

1989

## Positive results

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Positive results

by

Tammy Joy Pearson-Vander Broek

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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Major: English

Approved:

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~~In Charge of Major Work~~

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Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa

1989

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DEDICATION

To Amanda  
For Teaching Me So Much

## The Gap Widens

Once we swarmed within each other  
    within that first collection  
of everything--  
    dust, planets, stars, galaxies--  
that first compact completeness  
in the center of nothing  
    that was scattered  
by the BIG BANG  
    that sent us and galaxies  
hurtling -- our lights that were one light  
    strung apart and snapped apart  
you, my parents, and me  
and  
you, my children, and me  
    as we were flung through space  
and the black space around me  
    chills my borders,  
the stars spinning at the outer reaches,  
trailing, almost breaking off  
    as if ready to be whipped off  
through the dark  
to be caught  
in the gravity  
    of the nearest galaxy

as if part of me could leap to you,  
my parents, and you, my children  
and grab on, then pull the rest of me along  
so again we'd swirl in a universe complete  
but the universe continues to explode outward  
and I can only watch your lights  
and spinning  
and see how my stars  
fill the gaps from yours, my parents,  
and see that my missing strands  
are now yours, my children,  
and enjoy watching,  
as in the distance  
your detail becomes more distinct.

PART I:  
FROM A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

## Positive Results

The blue slip passes  
from lab technician to doctor,  
telling him that you  
are more than my imagination.  
I walk to my car,  
shadows of oak leaves  
crossing my path,  
and I picture you,  
yellow plastic rake in hand,  
piling leaves to kick and roll in,  
scattering them again.  
In the car I drive  
through autumn colored streets  
with you at my side,  
in your car seat,  
pacifier falling to the floor--  
out of reach.  
I pass the grocery store  
and hear you cry,  
wanting a nickle for bubblegum,  
and I see me pulling you  
past the quarter-for-a-ride  
miniature merry-go-round.  
At the stop light

I watch you wave  
the Mother's Day card  
crudely cut in the shape of a heart.  
I drive past the yellow line  
of school buses prepared  
for the three o'clock rush  
and see you,  
clarinet in hand,  
practicing the first song  
you learned in band,  
then you chattering  
"I told you I could make the honor roll,"  
then you,  
before graduation,  
"Mom, straighten my cap,"  
while I smile and answer,  
"When we get there."

## Aftermath

The knocking pulls me from my comforter  
to find Aunt Madge, her face of false concern  
peering through the window. A cake, her cure  
for all, in her arms. She feels it's her turn  
to offer condolences and starts in:

Poor dear, I've heard you've suffered and wept  
but don't you realize how lucky you've been?  
Mark and Paula's baby died while he slept--  
you hadn't yet felt yours move or loved it.  
Anyway, it probably would have been  
retarded or dead or somehow unfit.

And you're young; you can always try again.

Her voice hums on like a room full of flies  
as her red nails remind me of blood stained thighs.

## Emptying The Pumpkin

Surgical cuts separate  
its walls from membrane strands  
that tangle the seeds  
piled on newspapers  
to be stillborn in the garbage.  
Smile carved to impress  
trick or treaters,  
it sits on the porch rail,  
insides still raw from the scraping.

## Mid-Night Labor

I awake,  
the baby's cry of my dreams  
slips out through still curtains  
as I breathe in the air  
full of cricket sounds  
and release the sheet  
tangled in my fists.  
The tightness of my stomach eases  
as I settle into my pillow,  
cotton case cool with my sweat.  
My hands become heavy,  
pressing on my roundness,  
tensing--  
I gasp  
as the wind  
billows  
through dancing drapes.

## Not Like The Lamaze Class Movies

--The doctor places the baby, umbilical  
cord still pulsing, into the crying  
mother's arms.

Push

The doctor says,  
rolling forward on his stool  
to make the episiotomy.  
I hear the snip of skin and

Push

sitting up  
I grab my knees,  
fingernails digging in  
as I hold my breath

One--two--three--four--

the muscles in my neck tighten  
until I reach

Ten.

then pull in another breath  
and strain

One--two--

until  
the blue

five--

face appears

and a needle  
is stuck into the back of my hand  
to bring the next  
contraction quickly.

The pressure starts at my spine,  
wrapping around to my navel  
and I fill my lungs

One--two--three--

feeling like even my intestines

six--seven--

should come out.

But the head stays bodiless

ten.

between my legs

Once more.

I press down

then suddenly

the shoulders, arms, hips, legs,  
feet are there

Good. Rest.

in the doctor's hands.

I see it's a girl

as he suction her nose and mouth

Good job.

with a plastic bulb

and she kicks, reaching her head back

Just a minute.

in protest.

The nurse extends the cotton draping  
to wrap her in

Not yet.

but her arms are still there

I said--

and I look back at the squirming baby  
to see the large, soft mass

Call the pediatrician.

on her back.

She is folded in blue draping  
and I watch the nurse's back

Hold still.

as she hurries away with my baby  
in the bundle.

Almost done.

The doctor pulls the umbilical cord  
until the placenta falls into a silver bowl  
then he kneads my empty uterus

All right.

as my baby's cries  
disappear through double doors.

## Spina Bifida Morning

--Children with the defect at the lumbar  
four level often have damage to the  
nerves leading to the legs and bladder.  
Intermittent catheterization is often  
needed to prevent kidney damage.

Searching for sleep, she turns away  
but I roll her back,  
remove her diaper,  
and tickle her face with my hair.  
She reaches to touch my lips  
as I part her legs and labia  
with one arm and hand  
in a contortionist move,  
cleaning her with soapy cottonballs  
with the other hand,  
and talking to keep her  
looking at me  
instead of rolling to reach  
the pile of blue, green, red bibs  
beside her.  
I rinse her,  
then finding the opening,  
insert the plastic tubing

into her bladder just as she sees  
the miniature tennis shoes  
she'll wear that day  
and pulls away to grab them.  
I release her legs,  
let her play while I hold the tube  
in place and the urine drains,  
dripping into the cup.  
I tickle her ribs and neck  
and her laughter pushes the urine faster--  
a stream that slows between giggles  
then stops.  
I connect the syringe,  
the solution flowing,  
cleansing her bladder.  
I remove the tube  
and she laughs to see me  
nibble her toes.

## Where's Daddy?

Noticing the green pickup  
parked in the drive for a week now,  
she bounces up and down  
calling DADDY HOME  
calling DADDY TRUCK  
then crawls to the door  
DADDY HOME  
but I keep stirring  
the boiling spaghetti--  
steam shrouding my eyes  
bubbling covering her  
DADDY TRUCK  
DADDY HOME  
I sit her in her highchair  
and cut her food,  
watch her eat  
and drop bites to the dog  
while I push my food with my knife,  
my sleeves whispering  
across the table  
I tell her good girl  
for drinking juice  
without spilling  
good girl

for eating the last spoon  
full of peas  
good girl  
for not turning her head  
toward the door  
when we hear a car drive by  
and not smiling  
DADDY HOME  
and not shaking her tray  
DOWN DOWN  
DADDY HOME  
good girl  
for not being old enough to ask  
WHEN WILL DADDY BE BACK?  
and for not understanding  
why  
only daddy's best suit  
is missing from the closet.

## The Morning After The San Francisco Earthquake

In Iowa

I lift you from your crib,  
Put your rolling head on my shoulder,  
Wrap a blanket around your feet--  
Cold from kicking off the covers--  
While workers  
Remove the debris  
Of a collapsed overpass,  
Uncover crushed cars,  
Find the mother who'd gathered  
Her child into her lap  
To wait for the shaking to stop.  
I know I cannot hold off  
The falling tons of cement and steel  
As your head stirs against my neck,  
Your hair soft against my earlobe.

## Preparing For The First Step

Hands trembling against the steel,  
I fasten leather straps,  
Fumbling with the buckles  
That hold the bars  
Against her legs  
Like poles tied to saplings.  
She watches, curious,  
And touches the frame  
That now holds her legs stiff,  
Reinforced and ready.  
I lift her to her feet  
While she leans on my hands--  
Playing "stand up"  
Like we have in front of the toy box  
(My hands on her trunk,  
Her arms free and in motion).  
Balanced,  
I let her go.  
She clutches for me  
And her eyes widen  
To see me a pace away.  
But her legs are steady  
And she smiles  
When I call her "big girl"  
And raises her hands above her head.

## When Moving From Bed Is Impossible

I can think only  
of the sound of your turning  
in your crib across the hall,  
of the dog's soft whining  
for a ball lost beneath the couch,  
of the plastic over the windows  
flapping against the house,  
of the digital numbers of the clock  
melting from one to the next,  
of whether or not I locked the doors,  
of which window would offer the best escape  
in case of fire or intruders downstairs,  
of how once you were in my womb,  
of how I would like to absorb you  
through my skin, muscles, uteran wall,  
to have you there again  
under the blankets with me.

## Business Trip

I walk backwards  
down the runway to the plane  
so I can watch  
your waving hand flickering  
between passengers' hips  
and pull-along luggage  
until the rush pushes me  
through the doors and to my row.  
As the rising of the plane  
sinks me in my seat  
I study the cars below,  
trying to x-ray their roofs  
to see you playing with George,  
the stuffed whale  
that sleeps on your toy box;  
trying to throw you that "one-more-kiss;"  
trying to hear you ask,  
"When will Daddy be back?"  
but the cars are soon dust specks  
and I turn from the window  
when the cart of drinks bumps my arm  
as it squeezes between the seats,  
leaving a soda  
and bag of peanuts on my tray.

As the plane lands  
I deposit the peanuts in my pocket--  
knowing that you like to use them  
to make the dog sit up and beg--  
and they clunk against my keys  
as I claim my baggage  
and call a cab.  
The taxi leaves the curb  
to zig zag the maze of traffic  
and road construction.  
A picture dangles from the rearview mirror--  
a little girl,  
patent leathered feet crossed.  
The taxi stops in front of the hotel,  
I pay the fare and double the tip  
before going to my room  
where pages become ink-blot smeared  
under the lamp light  
and I close my briefcase  
expecting your "All done, Daddy"  
to follow its snap  
but tonight the sound thuds  
to the hotel carpet.

## Brandy's First Day Of School

The wheelchair rattles in the trunk  
As we join the line of cars--  
Parents waving through windows  
Rolled down in the August heat,  
Children glancing over their shoulders  
Before taking the last step  
From sidewalk concrete  
To indoor tiles freshly waxed  
For the grand opening.  
I ask her if she has her pencils,  
Crayons, paper, glue--  
Knowing that she does,  
And I watch the wisps of her hair  
Tickle the corners of her eyes and mouth  
Until cars driving slowly past  
Remind me of other parents  
Looking for parking spaces.  
She grabs her bag of supplies  
And pushes her door open  
While I unfold her wheelchair  
Then lift her in,  
Feeling her warm legs touch the cool metal,  
And I hurry a kiss--  
She is already leaving,

Pushing her way among kids who stop to watch.  
A mother whispers to her son,  
"Don't point. Get to class,"  
And turns her head to avoid my eyes.  
I look back to the school--  
At the gaping doorway  
That has swallowed my daughter  
And now grins at me--  
Daring me to reach in and pull her back  
But I drive off imagining recess--  
The children jumping rope,  
Climbing the stairs of the slide,  
Pushing the merry-go-round in circles.

I arrive early to watch the doors  
As, at first a trickle, then a gush of children  
Pours down the steps  
And hits the waiting cars in waves.  
Finally I see the metal glimmer of her chair  
And hear her shouting goodbyes to other little girls.  
Then seeing me, she pushes faster  
As if to catch up with the words that fly ahead of her--  
She tells me she likes her teacher, Mrs. West,  
And practiced ABC's  
And knew them better than anyone else  
Except a girl named Kathy.

She tells me the kids thought her wheelchair  
Was neat or weird  
But Brandy laughs and tells me who is really weird--  
The boy who combs his hair straight up  
And sticks his gum under the desk.  
The highlight of her day--  
A game they played at recess--  
Bounce a ball off the wall  
And do things before catching it  
But she couldn't do all the things  
Like turn around or hop  
But they made up new things  
Like touch toes or count to ten  
And she did real good.  
She leans her head out the window  
As I put her chair in the trunk  
And pleads with me  
To let her bring the class hamster home some weekend  
And promises to take good care of it.  
I tell her of course she can  
And we drive away  
As the last few children  
Straggle into the heat,  
Dragging their book bags behind.

## To A Child Leaving Home

For the sake of identity, you said,  
you moved to an apartment across  
the river. Pulling on my arm, you lead  
me through its rooms, showing, with a toss  
of your hand, where furniture will go  
(when you get some). Finally I leave for home  
but find myself stopped by the river's flow.  
Imagining holding you fresh from my womb,  
I walk along the dark water's edge,  
talking, letting my words trip forth among  
mosquitos that swarm beyond the ledge--  
their humming, a droning funeral song.  
Beneath my toes water steals the sand;  
I step back from you to firmer land.

## At The Funeral Of A Drowned Son

The chair is cold to her back  
As the mumbling of the minister's words  
Seem to rise from the dark oak  
That covers the face  
Bloated to anonymity.  
Her fingernails dig into her knees  
As she strains to see  
Through the cracks of the casket  
And her lungs grow  
As she holds her breath,  
Holds the choking that shoves its way  
Up from her stomach  
To her throat,  
Then escapes  
As her nails break through her hose,  
And blood trickles down the run.

## The Process Of Melting

Eyes on the ceiling,

I rewatch the day--

my boy's face

sharp and cold,

like an ice sculpture,

skillfully laid out

for final display.

I try to relax--

the months of watching my child

shrivel as the tumor grew,

finally over.

But sleep won't come

as I remember the days before

the cancer--

The December when the sleet coated

the streets and he wanted

to take his first driving lesson,

Days of fishing on the frozen lake,

woolen green scarves across our faces,

The graduation reception

when he stood shy

in front of the camera,

my wife saying, "smile,"

punch bowl full of ice tinkling in the background.

I think perhaps a scotch

on the rocks

will help me sleep.

I drink it in the kitchen,

the street light

casting a yellow square

through the window and onto the table

across my hands.

Finally, glass empty of scotch,

I return to bed,

leaving the ice to melt slowly

in the silence behind me.

## Fool's Gold

Her children dressed for school in hand me downs,  
ate breakfast, and locked the door behind themselves  
while she cooked for businessmen in town,  
lifted fifty pound cases from the shelves,  
and cut chickens, yellow skin greasing her palms.  
She stood above the steam, stirring, sweating,  
dreaming of the future when in the calm  
of children raised, God would be letting  
her rest. Golden retirement would save  
her from the back pain that had the power  
to stop her bending at her husband's grave.  
Finally, retired, she has gained the hours  
spent watching reruns, waiting for kids to call  
and hanging black and white photos on the wall.

PART II:  
REMEMBRANCES

## A Warm Winter's Entertainment

Mom keeps saying she hopes it gets colder than--well, you know--so all the boxelder bugs will freeze and die. She goes through the house with a box of Puffs, grabbing the critters in tissue and scrunching them until she hears a snap and figures they're dead. Plenty of times they've lived and come crawling out of the wad of kleenex but she always catches them again. And everyday she climbs on the coffee table and cleans bugs out from around the light. I watch her take the fixture down and empty it into the trash and can't believe that every one of those bugs is dead on its back. I can't figure out why they flip over to die or if maybe they die on their feet then flip over. There was one on its feet one time but when I nudged it it moved, so it wasn't dead at all. I wanted to watch to see if it died on its feet but Mom came along with her Puffs. Mom seems to hate bugs worse now that my sister can crawl and likes to catch them. She holds them between her fingers and watches them wiggle awhile and just as Mom sees what she's about to do, it's too late and the bug's in her mouth. Then Mom yells at her to spit it out but she's too little to know better and just keeps chomping away. I wouldn't think they'd taste too good but I guess they must not be too bad or she wouldn't eat so many of them. The weatherman said it's going to get real cold soon, which made Mom happy. I've started collecting boxelders in jars under my bed just in case the weatherman is right for a change.

## Mid-Morning Call

Mother stutters my name

In an almost whisper over the phone

And doesn't answer my

"What's wrong?"

Repeated over mumbles that drone on

Until I drop the receiver

And leave the house with just my keys,

Cold blast of January

Rippling my blouse around my waist.

I find mother's door unlocked

And am in beside her.

Phone forgotten in her lap,

She is muttering only sounds.

I hold her,

Her forehead

Hard against my collarbone

As I feel the slowness of dialing for help.

At the hospital

She breathes deeply

As I watch her chest

Until my legs fall asleep

And I know she does not see

The light fixture she stares at

And does not recognize

The unfamiliarity of the mattress beneath her.

## The Feel Of Satin

1950

She stands next to the groom  
as the wind blows through  
the open doors of the church  
and her new shoes echo on the wooden floor  
as she shuffles to stand exact,  
following her mother's,  
"To your left, head up, you can get closer--  
you're married now, you know"  
and the sweat beads under her bangs  
as she straightens the flowing folds of white  
around her thighs, slender, strong  
from carrying buckets of feed  
and racing the farm dogs to the river.  
Curls made by her twirling finger  
fall on her cheek  
and the photographer's flash  
stills her shaking hands.

1960

Tripping in mom's shoes,  
I pull old hats from the drawers  
and tilt my head in front of the mirror.

In the closet's corner  
I find a box full of tissue padding  
that I scatter across the floor,  
revealing the material beneath.  
I let the gown trail behind me  
as I walk around the bed  
that has become the stage  
for my make believe ballroom.  
Mom finds me in the tangled dress  
and wraps herself in its softness,  
joining in the play,  
posing and giggling until suppertime  
when she folds the whiteness on the bed  
and places it back in its box.

1975

Again I feel the satin  
drape around me as cameras click  
and mom darts a wrinkled kleenex to her eyes,  
"How did I ever fit into that dress?"  
When it's time for the mother-daughter picture  
she puts on lipstick,  
"I cried so much  
I must look like I just got out of bed"  
but dad tells her she looks fine,

"Can't tell the bride from the mother."

She laughs,

"Except for this gray in my hair.

Maybe I should have colored it,"

and we smile for the flash.

1985

I sit on the floor

surrounded by her things---

clip-on earrings,

yellow afghan she'd crocheted

evenings during the news,

my report cards from kindergarten on,

postcards from the Hawaiian anniversary trip

she and dad took when I was twelve

and on which she'd written,

"We miss you" and "Be home soon,"

and her wedding gown

in its yellowing cardboard box.

My hand runs across the smoothness

of the folded dress

as I imagine her hand

laid to rest that morning

against satin lining.

## Thoughts On A Mother's Suicide:

## An Elegy For Our Mothers

--The note said, forgive my  
selfishness.

When I found you,  
After prying open the locked door,  
The smell of your blood in the heat  
Must have been like it was  
When I pulled in my first breath,  
Doctor syringing my nose,  
Me covered with the warm tricklings  
From the cuts that made room for my emergence.  
I found you in the dark  
(Quilts hung over the curtain rods  
On a sunny day),  
The splattering dimly clear.  
I resealed the door  
And dialed for help  
As images of you  
Drifted out of the wooden grain  
Of the coffee table.

---

The dullness in my eyes  
And my paleness told you

One of my headaches would soon melt me away  
And you'd start your ritual--  
Closing curtains,  
Turning off stereos and TV's,  
Placing the bucket beside my bed,  
Handing me kleenex  
As I vomited,  
And apologizing  
Because you couldn't do more.

---

The yipping ricocheted  
Between houses and across the snow  
Until you could not bear it.  
I watched your scarfed head  
Turning, looking, as you left your prints  
Trailing you.  
My breath on the window fogged you from sight  
As you rounded the Hillsabeck's house  
And I felt the silence as you returned  
And told me the Miller's dog  
Had wound itself around the clothesline pole.  
You left your boots by the door  
And the snow slid off of them,  
Leaving the tiles shining wet all day.

---

After the product of my womb  
Stilled and was scraped  
Out of my body  
And everyone else's thoughts,  
We went shopping  
To get me away from the nursery  
Stillborn next to my bedroom.  
We looked at shoes, kitchen appliances,  
And plants to hang from the porch.  
As we followed our metal cart  
Toward the checkout stand  
We passed a clearance display  
Of baby sleepers  
That I automatically fingered  
Until I remembered.  
I froze in the middle of the aisle,  
The pain wracking from my abdomen  
Up through my lungs and throat,  
As you waited beside me,  
Not pulling me away  
And not checking for stares.

-----

You talked me into the party  
I didn't want to throw.

You came early and we stacked ham sandwiches  
And cheese on crackers.  
You dusted and wiped mirrors  
Until the doorbell rang.  
When only half on the guest list appeared  
You sent me blushed looks,  
Ate more than you'd ever eaten before,  
And ordered Tupperware you already had.

---

My images of you splintered away  
As the police and ambulance arrived  
And our yard filled with neighbors  
And strangers driving by.  
Finally, your sheeted body  
Was wheeled through the door  
Through which you'd carried groceries  
And yelled out suppertime.  
I was left alone,  
Your last thoughts in my hands,  
Staring at the tracks  
The gurney left on the carpet.

## Burial At Sea

The limp body,  
Revealed by retreating waves,  
Contours the ragged rocks.  
I step over puddles  
And crevices in the slick black  
Until I am an arm's length  
From the pelican,  
Her long neck draping toward the sea,  
Waves lapping at her beak.  
Above us a pelican circles,  
Watching me touch the soft belly  
As water sprays over us,  
Washing my hair over my face,  
Burying the bird in white foam,  
And carrying her away.  
I head back to shore  
While the bird above me  
Searches the empty rocks.

## Mowaholic

My Dad likes to mow. No big deal but he doesn't just mow our yard-- he mows the whole block. It's like he just can't stand to see that line that's left at the edge--it invites him to mow just one more row and so it goes--row after row with the sweat running down his face and sun glancing off his bald spot (we watch the glare make its way back and forth). Dad's getting older and it's showing--not only on top of his head but also around his waist so Mom and I try to get him to rest--at least between yards. Mom finishes supper early but he'd rather eat it cold than interrupt his pace. We try to stall till almost sundown when it's not so hot but Dad doesn't let much get between him and his mowing so we usually just watch him push along until he's done. At one end he stops when the Reeds' fence halts his progress (if the gate was on the near side I suppose he'd go right through and keep on going). At the other end he stops at the Stoners' yard because Mr. Stoner won't be out-done and starts his yard when he sees Dad's a house away. Mom's been saving up her coupon refunds and I've been stashing my allowance away so next year for Christmas Dad can have a rider.

## Dad's Been Chasing Moles

. . . and he's caught one,  
squirming fur in his fingers,  
struggling to reach the safe earth.

Dad drops him in the burlap sack  
he's been carrying around for weeks  
for this occasion.

"No more mounds in my yard."

The sack bulges--  
hard work pays off.

"Now what?" Mom asks  
and Dad runs his hand over his tanned head,  
contemplates the bag held at arm's length.  
He returns from the garage  
with a bucket of water  
and holds the bag inches over it.

"Maybe I'll hit it with a hammer instead--  
a faster and painless method you know"  
but he returns with the bag  
still in motion at his side.

"Well, if I didn't hit it just right--  
I'll let it loose some place."

Over country roads  
he drives his custom van,  
dust swirling behind,

mole bouncing in the passenger's seat.

Passing fields of corn and beans—

"first plow and the mole would be minced,"

passing pastures of cows—

"might step in a mole hole and break a leg,"

passing yards of unknown people--

"no, wouldn't do that to strangers,"

passing mean farmer Dicky's yard—

"no, wouldn't do that to my mole."

Finally, pulling into a wooded patch,

he climbs out of his seat,

"boy, this ground is kind of rocky,

can moles dig in rocky ground?"

When Dad returns home

Mom waits for him at the front door

but he comes in the back,

empty bag in hand.

"Take care of it?" Mom asks,

catching a glimpse of movement in the yard.

"Sure did," Dad says on the way to the fridge,

"He'll be right at home now."

## Night Before The Funeral

I hear muted noises  
through the closed door  
and want to run  
into mom and dad's room  
to snuggle into their blankets,  
but their bed  
lies frozen blocks away  
and half of its warmth escapes.

I hope dad finds the quilt  
mom packed away  
last spring,  
like every spring,  
after a winter  
of being folded  
at the bottom of the bed  
to be pulled up  
on wind-chilled nights.

I hear the hanger slip  
and see the crumpled black,  
my morning's preparation,  
on the floor.

I ignore it  
and turn in the coldness

of the sheets  
to mom's side  
to hold the pillow tightly,  
thinking of her arms  
stretching through its case  
to enfold me  
in their flannel covered warmth.

## Remembrances At The Black Wall

1. Jiffy Pop popcorn  
packed into boxes  
with riddles  
(why did the man throw the clock  
out the window?)  
copied off of Dixie cups  
in my child scrawl  
and sent to a far away jungle  
where only Dad, mail, newscameras  
and my imagination could go.
  
2. Sitting in front of television--  
coloring, trying to stay  
between the lines,  
I hear  
Vietnam  
and look up to see  
the men run through the trees,  
the men crawl in the mud,  
the men carry away the bleeding men,  
the men lie waiting, not moving,  
the men lie dead.  
I look for their faces  
hoping not to see my Dad.

3. I frost the window with my breath  
as I watch the mailman leave  
brown and white envelopes  
that Mom shuffles through.  
There's no letter from Dad  
and Mom hurries to start supper,  
closing the kitchen door behind her.
4. I look for him in the crowd--  
gray haired women with overnight bags,  
young women with children  
dragged behind,  
men carrying bulging green bags.  
He rushes toward us,  
hugging Mom and lifting me  
in one arm.  
His shoulder feels rough on my cheek  
and his soap smell is new.
5. I wake up with his screams  
and the imaginary rat-tat-tat of bullets,  
moans of soldiers,  
buzz of planes.  
He yells, "Run, run,  
get the hell out of here."  
and I curl up tight,

fearing the face-painted-green  
soldier crouching in my closet  
and jungle vines creeping  
from under my bed.

I pull the blanket over my ears,  
watch the shadows,  
and pray for silence.

6. The chicken and noodles are ready  
so I go after Dad.  
I find him in the car,  
in the garage,  
and ask him where he's going.  
He orders me inside  
but I say I want to go with him  
and he looks at me  
then cries  
and shuts off the engine.

7. We watch the nurse unlock the door  
then step into the whiteness  
to face his back  
as he looks out the window  
with his yellowed eyes.  
I sit in the red leather chair beside him  
and comment on the changing colors of the leaves.  
I ask him if it's beautiful

and he shakes his head  
while describing the blood covered limbs  
he sees on the peaceful lawn.

## The Weekly Visit--Dad Talks To Me

Can't remember--  
where'd I park the Olds--  
the Hy-Vee lot  
or down the street  
by Chuck's hardware?  
And what's your name?  
Donald, you say?  
Yes. Named after me.  
Did someone steal my car?  
Left it out front when I went after--  
Did Matilda want milk?  
Your ma want milk?  
How am I supposed to get anything  
when someone's hiding my keys--  
Where's your mother, boy?  
I say--you deaf?  
Passed on?  
Hell no, I don't remember--  
Why are you lying to me, Harold?  
You got my keys, boy?  
What am I sitting in this wheelchair for?  
Untie this damn belt  
and let me out of here,

I got to get to work.

Where the hell's your mother?

If I don't get my breakfast soon

I'll be late for the job.

Can't get this damn seatbelt off--

Got to get out of here.

Don't have to work?

Something I got to do,

what was it--

got to get the doctor

you know

Matilda's ready to have that baby.

Help me find my Olds, mister,

I've got to get home.

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