I went to him  
the night the city  
became moist.

The pears he had just picked  
were sitting alone  
on the back porch,  
I took two  
and rubbed only one  
on my shirt.

I saw him sitting alone  
at his kitchen table,  
the curve of his arm  
holding his head,  
felt like the shape  
of the pear pressed  
against my chest.

Instead of going inside  
I waited until he saw me.  
As I stood there  
I saw the clouds move  
to hang themselves  
flat against the sky.

Is Enough Full Enough?

We laughed and laughed when you tried  
to palm a horse off as a deer.

We held our sides and yelled  
ENOUGH  
ENOUGH...

We fell hard into the old man's garden.  
He did not like us pushing his turnips  
even further back into the soil.

He began yelling  
ENOUGH  
ENOUGH...

I sit by the window with the large shining piano  
and look out on this small rickety town.  
I train small fingers to be disciples.

None of us ever dare to say,  
the words even though they have become  
as pale as a split lantern  
as tender as warm bamboo  
and soft like polished small bones,  
from a good meal.

## Webs Inside a Home

All my edges have been removed.  
Everything sharp and pointed  
has been scrapped clean away.  
There are no corners left  
and the nails and hinges of my trap door  
have unplanted themselves  
and moved into the attic.  
At dusk the curtain moves slightly  
with the evening breeze  
and I am able to see the bones.

The skeleton of my trap door moves  
like an old spider across  
dusty floor boards. The underboards  
remember what it was like when someone  
would be standing in the attic ready  
to swing the broom at any small piece  
of dust or rapidly scuttling insect.

I remember years ago a bat died in the attic.  
There was one long white web covering the entire body;  
I realized then that one spider with one lace web,  
not even knowing I lived in the same house,  
has more of an effect on me than knowing I only have  
one single piece of bread left. So this is fear,  
both white and soft like lace made by woman's hands.



Watching a Sunset  
Through a Tractor-Tire

Somewhere deep in the field  
three men stand with their backs  
to the road where trucks are zooming by.

One is wearing blue overalls,  
one has a red handkerchief dripping  
from his back pocket  
and the third man has a pointed hat  
and shiny boots.

They all seem to be facing the same direction  
and looking at the same thing.  
The one with shiny boots turns fast  
and walks toward the road  
where a truck is waiting.

The other two do not move.  
They do not turn around.  
The truck squirts dirt and gravel  
as it drives away with the man  
who is wearing shiny boots.

The two men left in the field  
slowly squat down on their heels  
and finish watching the sunset,  
while their tractor tire is being fixed  
then hauled away.

## Native Land

These hands, covered with cuts  
coarsened but somehow still tender  
curse and break the black soil.

Awkwardly silent and much ashamed  
his hands dare to rest palms open,  
and look almost harmfully at the land.  
Sluggish horses plow the fields.

Bushels of homemade baskets  
filled with corn, onions and beans  
wait as crisp as papers  
stuffed in a leather case.

He stands there waiting for her  
and looks at his hands which carry  
so many wrinkles that his palms  
become a map of his soil.  
The shape of the map is the same  
as the shape of the lid of his father's coffin.

She impatiently taps the sagging wooden fence  
and watches the cows eat wild garlic.  
All the animals they own are lean and hungry  
like wolves. The animals howl with a frenzy  
when the grain is let out of its cage.

Both of them look and strain to smell  
the nice smell of their land.  
All the while knowing they are harnessed  
by the horses and soil.

PART TWO

## Pilgrim Boats

The first death was the death  
of your father.  
I remember you standing against  
the refrigerator door shading  
your eyes from the morning sun.

I remember you when your grandmother died.  
You stood again by the refrigerator door  
in the kitchen in the morning,  
this time not shading your eyes.

But you were staring at the clock  
above the sink. The clock had pictures  
of small boats instead of numbers.

You said to me that your grandmother  
used to wake you up in the middle of the night,  
just to ask what time it was.

You turned sideways to me and said,  
that one night while you and she  
were up and watching the sky  
your grandmother found a Pilgrim Boat.

You went and tried to touch the clock  
but it was too high on the wall.  
You stood there with one arm raised  
and told me that you told her that night,  
there was no such thing as Pilgrim Boats,  
it was just gray and blue thunder  
and possibly just a rain cloud.

I walked over to you with a small stepladder  
and had you stand on it to reach the clock,  
and I asked you if you were sure she had not seen  
a boat float through the sky that one last time.

## Country Woman

When the cows all lie down together in a group,  
in a circle, she says this means rain will come.  
She says these words were written down in her book,  
her book that holds all miracles.

The country woman also can tell what animal  
will be born next in the tall barns, what nest  
will have the next suffering and she knows  
which animal to fondle and which to say goodbye to.

She always knows. Swallowing stones in another way  
for her to tell the fortunes of the farmers livestock.  
She knows all the farming people believe in god and statues,  
just as they believe in melting ice.

The country woman will not answer the farm people's questions  
on weather. She will help them observe the land dry as paper,  
animal eyes the size of almonds and air from thirst as shy  
as birds without feathers. The farm people do not like her distance.

All the country land surrounding her has come to nothing.  
She says the cows do not lie down but follow each other  
in a straight line, blackness and deafness will come soon.

The farm people stay at least ten miles away from her,  
her house and tall barn. The telephone and electric lines  
have been cut by the farm people to cut her off from them  
and to keep the country woman dependent on the land.

The farm people say the country woman can punch the earth cold.  
She has power to stop and turn everything negative and on  
its backside. The farm people say she sits in her house  
and slices harness leather: thin like a razor's edge.  
The country woman's strips are lean, brown and stiff.

None of the farm people know why the country woman keeps  
making leather strips. They do know and steadily feel her  
body growing wider and bigger. They feel the heat of her  
growing heavier and heavier. There are no more raw edges left  
surrounding the land, and the barns have no corners.

The country woman watches the birds land and peck  
at the plastic flowers which cover graves. She slowly  
keeps rocking and smiles up where the would-be electric  
lines would cross the sky and then she stomps the land,  
like scolding a small child.

### A Farm Couple

The gate is bolted tight  
and the salt in the air  
is as strong as rotten canned tomatoes  
found exploded in the cellar.

She said to him that he whispers  
and this implies that he must mistrust  
her as he does the lame old dog  
tied tight to the chain outside the house.

He says he is innocent of this accusation.  
She continues to threaten to explode  
all over their house if he does not change.  
He smiles because he knows how important  
it is for her to look so well preserved.

## Two Thinking Fishermen

Across the lake to the left  
two men sit and try to fish  
by holding their poles  
close to the water  
but not in the liquid.

The row boat they came in  
is completely empty  
and the tackle boxes  
are full of food and medicine.  
They both sit on wool plaid blankets.

Once in a while one nudges  
the other but ever so gently  
because they are aware of the harmony  
and they do not want to disturb the sound.  
It does not matter to them the boat is not filled.

The two men are not only distant  
from boats, bait and renewal  
but they are in some way, by their wives,  
distant relatives as well.

They watch the water float off with the breeze  
and think of ways to carry pails of water  
up from the lake without spilling a drop.

They talk of remembering when they both danced  
in strong high winds and walked valleys  
bare of trees.

The sky keeps itself high and to itself,  
the two men sit close and bring their poles  
in from the top of the water. The sky darkens  
and their voices become crisp and clear  
as the first thin layer of ice on puddles.

They realize at the same time without knowing  
that both of them have as much splintered wood  
as the paddle, the one paddle, of the row boat  
they brought to this side of the lake. They nudge  
each other once again, this time not so gently.

### A Letter Is Like a Rope: Tight and Holding

His coat and other outside clothing is damp and very much dry-gray. An hour ago it was almost sunset and the evening is beginning to claim its moistness. His hat slouches deep on his head and his appearance is that of a mature cracked man. A lonely man with only worn places to keep visiting. His anchor has been buried and rusted itself away in the dripping liquid left quietly corroding on his coat sleeve. In his hand he carries a letter. Inside the soiled envelope is the letter and on the outside the original stamp still sticks itself tightly on the paper of the envelope. He read the letter only once. He holds the letter now as if it is a lost stone. Daily routines and events are twisted into knots of twine. He no longer remembers to count the different distances he has allowed his feet to carry him. The man's hair is short, his beard long, his feet sleepy and his right knee weak. He limps when he walks. The inhabitants of this town he is now in are completely terrified of him and ask him pithy questions concerning his letter. He never answers. He walks straight, direct and with purpose to the local post office. He buys a new stamp just like the old one on the envelope. When he reaches the edge of town he buries the new stamp under a fresh pile of stones. Briskly he goes on.

In a kitchen in the middle of the town a young girl sits down in front of her burning stove and writes a letter. She only has one stamp. She is surrounded by fire and saucepans.



### When Dull Leo Comes Home

My brother, dull Leo is coming home.  
No, he is already home and lying  
in the dead mowed grass. Leo always  
was a little cracked. Just like the window  
in the family truck. The window has been blocked  
with a piece of cardboard ever since I can remember.

The cracked window breaks the monotony  
of the driving and cuts the breezes  
in unexpected places and pieces. The window  
and dull Leo are two of the most important  
and inescapable parts of my life now. I still  
leave the doors to the truck both unlocked.

Behind the window is a part of life dull Leo  
has seen that I have not. He went away for a while  
and then came back. I have never left. Not once.  
Family, home and the business have kept me here.  
Distance, driving and roads all have the same direction.

My brother, dull Leo is now out of sight again.  
He always goes just before it gets light out.  
He left his jacket on the front seat of the truck.  
I will remember him every time I try to look  
through the fractured glass and cardboard.

PART THREE

## Moo Cows and Mother

Late at night  
just before dawn  
I can remember  
my mother coming in  
and smelling like stale beer  
to kiss and tuck me in.

She had forgotten.  
Now when she is ready  
to fall to the bed  
or to the floor,  
she comes in to me.

I let her come  
because I know  
she has nowhere else  
to go but to my room.

Everytime she comes in  
she finds a new shadow shape  
for me on my wall.  
Last night it was cattle perched  
on a wooden woven fence.  
She even mooed me the song  
the cows sang as they  
straddled the fence.

Tonight it is already light  
and still she has not come.  
It isn't that I am worried,  
I can hear her singing  
the words of the cow song.

The words are dim,  
all I can hear are moans  
or are they moos?  
A thud. She must be down  
on the floor.  
I wonder when she looks up  
to the ceiling in the kitchen  
if she sees the cow shapes.

## Watching

## I

I watched as my mother drank  
and misplaced clothing in a ritual,  
which grew to her hitting the family members  
which grew into her forgetting the flame  
underneath the skillet on the stove,  
which led into a fire that burnt down  
our house.

## II

Everyone's face and hands look much darker and longer.  
My mother still drinks and misplaces clothing  
but we do not have the same stove anymore.

## III

My father walks around my mother  
as if he is in the iron cage.  
He never sleeps anymore because  
he must keep constant watch over my mother.

## IV

My father always looks now just like he has been  
kicked by a strong heavy horse.

## V

I watch both my mother and father  
as they both hit the ground.  
Nothing breaks in this new house  
because nothing was brought from the old house  
and nothing here has been given a solid place.

## VI

But I did sneak out one item from the old house,  
curtain rods. The twine that hangs from the top  
of the rods keeps twisting itself into neatly shaped  
nooses. I did not tell anyone that these rods hanging  
in the living room are from the old house. I watch the twine,  
my mother, father, and wonder which one will see the shape first.

Her Hand Looked So Small

I

Standing at this corner  
watching the cars go by,  
we saw a boat being lugged  
by a rusted green truck  
limp past us.

A

I remember being very young  
and cold standing inside  
a large, damp and unfamiliar  
wooden garage. The smell was bad  
and the paint was peeling off the walls.

A one

You and my mother  
were trying to take a large wooden  
red and white boat off some type of sled.  
I was told to stand over to the side  
where buckets of things that smelled  
like dead mud worms were stacked.

B

I remember rubbing my hands together  
and feeling how red and cold my fingers were.  
I heard mother yell and then saw red trickle down  
her hand.

B one

Then I saw her cry. Her hand had dipped back  
between the wooden boat and the wooden garage wall.  
Her hand looked so small.

II

I had seen you cry many times,  
but I had never seen my mother cry.  
I have held your hand and given you hugs.  
I have never hugged or held her hand since  
that day in the wooden garage with the wooden boat.

My Mother's Room and My Father's Ghost

My mother's kitchen has a different season from the rest of the house. But it has the same season year in and year out. The floor is damp, the air is hot and the counters always have drops of water, as if they had just been wiped off.

I do not believe that my mother ever left the kitchen. All the other rooms of the house have my father's touch. Cold, sharp and immediate.

There seems to be a great dark all around the inside of the house. My mother has gone away. My father never says a single word about my mother's disappearance. The kitchen has become off limits to the whole family.

My father hired an outsider to live in mother's kitchen.

The new woman walks bent over at the waist, even when she is not carrying anything in her arms. We decided we did not want his woman here, we want to give her back.

My father does not come to supper anymore. We do not care.

We hear some kind of swinging coming from my father's room but we are afraid to go down into the basement.

The new woman is not afraid and she goes down to where we all know our father's roots are spreading and dying.

She comes up to us at the dinner table carrying a rope. The rope has a long knot with flesh around the edges. The rooms of the house all become warm and without shadow.

## A Family Made of Unlikely Ties

It's funny how when I look  
at my mother, and sometimes my father,  
how similar they look,  
even to the point that I know  
their blood must be the same.

Both of them are masters,  
people who can travel and always  
find their way out.  
When it comes to tucking away pain  
they are the best.  
The only sign, the only visible sign  
of pain they have is a large wad  
of juicy chew stuffed into their cheeks.

Raw and red,  
yes my mother and father both believe  
that if it starts out as raw and red  
then it must be good.  
Just like cows, cows are good,  
cows are fat, warm and follow well.

The furniture they left for me in their house  
seemed to be left for someone much bigger,  
or at least for someone with larger shoulders.  
While most of my relatives mourn in the rooms  
I feel like I am sitting in a room full of sad  
pieces of thread.

There were so many small stringy things left floating  
that I found myself threading and rethreading.  
I could not see to take my eyes away from the silver  
spittoon off to the side. I knew it was fake,  
something just for show, but for a small moment  
I thought I smelled something red and something raw.

My Family Grows Pain: Ghost Dirt

My family has pain just as bad  
as some of the families have farm.

All my family has grown up  
in the midwest. Corn, hogs,  
and work days as long as they are not  
do not mean a thing to them,  
except that they know how to put  
their pain in bushels.

No one in my family has ever  
set one foot on a plowed field  
that is not their own. They have never  
milked a cow that they did not breed.  
My family just happened to be born  
in the midwest. It was not by choice.

Being born was rather a convenience.  
They live on the land, not on top of the land.

Each year my family gets smaller.  
Everyone goes home and the homes  
even get smaller. My family grows  
pain very well. On cool clear fall  
mornings I see them all wiping the pain  
from their dripping faces before they go  
work the fields.

All that seems to be left of their bodies  
is simply a cloud of ghost dirt and the smell of pain.

The erosion that wipes the land has become  
embedded firmly on top of my family.



PART FOUR

## Beginning a Family

If I were a house  
I would not like straw,

If I were a house  
I would not like brick,

I have never before  
allowed my arm to be broken  
but if I did I would not  
want it in a structure  
that would be long and lean.

I would want a large square room  
wrapped all around me, and folded  
in at the corners so that I could  
tuck and carry myself away at will.

When the whole house shakes  
I move too and I move fast;  
still I do not like the things  
houses stand for and are built from.

Ghost smoke seems to be the abundant  
material for the houses full of families  
and laughter. If I had to be a house  
I would be attached over a train  
and use the track to tell time and make  
distance.

If I were a house  
I would let my mail hang outside,

If I were a house  
I would miss rubbing my hands together  
to keep warm

because I would have to rely  
on the people inside for heat.

## Strapped by the Belt

Then, but not finally the rain falls.  
The liquid hits the ground like the sound  
of a person slapping insects dead on her arm.

We both watch him and stand almost on top  
of him, unaware that we are hampering him.  
You stop and pick your teeth with a rough piece  
of grass or weed and I bite my lips and press  
my shoulders deep into my chest.

I do not want him to grow up like you.  
Even now, as he smiles he is small  
and secretive just like you.

This shelter leaks. We all sit close.  
We both put him in the middle, not because  
we want to protect him or keep him warm  
or even make him feel safe. We want to put distance  
between us. Human distance. Distance grows in our family.

Our house is just a bit larger than this shelter.  
I try to imagine just me and my son alone. Here,  
in this shelter it is easy to think of alone.

I travel in my thoughts to our house.  
To our tables, chairs and books I make direct paths.  
All these things feel like tombstones.

The smallness of our house stretches around me.  
Then, with thunder everything switches itself back  
and I reach behind and touch your belt and feel safe.

## Good Cow

The nights you could not sleep it off  
I would stand and watch the cows  
eat, sleep and listen to them moan.  
You made the same sounds but your noise  
seemed disgusting almost as if you were ranking  
your throat inside out and backwards.

## Cows

I always stayed in the same room as you  
until I knew you were deep asleep,  
the kind of sleep that you didn't know  
or care what house you were bedded down in  
just as long as someone was there holding  
warmth for you when you were ready to use it.

## Cows

This is my father's house, and I have decided  
this is the last time you will sleep it off---  
Just a moment ago you were still my husband  
breaking back into the house but not now, you come  
breaking into nothing but lost darkness. I hear cows,  
all this time I have stayed awake for you.

No more room left for me to stand in this room.  
I am heading out to the barn. I want to get into  
one of the stalls and pretend the bull is my father  
and talk to him gently. Plead with him as I brush him  
to forgive me for taking a weaker breed. I will tell him  
I know I am a good cow. I give sufficient milk.  
I hear him blowing across the trough.

## Cattails

So the one day that you took me  
for the drive out to the country,  
to search for cattails  
was supposed to be romantic  
for me?

It was cold and rainy.  
I already had a cold  
and a pile of paperwork  
falling off my desk,  
I couldn't even see the top.

You suggested heavily,  
that I get out of the truck  
and go into the ditch  
and pick as many cattails  
as I wanted.

I was picking cattails.

Not because I wanted to  
but because you had decided  
that it was the task  
that I had to do that day,  
that minute for you.

I tried to only pick  
the cattails that were already  
half empty.

I stand staring in our hallway  
at the glass jar, the large jelly-jar,  
that holds the cattails straight.

The cattails are captive and tall,  
I already know that.  
I know because I am standing  
on the forgotten fringes  
of our human-made island.

### The First Home

I try to sit comfortably  
in the first house  
we have bought together.  
I find it hard to look  
at the walls because they hold  
so many pieces of the past family.

The members of the past family  
come back and hammer pictures  
into our walls and stick our clothing  
out on the trees. Nothing seems to be able  
to stop these survivors.

I feel my husband slowly growing bald.  
My hands have become thin and bloodless,  
almost as if they are preparing to die.  
Still we try to share each other in this house.

The past family members have made a mask  
that covers the whole inside of the house.  
We must move from this house. But when I say this  
my husband acts like I am only speaking of taking a trip  
to the food store. He asks me to pick up fresh onions.

As I walk out of the house,  
I hear him talking to the past family members  
and he is telling them everything will be fine.  
Even though I do not need one I grab my hat  
because when I pull it way down the shadow  
makes my face look like half a mask.  
I say to him I will be right back.

## Pulled Back, Pulled Out

Too warm in the kitchen  
with the curtains not pulled back.

The cookbook has been pulled out  
but not opened. She stands still  
in front of the sink with the book  
to the left on the counter next  
to the box of knives.

She can not open the cookbook.  
The outside of the book looks too much  
like the journal she kept as a young girl.  
One day her mother read the whole way through  
her book. Since that day she has never been able  
to open a book with yellow flowers on the cover.

Her husband gave her the cookbook on her birthday.  
She has never opened the book because it reminds  
her of her journal. Her husband walks into the kitchen.  
Opens the refrigerator and pulls out a can of beer.  
He picks up the cookbook and drops it flat on the floor.

She sees a small envelope sticking out from the pages.  
Her husband picks up the card then quickly throws  
it away in the trash can behind the stove.  
She does not move. Her husband leaves and belches loud  
in the next room. She searches through the trash  
for the card. The woman's name on the card is not hers.

She picks up the cookbook and places it in her roasting pan.  
She puts in carrots, onions, celery, water, salt and pepper.  
Then she pops the tin pan in the oven and turns it on high.  
She walks out of the kitchen to the backyard.

It is cool and she can see everything much better.  
The curtains are pulled back and out of the way.

## Tied Down

A

I am dead somewhere inside a tree.  
Dead somewhere inside a tree in this room.  
There always seems to be some kind  
of snow in the air. The snow begins  
here in this room.

I am attached to the thick of the trunk.  
I am linked to roundness. Sitting in this room  
I walk through fields with the photograph album  
and become one all by myself again.

B

I spar with myself in the kitchen  
because the utensils are familiar.

My belly aches from the all-day snowfall.  
When I look out the window the energy  
is strong, white and warm.

C

The kid is asleep somewhere inside me.  
You are blind from drinking, as usual.  
I never seem to leave this room anymore.  
But you do often.

Every time you come back  
you still are falling flat down  
from somewhere else.



PART FIVE

### Missing Lovers and Sidewalk Cracks

The clothing is zebra-striped and the windows face  
the street where the dogs gather with humans to keep  
the night and its hot summer dampness smooth company.

The restlessness that is rising is mysterious and thick,  
light bounces keenly in the horizon and then colors  
wait for full balance and focus sharp and frozen in the windows.

The woman is topless remembering the highway outside  
her first home and her first husband. She notices how rough,  
almost like wax milk cartons her breasts feel to her slight touch.

Down below her a man she used to know by touch stumbles,  
and slides into her bag of garbage. His boot makes a large  
deep incision. Along the tear comes a hard sound of clumsiness.

There is no use in trying to pull together the gap in the bag.  
He knows scotch tape will grow yellow and lose its grip.

She hears the noise and knows that she does not anymore  
own the pieces of routine in the bag. She does not even  
have a rubber band to tie around the neck of the bag.

## Tinting the Puzzle

He says to me his day is breaking.  
But it is more of the way he tells it,  
the sealedness and the profanity he feels  
toward the sun. His universe is invaded  
and the invasion is of soldiers who appear  
like workmen in overalls made of mountains.

The train is still waiting at the station,  
his hands shake and the appetite of the steam  
becomes the penance for the late spring.  
We try to exchange definitions to get some true meaning  
and not the usual limp illusions. But everything  
keeps coming up.

We look to the front of the buildings,  
but it is all a joke, the weather itself  
is slumped behind us under a blotch of trees.  
The moments that pass us become skittish  
and our entire weight is balanced on the fresh  
edge of a broken mirror.

One morning at breakfast I picked up a piece.  
It is waiting for something to be born inside it.  
In my and your best interest I decide to leave it in  
a tint and prefer to finish my life and food  
in a tint of floral retreat and not in postponed simplicity.

### Water Will Always Stay

Once we used to describe ourselves as a low floating boat. Now leaning back with exhaustion we look over all the cuts on our arms, legs and belly. We both have been wronged and still all the years have not taken the time to remove the delicate box and chain that we put so quickly inside one another. The day we gave the gift we made a pact to always believe in islands, umbrella trees and intricate seeds we will never be able to taste.

The box and chain are so far inside me that I feel pain up to my elbows. This is especially tedious at night, when we bump innocently into one another trying to keep from touching the bed corners.

There is a terrible puzzle between us. Images of tombstones and beefsteak float through as swiftly as ocean water. I keep insisting to you that there is a carpenter out there waiting for us to begin to restore and even rebuild our boat.

Somehow the water will stay all around us and become as necessary as napkins. We will learn how to use the liquid as a lasting souvenir. So, the polluted leaves and trees will not end up as threatened pleasures and broken emigration laws.

## Desert Water Line

If all of a sudden I did come to believe  
that there would be no tomorrow and waves  
in the ocean, that I have only seen once with you  
that strange time early spring with Indian art  
piled high in the back of the car, almost as if alone  
we were the carriers of all beadwork of all time.

Then and only then would the waves maybe begin to look  
like obedient but separate occurrences of dense useful functions.  
The days and mostly the wet mornings were always below us  
trying to catch us and force us to wait, to hang.

We watched the shadows of old men showing their thin sons  
how to successfully crack crab and lobster. Showing how to get  
to the deep meat. The skinny green and clinging seaweed  
was thrown aside so fast that it sounded sharp and brittle  
like a twig from a dying tree when it hits water. The old men  
said almost in unison to their lean sons that only particles  
of sand could snap, snap and snap louder than the stringy seaweed.

The tall sons did not hear the water sound.  
They only saw the stuff floating that smelled dead  
on top of the water where their fat fathers  
had thrown seaweed, scales, empty tin cans and dull knife blades.

## All Darkness

I inherit many things but most of all darkness;  
you tell me it is the voice of my mother  
but I hear the difference, I know what it is like  
to keep dialing left to right and left to right.

The clothing I wear is dim and unmarked.  
While I walk I will not unleash anything,  
and since you believe I already look like  
someone else, does it matter what I answer  
you goes unheard? Your deafness is as clean  
as a surgeon's mask.

My only yielding is to balance, my own balance.  
The glare of the cutting edges of blades of our kitchen  
knives piles itself to the top of our walls  
and all light is pushed aside and out of the way.

The endless walking, endless rearrangement of our furniture  
does not produce the special language that carpenters  
have with their tools, tools that build and do work.  
We continue to wait and with this comes dimness.

The water becomes warmer and all our food preparations  
and the oil we use so generously quietly allows itself  
to become hot in the iron skillet. With the skill  
of our lying children we cover the utensil and wait  
for the drowning darkness to begin.

PART SIX

## Long Poem: Broken into Short Paragraphs

Here we are, they are here and we all are talking, speaking, trying to sound and it is all about what looks right or wrong, what does good or evil sound similar to? And where are the pieces? The missings of the puzzle. We all become themselves. Satan is the dead small branch of the purple lilac but the poverty becomes purpose of the proportion. But there is conversing with the external worlds, the outside worlds, the areas around the throne. The throne is where Man is turning on his own back where perfection is nothing but a simple production. The existing realities only in the imaginations are designs of each side.

We have taken care to make ourselves worlds. Worlds of death and the incapability to make judgments or even attempt to govern ourselves, but we become the land of pretenders. The generation asserts and it tries very hard to cast off all those humans who are not better. Who hinder, who are bad men and who display and consist of only vile. But it does take all as individuals to make such artists as Raphael and Inness and not just manufacture sculptors. Things will have to do well and not dwell on the hungerings for bread.

The wine and life are two. These develop accordingly and the opposing truths will coincide. The opening will be cut and formed into and inside some part made into some extra area of a baptism. There will appear the wind and the light and the top soil. It will not let itself be left to only represent. This will take knaves, the lords will no longer eat all the supper. But it will always have the time and the material to continue.

Nothing is less even if someone is inside it. Standing by it or living in it or even believing in it---it becomes the society. The throwing off will keep occurring because it needs to, because we want it or it wants it. It will not allow itself to be embraced but it will beam for all those who know how to err. The design is that of nature and all mortal things wise. The arguments and the awful vivid thirsty insinuations will and must be the beginnings' foundations. But no one must kneel for pictures all the waking time.

The idea or presence of infants will not be seen but embalmed. The heads and insides of the babies will emanate from us all as youthful rolling and fleeing clouds. Fat clouds. Weak and wicked must be, but it will be made to receive such things as rainbows and the name of Mary, John and Elizabeth. The sense of eternity will be felt of submissive will. To reject will be demanded but to tolerate will be more meaningful and the beneathness will be separated and those willing will acquire seats.

There will be spots where graves must live. The offspring must live. But the things will calmly descend and all ages will stand



and face the circled life. There are the multitudes and the milky way will be the green in the fields. The people are solitary and steamed and streamed inside caverns. Stars are somewhere, such as Egypt, and reflected in the dragons and will always meet in friendship. The rulers, the nations and the family are purifying and protected by the diamondness of art and there is not need to look further into the heavens. Because the humble are shaped to fit and the first made descriptive here. The branches are pears and the fruit is particular about who it will help and who it will let help it keep up.

## Buckling the Grave

## I

The weapons are circles and the machines are vicious.  
 Men and women swarm together in one hot bunch  
 and try to scatter the forming explosive sounds.

The wheels of the machines are too small for the noise  
 and the rumble of marching brings a heaviness  
 to the furious flutterings of the parasol shaped swarm.

## II

Tap bones tap, tap skeletons tap, the drums grow sharp.  
 The interior of the circle grows warmer as the beats  
 become louder. Voices speak only in one-dark-syllable words.

## III

Still the swarming has not found any blank breakthrough;  
 there does not seem to be any word for the life that will  
 be left over. Still, the men and women do not stop, they keep shuffling.

## IV

The air is attentive. The machines are nothing but crusts  
 of things that will stay buried beneath desert hot sand.  
 The forces have gathered and made rough sooty sleeves  
 of their uniforms soft.

The shrivellings of time  
 and the falling down of homelife  
 has been bucked, bucked clean and bucked clear.

## V

Marching, moving, and metal music / whistling has been captured  
 and will be used only to replace and rescue the grave.  
 The swarm is a double profession an instinctive whole.

## Never Give Away Your Name

Someone is speaking;  
do not listen, do not tell  
your full name. This someone will begin  
talking to you by telling a good story.  
The story will be made of porcelain  
and healthy colors. —

Your name will be called  
and you will want to go forward  
but do not go and answer.  
Stay away and think of things  
you did when you were a child.

The story will be familiar  
you will want to contribute  
but keep yourself silent.  
Take your turn and go down  
the hallway, allow yourself  
once again to become small,  
tiny and tireless.

Keep your full name  
to yourself, do not give  
your name to anyone else.  
When you give away your name  
all that is left is the final  
spitting and choking on language  
and words that do not and will not agree.

Weathered Sunworshippers: Remeeting an Old Sunbathing Friend

I

And then she said she let her dress fall off  
to one side of her shoulder and then she said  
she let herself touch a copy of herself in the mirror.

The sea was banging away just as it had been the afternoon  
she watched herself in the mirror. She smiled as she pressed  
one breast to another and noticed how much better she felt  
when she touched them like light loaves of bread. She used  
to help her mother knead bread dough every Sunday morning.

II

We were young and thin lying on the plaid blanket  
belly down with our bathing suit tops all the way off  
and trying to tell each other about touching fleshy  
and puffy lips and breasts.

I listened to her as if my ears were ice-cream scoops  
pulling every word in and shoving them solid inside me.

III

I notice now how many of our secrets have turned to paper  
and turned to stumps. The collapse of our skin has made our exteriors  
similar to cobwebs. When we greet each other it is with pale  
arms about the neck.

## Blue Line

I turn away from you  
to the double window  
and instead of seeing  
a blue horizon  
I see a pool of gray water  
and a thin line of white trees  
with thick wet moss.

You pull yourself toward  
me and my half of the window  
and then without asking,  
close both the windows.

You seem not to notice  
and punch your pillow  
as if nothing, nothing  
had just happened.

But it did.  
Something did happen.

I dream of zippers  
and in my dreams I unzip  
everything you have ever touched.  
I rip out old thread,  
but I end up fixing the snags  
and replacing the buttons.

I wake and see a small slice  
of light trying to come in  
through the closed window.  
The reflection of the water  
on the trees looks pencil thin blue.

I don't care any longer  
you sleep without air  
because I am sewn so deeply  
into place that nothing, nothing  
can pull me away.

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