Ways of traveling

Jamie L. Steckelberg

Iowa State University

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Ways of traveling

by

Jamie L. Steckelberg

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)

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1991
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THE SLEEVES OF HIS KIMONO
Three Movements

I know it wasn't feathers
on my friend David's arms,
but the sleeves of his kimono
spread white and indigo,
fanned down to the floor
boa-like, drafted up
towards his face
until all I saw
were feathers,
reaching out and wrapping
around and around
the face of my father,
my brother,
and my absent and imagined lover.

David and I ordered take-out,
steamed rice with bamboo shoots, cashews,
snow peas, fried
rice in white cartons.
I moved the faces
of those I love
to half-packed boxes,
and everyone cried over rice.
He fed bamboo
shoots to guinea pigs,
stroked their fur, mimicked
their squeals, while I painted
his toenails mauve or purple,
imagined eating live shoots
from his hand.

I can't stop seeing
feathers everywhere,
imagine his face
leaning down to mine
like the time my father didn't
take me to the movies,
my brother unhooked my fish,
or when she touched
me for the first time
with her eyes.
Stones

i.

I woke to see my brother Jeff, lying, lips closed against the smell of chrysanthemums and begonias, gash across his forehead, where his body broke through the windshield, yellowed fingernails, and a slight cut below his left eye. I waited for him to take out his gun and shoot darts at me, to throw fistfuls of gravel in my face, to scream my name and wrestle me to the floor, to tickle me until I gave under a burst of laughter.
I woke to see him,
as if he had never stopped wandering
through the house in the middle
of the night, opening the door
to the fridge, staring in,
with only the small white blue
light guiding his eyes. The same light
glinted late across the lake,
the tops of our bobbers, poles, the sides
of walleye, blue-gill, perch, minnows,
and the loon that dipped
its head and popped up again.
He and I took smooth black stones,
tested them against the flat of our palms,
winged them from thumb
and forefinger, watching the pools
create pools create pools, imagined
whales rising up and out.
I woke
to the push of flesh
against flesh, chin
against arm, to drift
even further, like the loon
as it ducks down into the cool
of water, along the edge
of seaweed and below,
to sink deeper and swim
with the catfish who creep
along the bottom of the lake,
to feel my way along the rock
ledges and drop-offs,
to push up, feel the air
release from my lungs, and to cry
out like the loon
for what it sees
or does not see.
On The Anniversary of My Brother's Death

Like misplacing a pair of old glasses,
the way I saw things changed. The spots
in my rear view mirror grew smaller; the colors
of rain merged and blurred; the grains
in the sidewalk disappeared. I squinted
and blinked much too often, replaced
the missing lenses with a new pair and frame.

Everything seems familiar again:
the way leaves lose water, gain color,
fall; the way clothes carry the breeze
on a mid-April afternoon, or the way
the breeze carries the clothes, fills
them up with old ghosts, prepares them for flight.
My father and I do not talk of death
even though once a year we tend
his son Jeff's grave,
note how carefully the grass is kept,
brush leaves, almost
annoyingly, away from the bronze
marker, pull the vase up steadily,
bury the rusted chain underneath,
test the strength of plastic
daisies against sudden bursts
and fits of Iowa breeze,
touch the letters of Jeff's name,
toe the earth.

My father and I do not talk of death.
So when I see his wrists tied
to the sides of the hospital bed,
flesh rubbed raw underneath,
I do not speak of how
the body shrivels on white sheets
as hands fidget with plastic tubes and cold aluminum
or the thin trickle of urine that trails across the newly polished floor
when my father stands up,
how strong his hands are,
how much I want to hold them.
When he married her, he did not guess

soft flabs of her flesh
would sag as she hung bedsheets
on the line, clothespin in her lips,
that he would sip pink lemonade
from a straw and watch her
and still have something left to say,
or miss years of tinker
toys and wonder bubbles, their love
becoming this at day's end:
his teeth in a cup next to the clock,
his lips gummed in a kiss
to her strange, known forehead.
First Meeting

On Farm Implement Day overalls gather in the Coyote Room at the Prairie Mound Inn in Vermillion, South Dakota to drink a few brews and talk of how green the metallic paint is this year, that things aren't like they used to be, and to stare at two women in a corner booth playing footsie.
She touches me with her eyes

and I spin dizzy
like the seed
of a maple tree,
helicopter whirl,
hear the whole earth sing.
I drink with the woman I love
and kneel, wholly trembling
before I take her name to my lips
(that which is unnameable)
with uplifted palms
and, open-mouthed,
receive the wafer,
rest it under my tongue,
and rise, weightless
before this light.
I want to sleep out with you in the cold
slow-cook chili and boil coffee
over a camp fire, take your hand
and walk up the trail past mushrooms,
live oaks, and mushroom-seekers,
know there is one place in this world
where two women can love
each other beyond the darkness
of forests or closed doors,
and to hold ourselves and each
other, claiming and reclaiming
what is ours.
I want history, she says

and I correct her, call
this herstory, as she pulls
me towards the curve of her arm,
brushes her hair
against the continent of my back,
slides her fingers
across the river of my belly,
wraps her legs
around the map of my body,
navigates her way past snags
and bumps of flesh,
nestles her head against my belly,
drinks from the ocean
that is mine and hers,
and lingers there,
like a doe
dipping its long neck
down to the water,
tasting the herstory
of the place for the first time.
The night the first bombs were launched against Iraq, we held each other in a world not knowing how long anything would last: this love or the sadness for people we had never met. We renamed the three-day frost on the trees of South Dakota "Australia" for where we wanted to go or "the earth's sorrow," ordered take-out pizza, listened to Miss Sarah Vaughan, woke after long afternoon naps and wondered at the trees: the way the frost clung, the way they held each other in sorrow or in love.
The Visitor

I pack the faces
of women I love
carefully in newsprint,
tie ribbons
around each one,
transfer them to the trunk
of my car
before my mother comes,
remember the women
she has been,
fill nail holes with toothpaste,
slide my hand over each hole
to touch the place
where each face has been.
WHAT THE LOON SEES
Every Tuesday she stocks the cans on the top shelf of the back porch, remembers the feel of the blue cloth book of stamps marked "rations for March of 1943--Woodbury County, Holly Law," the look on her father Holly's face as he handed them to the clerk at the A & P for meat, sugar, coffee, beans--stamp no. 18 saved in Mom's apron for work shoes. Hoarding was not the American way, especially when ketchup was worth thirty points and tins and waste fats paved munition parts. She remembers how she curtsied in her hand-me-down dress, smelled air raids all around, tasted the darkness that settled on the blue and gold stars in the windows of town, pushed against her father's chest the medals of an earlier war. And so every Tuesday she stocks the cans on the top
shelf in the back porch, listens to the news that day, wonders when it will stop,

if she will smell the blue cloth book again, crack black walnuts with her boot, watch the men jump off the Chicago Northwestern and loathe them as they stare at her mother's cherry pie, the soot on their faces by the window as flies hover, and she sees it happening again through the top shelf of her house overlooking the Missouri River at dusk when

she soaks the stubborn red paper off to give to the drive at her granddaughter's school, stores the tin in a paper bag high enough to reach the cans next to the stool while the men gather next to the tracks to share a bottle of Boonesfarm near a fire, the shadows of their backs shivering in a darkness that settles warm.
"'... my old man was assistant air raid warden on one block until the night he had one too many and started shooting his shotgun at the streetlights. He thought they was German planes.'" --Slats Grobnik in "Ribbons, Rallies, is that all" by Mike Royko

_SiouxCity Journal_ 12 Feb. 1991

They said he was like one of them crazy folks down South, hid clear in the Ozarks, who shot at anything or nothing. Others could have guessed as much would happen, called him a tippler, not surprised by his nightly stumbles home, the door slammed shut. Some held him up like a hero, theorized it was the times everyone felt: the stress of the white lights bouncing off the blue and gold stars in the windows of town, or the blare of the siren and the howl of neighborhood dogs in his ear, not to mention the boxing he'd gotten last week at Dad's Place,
or the hunger even after he ate
pork and beans, cold in the can,
and the craving for something more,
a single chocolate bar or a steaming
cup of coffee. Maybe
it had nothing to do
with the nip he took
from the flask strapped to his side
of warm brandy or cheap wine,
probably cheap wine, and everything to do
with the rage he held in
from his day job as a baggage man,
the stamps he exchanged for food. Maybe
he aimed for the electric lines
instead. Maybe he did see something
in the sky that night he pulled
the trigger, imagined parachutes
descending all around, the red
and gold in the air, the bodies
gliding, slipping, sliding,
brushing the high wires,
catching on telephone poles.
Clancy

i.

After supper and during walnut shelling, she waited for Clancy and the others to come from the other side of the tracks of the Chicago Northwestern, past Mr. Verlinden and his azalea bushes, up the cinder streets to watch the flies over Mom's pie on the cool window and to wait.

ii.

Clancy was not one of those who rode south and west on the Chicago Northwestern, clasped his bowl next to his overalls, insisted to the others in line he was temporarily displaced, waited at the corner of the A & P
or across the street from the Church
of the Nazarene for the ladies
to carry their groceries home.
But he always returned to Lemon Street late.
She took him blankets, let him sleep
out by the shed before Dad came home mornings.

iii.

There was too much light in the sky
that night to let him stay.
Across the way, white gloves trimmed
back azalea bushes--just far enough to see
Mrs. Menefee, flowers on her dress
still wrinkled from yesterday, bent
over, cracking walnuts. She sat back
of the walnut tree, watched the stars
as car after car drove north to the trees.
A six-engine swooped down low, caught
the top of the elm next door, sheared
it right off, just like summer
lightning, met Mr. Verlinden's blue
spruce and wisteria. She waited back
of the walnut tree. "Couldn't see no bodies, but we knew they was in there," said Clancy, his pockets full.
She did not understand when her sister fell as a child down the basement stairs, her head wedged between the second and last stair, what the doctors meant or even if they knew why years later she cried at night or what it meant. She only knew how long she saved for ten cent Saturday cinema double features, that her sister tagged along and screamed for candy--at least she thought she screamed for candy--and her arms ached from hauling her home in the wagon, or she got bawled out if she met her friends at Roe Dairy for chocolate milkshakes and talk of boys, that she stayed up and played gin rummy to keep her from crying in the dim light and almost clapped when they took her sister away and locked her up. Years later, with children of her own, she wakes to echoes of her sister's cries and rolls over.
Whiskers

My mother gathers light
around her face,
smoothes the sides
of her fingers across
her chin, feels the stiff,
white hairs, tugs and pulls
until the pinched skin between thumb
and forefinger pains her, calls
out to me to pluck
them one by one.
She thinks of things she never told her mother

How she spread the white sheet
under the ankle wide tree,
plucked plump berries,
carried them in the fold of her skirt,
and crawled on her stomach
under the dirt porch
to roll her own smokes,
corn silk in newsprint,
to sink mulberry juice in her mouth,
to wipe it across her feet,
to laugh at such delicacy.
Aunt Ollie

Her hands smelled like fish
the day they buried her,
from the years she packed
and canned mackerel, tuna,
cod in a small logging town
along the Oregon coast.
My mother watched them scrub
her flesh, carry her body in the front
porch, open the screen door.
It was like entering the next
door neighbor’s basement,
rows of canned sauerkraut and pickles
leaking their slow, strong smell,
filling the room.
Grandma taught me how to look for lumps

in the dough she rolled
out flat against the formica, floured
her palms and the dough, pinned it flat
for pie crust. I watched her thumb
the edges of the crust, brush
milk and sugar on top until the day
she could no longer raise her arms
high enough to reach the sugar
on the top shelf or put curlers
in her hair. They flattened her against cold
aluminum, kneaded their fingers over
her breasts to feel for lumps,
pushed the needle of blue dye
into her chest, packed her full with cotton.
Gooseberries

I remember Grandfather's hands,
leather crevices, tufts of mouse fur, reaching
for thin green skins, ribs, among low-limbed bushes,
how thorns prick flesh, surprised
rivulets of blood streak forearms,
creased thumbs dive in and out,
pull stems, caress pea-shaped pods
under sprays of liquid, the ache
in the spine and back of the tongue,
the pursed lips.
I avoid the vegetable aisle

steer my cart clear
of avocado, sprouts, the hose
that keeps lettuce alive
and the opposite shelf
of wine and beer.

I stand and stare
at the hourglass shape,
the light that shifts
from burgundy to red,
the glass that curves
around my hand.
I remember the way
my hand caressed the glass
in the bath at night,
the way the light emptied
from the glass, the way
the taste lingered
at the back of the throat,
the way it still lingers
as I pass the hose
that keeps lettuce alive.
The Woman Who Wears Lies

and black turtlenecks in the summer
does not uncover her arms to the light
breeze, her veins to the warmth,
says she has some type
of rare skin disease to strangers
she serves at the coffee shop, and at night
when she sleeps refuses her lover a glimpse
of what lies underneath, does not speak
of the tracks she has left behind.

This is for the woman who wears lies
and black turtlenecks in the summer,
the woman who cannot find a healthy vein,
shoots up crack through the remaining
blood vessels of her toes, cries at night
and holds the picture of her five children.

This is for the woman who wears lies
and black turtlenecks in the summer.
This is for the woman I hate,
for the woman I love,
for the woman I cannot save.
The day her mother walked out the door,

traced "I love you" with her fingertips
across her cheek, said she had work
at the cafe down the street, she did not imagine
she would eat her father's cold cheese
sandwiches for a week until the bread ran out
and he tired of her or the cheese,
or that he would leave her at his mother's door
and gun the engine with relief.
She knew she sometimes punched her brother
too hard in the arm, didn't always keep
her room clean, failed math class,
but she did not imagine
she would feel like the fish
she tried to keep alive.
She watched them poke their lips
at the gravel and flutter to the top,
their eyes glassy, their mouths wide open.
Foster Home #3

When she wakes, she hears breathing
beside her, sees morning shades form shapes
upon the walls and ceiling, hears
unfamiliar steps, and she does not know
if she should turn right or left
at the stair, if there is a stair,
if this is the room she grew up in,
or if she dreamed long enough
she could claim it as her own.
RELEASING THE SEEDS
Ritual

The day he got the call 
from Oklahoma, he picked 
the sandalwood cane 
with the rattlesnake 
on the handle, the one 
his grandfather gave 
him when he moved 
here, the one he keeps 
next to the window- 
sill/makeshift bookshelf 
and the spider he feeds 
flies to once a week.

He placed it on his bed 
between them as if 
it were a feather, covered 
his hands over hers, rubbed 
them over grains of wood, 
showed her how to make 
it sing, like the voices
of his ancestors who called
his grandfather home
and the voices of the living ones
who sang his favorite hymns.
She had never heard
feathers sing
before.

They walked the cane
to the only place in this city
where there are more
than ten trees,
waited for the sun
to fall in the West, the place
where his people were forced
to walk a century ago,
where all the dead rest,
and they buried it.
Northern Lights

Long summer evenings
my brother and I chased
their yellow lights for blocks
just to grasp them in our palms,
dump them in a glass jar
with tufts of grass and sticks,
watch them blink and wink.
He sang, "Momma had a baby
and her head popped off,"
detached the light
from their bodies, fixed
it to my finger like a ring.
I touch the place where you found me

where you left me, with an almost full box
of bran flakes, an oversized shirt,
and all these dishes to do
in the middle of the afternoon.
I pull back my sleeves,
test the warmth,
plunge my arms in the sink as the sleeves
fall back down at will, nag
my elbow, tease my wrist,
touch the dampness,
and I let them,
like the time you suddenly wrapped
your arms around me
and I forgot everything:
jasmine tea on the stove, soft notes
of jazz, the taste of incense,
and the neighbors who walked past
our window and saw two women
in the kitchen touching the dampness.
A solid pause fills the room

after reading poetry; the same caesura
settles on my lover's lips Saturdays.
I have learned to not take it personally.
Listen to talk of form, stanza
breaks, assonance, assurance, and the words
my lover didn't say. I mouth responses
in my mind, wonder how hair turns blue
with age, watch my body hover above
the words she forms across my thigh,
along my cheeks, upon my eyes.
The same caesura enters me, lines
my lips familiarly.
Don't take it personally.
Theft

When I said goodbye to you,
it was like putting something back
I found or took on a shelf in a grocery
store, not some small thing
like a candy bar
or a handful of grapes
but whole Vidalias, asparagus,
unwashed carrots,
quarts of Hagendaas
and Brach's chocolates,
everything my heart desired.
Pulling the Weeds

Some things in this world
are more stubborn than others, refuse
to die quietly:
fungus on the shower door,
dandelions,
one shoe by the side
of the highway,
the name of a past love half-formed
on my lips.

Sometimes this stubbornness offers
a kind of salvation,
like the common garden weed
with unknown roots
being pulled up, releasing
invisible seeds.
Love Poem #31

The tom licks his paws
as she drops each soft ball
in the green bucket on the top
shelf of the shed, waits to declare
his love for her, to tear
their hearts out with his claws,
to leave their warm fur
scattered like chicken feathers
around her feet.
I drove miles for worms

just to squirm them on my hook,
pull their insides through the length
of tipped wire, drop my line,
watch them come up clean
from bites, like the last time
I knelt before her,
cast out and reeled in,
reeled in and cast out.
She feeds the horse at Sunshine Cafe
copper, slides coin after coin into the slot,
rides higher and higher, squeezes
off another coin until legs grow braver
without stirrups, until the sides
of the horse swell and expand
like a sea monkey in water,
until it spits out copper, squishes loaves
of bread off shelves, smashes pies
and day-old doughnuts on the counter, crushes
waitresses and coffee cups, shatters glass
windows, stretches and shoots up to the stars.
She swallows water pills
to lose the fluid in her ankles,
around knuckles, where every swelling
begins near the ring she wears
and moves down to her knees,
where she hears the ache, the rain
before it falls beneath her shoulder
blades and drips across the space
behind her ear lobes.
She feels the weight lift off
her feet like sand bags, watches
herself drift across the walk,
as weightless as a husk.
Plumbing Repairs

The day after she left strombouli in the freezer,
I called him to fix this broken valve or seal.
He cupped his hands around the heart-shaped ball,
flushed water through tubes,
checked the seal,
replaced it with a black rubber ring,
guaranteed to last five years,
better than her warranty.
In Memory of Michael

I do not remember that night they followed you home, a small Midwest town, and waited outside like wild dogs circling around. And I do not remember if you cowered under the window remembering the man you love or how long you knelt there before you stood up and felt the years of the bullets impact your chest, your skull, honing through flesh to blood to bone. But I do remember how the earth received you, remembering echoes of former deaths, thousands of the Jewish faith stripped naked, their arms bearing a single pink triangle for us to remember that they were shot or gassed in heaps. And I do remember when your former lover woke to news of your death in the hometown newspaper somewhere between "Dear Abby" and your friend Maxine's cribbage hand, the best in years. The pink of dogwood reminds him of you, petals cupped in palms and all too soon gone.
Des Moines Airport
May 17, 1991

I greet the man
with the face of feathers
goodbye or hello
as the lights burn
yellow white, signal
me to stop and rest
or to leave the way I came
and be carried along
hallways filled
with familiar, unknown faces
and this light,
the same light
my brother was born
to this day years earlier.

It is then that I realize
I possess
nothing but my self
among this light,
the light I was born in,
the light I move
towards each day.
Along Backwater Roads

clear cut from loess hills
beside low-lying graves, sunken
and sometimes toppled stones, and pools
of water, past stretches
of Dead Man's Curve
where does step out on the road
and familiar ghosts or curls of smoke
rise along crooked fence posts lined
with truck tires and cut barbed wire,
the passing wave, the curt nod,
among fields and hills, hills and fields.