1988

The feather's edge (a collection of poems)

Carol A. Larkin
Iowa State University

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The feather's edge
(a collection of poems)

by

Carol Ann Larkin

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

Department: English
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For the Graduate College

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Ames, Iowa

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Exotic Breed

You Silkies, fluffy choir in white,
your rough voices
command sunrise. You strut inflated
costumes through yellowed fields. Proud
deceivers, feet disguised, creamy
spurs lost in ruffles, you scratch
ciphers in the dust,
puff yourselves like dandelions,
but winds never scatter you;
your scrawny centers
hold tight. Beneath your masks purpled
sinews cling to bone so fine and black
the weasel leaves without a taste. You
watch the hut through green-glass eyes.
envy the weathercock his dais.
Taking Root

This concave sky,
a kite,
anchors itself with cottonwood
to our prisoner house
of old whitewash and weather.
Our porch sanded round
by wind
ages where steps like broken front
teeth grin. Tall
weeds near the road winter grey,
parch lavender where angry
gods paint clouds
as whips to flay the sun.
We kneel, dig our toes
into the earth,
cup our hands before us to catch
strands of last light.
Recess

A fierce wind
And Marilyn and I learned to run
With dust
My hair flying in all directions
    seeming as long as I was tall
How slowly and with such effort
We ran out to the ball diamond
Then turned with the wind at our backs
Taking long strides toward the building
    where the timid waited for time to go inside
With the wind I was almost as swift as she
Though I never learned her arm and hand motions
And wondered why she ran with me
She loved horses
We were free
In blowing sand and crunching pea gravel
Until a bell rang and the whistle blew
And the man closed the classroom windows
To keep the papers neatly stacked
Roadside Rest

You were sleeping when the last of the moon lighted
The lake white neon
And outlined skeletal trees.
I didn't stop at Lemon,
Where the only open establishment was
A garrish, flashing saloon,
Entrance obscured by dusty pick-up trucks
Bearing large dogs, and by a group
Of paunchy dark men from the reservation.
It seemed an unwise stop for a mother and son.

After midnight, we pulled into the rutted oval,
Marked by a greyed sign,
Surrounded by tall trees,
Blacker silhouettes against a tarred sky.
We couldn't see the river, rustling crinoline
Beyond the headlight beams.

I pretended courage,
Walking to the outhouses of weathered wood
With crescent moons and gender signs.
I told you the history of ventilation moons
And remarked how ridiculous to differentiate
Between identical lack of plumbing.
I stood outside your youthful modesty,
Answering constant chattering questions—
Proof I waited at the door guarding you
From the thousand enemies unseen in shadow,
Unheard over the river,
Beyond the reach of our feeble flashlight,
In the darkness everywhere.

I told you to walk slowly, deliberately,
Watching for uneven ground or berms,
Hoping our bravado was convincing,
That the night would not think us vulnerable,
Would not unleash its forces.
You slept then, in the green
Reflection of the dashboard,
Glad for our speed, reassured
That the river and trees would not follow.
Sterling Collection

(Off the highway near Sterling, Colorado, is a small museum. It lies just 12 miles south-southwest of the approximate site of a vanished Cavalry Fort.)

The glass eyes of a four-point buck see
buffalo robe
spurs
and great great Aunt Monika's German Bible.

Upstairs a tatted lace wedding gown
with mutton-chop sleeves (circa 1885)
stands pinned to a wigless mannequin.
Black dropped-waist and pearls
adorn a low-bosomed dress form
awaiting bootleg martinis
beside the souzaphone.

A two-headed calf balds slowly under glass.

Outside the gate
past a rusted steam tractor
tuft of sky shine like temple domes
and distant pink rain at sunset
falls halfway to the ground.
Spiral Slide

Matchbox cars clatter their way down and around,
An indelicate landing, small depressions in pea gravel.
They are followed closely by one, then another
Of the smallish boys who sent them.
A city park welcomes us,
In a town not our own, where
The usual chores await,
The duties which each week I tell myself
I will complete before,
And which are left each week until the frenetic
Eve of Monday:
    the never-empty sink of dishes,
    the ever-crumb-covered floor,
    the overdue bills which arrive with a regularity
    I have never matched for the sending out.
A pilfered part of Sunday, in a park not far from home:
    unrestricted sunshine,
    the slide is fast,
    the swings are empty except for us.
Across dew-covered grass
Stands a sculpted turtle, very large,
And the skeleton in iron pipe of a locomotive,
Painted red, anchored in concrete.
Spit at the Moon

I should have named the rooster,
individualist who crowed noon,
launching vocal battles with neighboring coops.
Our half-breed, multi-colored and strong,
led his mob against the old
and weak, challenged even dust,
mounted his hens with fierce regularity.
Assured immortality,
he stared down all opponents, attacked
and cowed the dogs,
my sisters,
and finally me, until none of us
dared enter unarmed; we flung buckets
and wielded broomsticks,
and at last feared even to near the gate.
Papa, tired of our cowardice, our complaints
and refusals, stormed the yard
where wings raged; flapping,
upended,
brandished spurs aimed at Papa's eyes,
drew blood enough. A leather hand
caught one leg, imprisoned him,
gave instant verdict.
Papa's hatchet swung a clean cut as always,
left wattle undisturbed;
convulsing body thrust
neck first into a gunny sack,
burlap shrouded all but one claw and the longest
tail feather, more blue than black.
The fallen head,
jewelled profile with parted beak,
tried to swallow,
its tongue still waving.
One starless eye gleamed,
yolk-glossy with no speck of red.
You paraphrase your travels for me,
each day's adventures, the weather in Chicago,
how fine or funny the play, exactly,
bringing your mementos, postcards, ticket
stubs, your glossy book,
until it seems I went along.

Examining the reproductions, you enliven
the plates, renew the colors for me,
remembering aloud even the arched doorways,
the wonderful windows of the foyer.
When I notice how the artist concentrates
his energy on his subject's hands,
we go back through one page at a time, marveling
at his "Standing Femmes" with backlit
drapery, their too-tapered fingers,
short manicured nails buffed
to pink gloss,
leaned upon yet unsupportive.

I like the half-smirking redhead, resting
a flippant right hand on her hip
while the left disdainfully pinch-grips
an astor stem, dangling the blossom between thumb
and forefinger like someone's handkerchief
found already used.

We laugh at the two sisters smiling confidences,
touching each other's stays,
and conjure adventurous conquests for one,
timid imaginings for the second, so different,
yet preserved together in lace.

Studying the Admiral's cane, symbolic lion's
head obscured by nautical knuckles, we speak
of him pointing in his ornamental braids
and shining medals, facing South Southeast,
to India or Tai Pei.

You return again to your favorite—a room
all blues and greens, carefully draped
in wrinkled gauze. You say it looks like Paris,
and we fill the crystal decanters
with lilac water. But I turn
back to the poet, captured in his youth,
so much like you.

How strange that only his portrait lacks hands.
Kiki's Wish

I cannot see you
when I put my hands over my eyes;
I am invisible,
living behind closed fingers.
I touch the bark of your trees;
no roughness,
no splinters bruise me.
Your cold wind blows through,
past me, around
but not into me.
I can grow as tall as your late-sun shadow
or wide as your shallows,
shoals,
sandbars.
Blind, I am unafraid;
nothing is bigger than me.
I find small magic indoors:
the steam that hides within a kettle's spout
just before the whistle
and the dark between the latch and doorframe;
I rise on a bit of lint above a heat register,
slide the dust down an empty mirror,
rest on the polished-wood frame of your photograph.
Table Stakes

I

The children of sunshine and sepia
bronze in the garden;
their cheeks keep the faded pink
of handpainted photographs.

Children find play
watering neat hills of cucumbers,
squatting between zucchini's shade
and corn
rows of dust
golden, among flattened
barefoot imprints.

All summer, vegetable children proclaim
boats of matchsticks,
twigs,
wood splinters,
for races through the stalks,
over the dams,
forgetting proprietorship,
cheering rudderless floats,
changing launchpoints and command.
In the maze journey from pumpkin blossoms
to swiss chard
to the strawberry blockades,
we forgot whose raft led the way.

II
Billed caps live a season of infields,
conscious that no one keeps
stats for the cellar
after the series teams are drawn.

They could go home early,
drunk on tangerines.
Honing only hopes, they play for the game,
keep a running tally.

We oiled a glove for the miracle catch,
a line drive snared
after the winning run crossed the plate,
a competition without victory.

III
Ante up.
Secret lovers call even muslin
fibers opulence,
explore feather pillows,
venture the spaces between fingertips
and the heels of palms,
between calluses and smooth
slabs pressed into marble
in their hour's Wednesday wager
as prone statues with no traveling shadow
circling their dial,
timing short infinity.

Your grey iris spins wide;
persimmon shards of late afternoon
disappear into its black center.
I follow with a scrap of lace,
collateral always accepted,
where the rules don't quite apply.
On Crazy Horse

White sun dried the mountain
where dynamite excised granite
enlarged the space between the chief's arm
his horse's mane
the outstretched fingers he'll point
toward all his stolen lands.

Soundless billows shattered distant
stone to dust
gravel smoke drifted off east
softer than a shadow's latch
silent like your leaving.

I counted the seconds then
as between flash and thunder clap
ticking off stillness
until the blast rumbled far
loud
the ground shook.
Running

When wind blows out of the south
the door rattles;
she turns on the stairwell light
for a breeze moving
shadows through the screen,
carrying cricket conversation.

When slow cars turn the corner
headlights reflect
from her bureau mirror,
drive across her ceiling;

she parts the curtains,
dreams a distant forest with no road,
no mailbox,
wearing her hair loose,
squaw-braided.

Where she can't be found
she waits without expecting him.
Landscape

Damp mother, the earth,
Exposed muscle the color of fudge
Where hungry steel beasts like maggots
Chew and gouge,
Leave braided imprints
In torn flesh.

Her warm blood overpowers
The stench of their breath;
She waits, owns time, allied, embraced,
Bandages scars in green and violet,
Satin and velvet, woven
Of her body. Her eyeless
Progeny await the silent victory--
Rust.
Narrow Path Between Sidewalks

Unlike caribou
we travel opposite directions.

In decreed parallels
he treads two feet north
and I equidistance south of the rut.

If he wore a frock coat
and I hoops and lace pantalettes
he'd leave greater space
allowing me the lane.

But lace is out of style.

Our hands pose calm;
our eyes never meet.

The empty path curls its edges,
grinning at us both.
Kiki's Amulet

I never draw lines straight;
I'm glad my hair is curly.
Papa told me, "Here's a trick
you can do with any chicken. Just
draw a line in the dirt, as straight
as you can make, and put the beak
into the groove. Then trace the line
go a times. You must be quiet and slow
and if you do it right, she'll lay
at one end staring
down her own beak
forever
unless you move her, shake her, stand her up."

Then he showed me with the meanest old hen,
the one with the bald spot
near her tail, whose torn comb lays to one side,
the one who pecked
at old dog's snout the day I tried
to introduce them.

Someday, I'll build my house round;
I'll live where women
drape veils across their faces.
Stranger Still

Water blows in six directions
Though my compass points to just
Five of any thing
incidental
January snow ghosts scatter
Across the county roads
Seek the deep drifts and
Wrap themselves in trailing cloaks
Like silver spirits beneath
Crystal headstones mourning glories
Open toward the sun but
Cactus blooms at night
Where mice play and
Scorpions dance without musical fabric
Fibers wear thin on elbows where Patches would fit if
Things could be mended discarded
Dreams don't impact on eggshells
Only nothing important matters
Warp and Web

This couch isn't old;
it just never was good,
and it's grown tired
now I've given so many hours of my life to it.
The cover grows abrasive,
grumbling at my thighs,
my stiff knees,
my feet.

I sit always in the same position,
at one end.
These cushions, lumpy, refuse
to disintegrate, though I pick
the balls of wear,
hear synthetic snaps at their removal,
make a plaid puff to roll and squeeze.
Sometimes a fiber comes loose
from the weave;
it flies free as the half earthworm
not used on the hook,
but this string remains connected
to its fellows at one end.

I try to pull it out, but fail.
Its root is strong,
its meshing too complete.
In time the forgotten
strand frays, thins,
spreads,
and disappears among busy color,
unnoticed,
but still unattached
at one end.
Dorothea

Silk kite against a storm
her wizard flies a dragon
finds the secret bridge to wild strawberries
plays a mandolin.
When his voice has ragged edges it has a soft middle.
She brings orange tea from her mountain
shares sassafras with his bears
wears black tights under blue denim.
She serves white wine in china mugs and whiskey
without ice
in a brown plaid room of suede and flannel
floor pillows near a stone hearth.
In autumn he chooses dormant lilacs to bloom
red-lavender spring.
He builds her a gazebo on the old hill.
She loves him
because he listens to her
trusts him because he forgets
what it was she said.
Connections

I

Flannel sleeves lumped up around his elbows
sparse untrimmed beard and moustache
sparkle silver strands.
Samuel lost his roan dog in the Rockies
sold his Percherons in Pennsylvania
married Alicia because she was sleek and gentle
wearing pearls
starched linen collars and lace.
She protected her skin from wind and sun
but Samuel remembers the sting of a blizzard
longs for axe calluses on his hands.

II

For atmosphere
the proprietor bought a sagging Conestoga
of bleached wood resting on leather springs
its ribs exposed and spoked wheels rimmed in iron.
He removed the tongue for convenience
placed it on his polished parquet
reflected by upturned stemware.
Squat laminate tables bear fluted amber globes
chimneys for unnecessary candles
while John Lennon's "Imagine" emanates
from everywhere and nowhere
drifting through muted fluorescence.
Flat ochre walls wear yoke and harness
spurs and lariat
or surrender to greyed tintypes
enlarged to blur detail
of clapboard homestead
and Montana cattledrive.
Beside the doors rusty milk cans
hold white ginger jars with pleated burlap shades.

III
Last century's brick edifice
stands massive and unbowed
with tall blinded windows and heavy sills
joined by a blue-grey acrylic breezeway
to its new appendage west
a tall obelisk of white concrete
flat-roofed and efficient
incongruent
like a prosthetic arm.
Old porticos survey the courtyard
sheltered by ancient mulberries.
IV

Lilies tire waiting
in their translucent jade vase still
vivid sunset orange
slumped over their own proud stamens
where black dust faded brown
pollinating only shiny mahoghany.
Frail petals wither and fall
never reattach.
California Out of Season

A Saturday forever of sky droops down, blots out distance, but makes the world bigger. Close damp hangs on trees. A man's skin seeps sweat. Everything echoes slow, muffled and alive.

Thorn closes his mind, except to the porch, dripping walnut trees, rain coming soft and heavy like lead plumb-weights, with no warning. Thunder rumbles far off like cannon in the great war; no telling where this battle is either.

He remembers barracks, but they run together with bunkhouses, flophouses, group shelters for men with no place. He lights a cigarette, takes another swallow--this is all he ever wanted--staying partly full of whiskey, taking his time, not sorry for being old, not feeling regrets.
With eyes closed he sees the shiny faces,
small men in hats run wooden ladders
up old trees,
going after fat French prunes near Gilroy,
getting two dollars a box.
Guitars play at night for fleshy
women in white blouses, skirts ruffled,
too many colors to name,
the smell of tortillas frying.

He crawled on all fours
in the flat Sacramento Delta through dust
deep enough to lose a fist in.
Smuggled-in Braceros working fast,
threw tomatoes into weathered crates.
At night it was the Army again,
loading into slatted flat-beds,
being trucked to barracks,
trying to wash the silt that filters
through clothes and seeps into skin.

He remembers a little girl, working
a field near the Consumnes, one of the locals
making summer money with her brothers.
She was too young to want a man yet,
just sunny and friendly, trusting
the foreman to watch. She never worked
in the high heat; locals always go home at noon.
She smiled at him, listened when he talked,
watched how fast he could pick.
After two weeks the whole crew moved
to another farm.

Thorn listens to walnuts pelt the ground,
figures maybe it was tomatoes
taught him how leaving
is easier
than being left.
March Snow

Through forged white darkness by memory or luck,
the boy Jacob finds his way from the back porch
to this isolated bubble.
His fear forgotten in the familiar silence
of straw and dung, he waits,
the barn the only space with air to breathe.

Here where the sulfur match lights easily,
he shakes and primes the lantern
for feeble yellow light where oxygen is free,
not frozen in clumps that stick to bark and barnboard
or stuffed as soft insulation
between sash and sill.

He comes to watch, and help if he can:
the last lamb of the season, perhaps the ewe's
last season of lambs. She circles herself,
strains forward kneeling, stands, her liturgy
memorized, repeated.
Jacob smells the birth, like rich damp deep
in the woods, old moss long covered by decaying leaves,
when first disturbed by running feet.

He watches the still body drop to lie on soft hay,
knows the tough membrane like dried egg white,
and the shouted whispers of the ewe's tongue.
She grinds the cord between sharp back teeth, severing, separating, like harvesting daffodils, cutting stem from bulb.

The new ram, one day emperor of the flock, his coat tight tiny curls with longer fibers of gold, must stand alone on reluctant, disobedient legs, unwilling stilts which buckle, hold him balanced, then sprawl him forward to struggle up again.

Within his scrotum coils the future, striated inward spirals, like the horns with which his ancestors kept rule. Unaided, he must find the swollen udder, the leather-tough teat.

Jacob nestles in the bales, leans back, in the rafters counts new webs; this year's upstairs tenants crouch in crevices safe from drafts, await warm days of insect smorgasbords. The tackroom corner holds the axe handle, tip still wound in creosote rags, set aflame each late summer when Jacob climbs to burn out the squatters.

Every Spring, blizzard or no, new vagabonds set up housekeeping: the same knot-hole,
joist, truss mount. Jacob rolls
an old saddle blanket for a pillow,
lets the spiders say amen.
Early Season

A big bass drum, the sky stretched
tight above clouds, rattles our windows;
the loft trembles, afraid of falling,
threatened by this sky-quaking.

Hailstones, white-lace marbles, hurl down,
raise welts in puddles, crack
the redwood-slice path from the tool shed,
jump like popcorn beetles
up from the lawn.

Our three-fingered walnut tree guards
the nest where seven chicks slowly
tap their way to sight. But one loses
heart, gives up too soon, so we pluck him
from his cut-away side car,
lift him to fresh woodshavings beneath
a bare incandescent bulb for warmth,
supply water from an eyedropper, supporting
his head in careful fingers.

But Spring comes violently with wind-
thundered beats, wrenched and twisted skies;
it falls soaking and steam-heavy.
Down our lane muddied water rushes
toward tiny culverts, cliff-mounted
as if to drain the sea,
and the chick dies for lack
of strife, of single-minded obsession,
for so gentle an entrance.
Blind Summer Blues

Hot night drips down the porch steps
slow and easy,
singing sweat and stiff-jointed sway.
Willie stoops when he walks,
shaking his head,
shoulders suspended
inside a tropical jacket with satin lapels.
He sings WangDangDoodle,
murmurs to the crack of arthritic knees
and graveled ankles,
looking for a cedar-lined box or sand-lot ballgame,
or a train ticket for him to dream a place to go.

Willie doesn't need a dream
when Charlie's stage gives him rhythmic introduction.
All the drowsy neighbors lounging,
leaning,
feeling below their bellies
where the ache gets too heavy for aspirin
or jelly glasses full of water,
how morning folks over the hill harvest
mustard greens,
believing in magic and calling it the lottery.
Watch fireflies chase the red-hot procreation
beyond a dim circle of yellow
buglight seeping past the screendoor
over the meadow
all night long.
Crack a beer open, maybe
swat a fly with a wet dishtowel
after the kitchen empties out some.

Willie smiles over sad-song harmony
with too much wine.
It's there like a pot of spoiled beans
or the smell of burned broccoli hanging
suspended in the hall,
wishing for a fan,
a cool blowing from some storybook ocean.

Storm breaks before moonrise.
Shifting grey pool of sky springs bottomless,
beginning like a two-day beard scouring
some virgin cheek, swearing it won't hurt,
coming lighting-and-thunder cool.
It rains slicked down hair silk-skinned,
cotton-shirt smooth.
Shiny wet newborn air speaks soft
after the storm, baptized clean and free,
not asking questions.
Performance

He waits for the opening curtain
unaware
polished and suited
in third row affluence near the center aisle.
Gwen's eyes having touched him avert
pretending deep interest in others
surrounded by the high coiffures and white ties
of people she will never know
enough to envy.

Across the broad lobby at intermission
her gaze drifts past him
through the plastic wine glass
and under the place where a chandelier
would be if this were an old theatre
but her eyes return
checking
before roaming to faces without names.

At the final notes and word
the players bow to earned applause—
a standing ovation.
She watches his shoulders
remembers his scent in safety looking down
while others cheer the stage.

Near the doors her eyes catch him walking out and away. The road he took reflects in her mirror.
Saying Goodbye

Jenna remembers her sailor
dressing before dawn on a June Tuesday.
Avoiding the dock, she drove
to Point Loma's historic lighthouse.
Steel-grey warships without sails
cut through the channel,
his carrier the queen bee
surrounded by cruisers and destroyer-drones
with guns mounted aft,
flags flapping sun-white reflection.
She watched from the kelly-green
slats of parkbench,
staring at the inlet long
after the swarm's wake had beached.

Now her professor leaves her,
on a day when dark clouds make
their creek-bed woodland
a jungle glistening in mist.
The rain-emptied campground, errant splashes
and rhythm of windshield wipers soothe her.
Stopping near a stone shelterhouse, she stands
in the doorless frame absorbing puddle
sounds on roof timbers, watching
drops fall all around,
free of gutter guidance.
Call Home

Micah wants to be essential
to the woman called Melisande,
wants her longing to outstrip his mortality,
exist for all of time.
He is the lighthouse where paint never cracks,
where breakers never shatter rock,
where a tidal wave baptism strengthens
as it submerges.

He says the words he hopes to hear,
wishes for power and prowess, unsatiated
need from her, a crescendo,
a silent cymballic crash. Always
when he says he loves her,
she answers "I know," explaining
how believing herself loved is more
significant, more difficult
than mirroring his phrase-feelings.

He touch-teases and intemperately tries,
hoping her violence—undisciplined
response—matches his own, where neither graph
nor meter informs him.
Perhaps she only apes his rhythms, ignores
his inaudible screams and whispered
endearments. He wonders why she is careful
with him, never counting
the money until he has gone.
Compensation

Daddy begins it, tells Mama to put on the kettles.
Today the slaughter. He sharpens
the hatchet, readies sacks to hold
spurting pullets, to keep them from dithering
around the yard headless,
like Aunt Elvira chasing moths.

Mama exchanges pots on the flame
while Daddy's hands splay two pairs of limp
claws, dunk the bodies
into the boil. Steam forms
moist across his forehead, gathers to fall
from the tip
of the nose he turns from wet-feather stench.
Then quick those nailless hands scorch
free the loosed feathers. His knife severs
scaled legs at the knee—the yellowed
feet he shovels under with the heads.

Mama's fingers grip entrails, count
and separate gizzards, lungs, livers, hearts,
break backs and force joints
with snapped precision, or leave a young
cockerel whole to bake, an old
hen to stew.

Dressed for Sunday, the butter-basted carcass
glimmers naked brown on Great
Grandma's platter, but spins no spells,
ever whorls a vortex,
burning through the redwood slab, screeching,
carrying the carving fork, the knives
and melamine, igniting the candles,
ever sucks them all to the place
where beaks and talons wait.
Three miles from my road stands the old house--pristine, isolated--mounted on a chiseled afterthought of knoll, amid a field glassy green as old bottles for poisons. Nothing else remains--not outhouse, chicken shed, herb garden, clothes-line--just a house, unbowed. An antique-insulator sky outlines stormy clapboard--perfectly square, abandoned, unapproachable. The track trails off unconnected into fenceline, a shadow where wild prairie grows short, the ground too hard for even tough roots, where seasons of buckboard or Model T travels to a Mercantile scarred and pounded clay, as mud or dust, to stoneware.

If I were braver, I'd force the door, peep through windows where tatted lace dressed the parlor and yellow-paper shades wore crocheted silk around wood pulls. No father tests the banisters, repairs the roof where careful hardwood floors upstairs
swell, turn brackish, in a mother's room
from puddles of rain and melt. No one draws
shades closed to morning sun for preservation
of velvet dyes and wallpaper fleur-de-lis.
Boiling onions and Christmas
cinnamon-persimmon cakes leach
from kitchen walls, but no one oils
panels or dusts wainscoting.

I only want the attic, musty
resting place of strangers' memories,
where the dormer watches the highway,
to lie on iron bedsprings with an artfully faded
quilt at night,
as lookout, to wait for a feeble cyclops
headlight, for escape.
Requiem

Clomping in the heavy boots of dairymen,
Buzz pounds toward the coops.
The flock already flings itself
with muffled thuds against the fence,
his charges relying on him to treat their mites
with coal oil swabs, to throw their millet
and pour their water. Wound-wire
hinges sag; bent-nail latch loosens
with their pressure on the gate.
The dogs lead him from the back door.
Just beyond the patio, the ducks notice
and follow in parade, misbehaved
cousins in line for spills, for scraps,
for mischief.

Every morning Barney, the google-eyed one,
sidles close, nips my brother's heels,
while the dogs pad limber to the barn.
Buzz kicks free, shoos, scolds
over his shoulder.

One day he stops, shakes a warning
finger at the offending foul, the bird
indignant at the end of forward progress,
the about-face of the heels. Three times
my brother wheels to alert the imp,
three times resumes his journey.

The fourth attempted pinch
harvests Barney a head dipped
in his own pond. Sputtering, eyes strangled
in disbelief, appalled at the prospect,
his left no time for repentence.
Once, twice, thrice.

Brother Buzz, spouting the righteous
fury of a Plymouth preacher defeating the devil,
drowned our drake on the fourth dunk,
then stumped to the henhouse and the chores.
Lawnmower History

San Francisco, 1954.
Grandfather in Saturday straw hat
precision trims his perfect square of lawn,
sign of ordered existence,
civilized cultivation of dichondra,
pushes his scissors-clacking cutter
in neatly joined strips like seams
up and back
side to side twice
each way, snapping grass off
at the required height like a new soldier's
haircut, uniform,
no stragglers,
no crabgrass or dandelion deserters allowed,
demarkation between sidewalk and porch.

Father worships green in rural heat,
plants rye, the hardiest stock,
but incorporates rugged individualists
regardless of origin,
in an uneven quarter-acre around the house.
He scatters dung and compost by shovelsful,
sprinkles water daily,
mows thistle, vetch,
red clover, democratically.
Every other week, he winds
cord around the spindle to pull
a cantankerous spark,
travels over dirt and intermittent growth
in overlapping, ever smaller
perimeters
maneuvering
avoiding shrapnel, rocks thrown by spinning
blades too near the drive.

Des Moines, 1980.
Jaimie, the Deere Centaur rides daily,
here, across the street, next door,
wears black ear muffs for music,
head bobbing to the beat.
A bulky beast, he avoids the chimney
in a sweeping arc,
leaves thick tufts of green a summer
tall by August,
in the ice cream cone triangles.
Vibrating jet engines block my Beethoven,
keep him unaware of omissions, errors;
his closed eyes focus on rubberized drums.
Losing Track

He found a frequency playing old stuff—peaceful
Forties Big Band sounds and sentimental-
Blues-y USO favorites
(nice music from when it was OK to be nice).
Out the windshield yellow beamed
Straight up from the middle of the sky,
A foreign searchlight, mounted on a frozen cloud.
The gold arc appeared at the base
Of the beam just past Webster City, Iowa
While Benny Goodman and Harry James played a duet.
The moon, once clear of the clouds, was an orange
Gem at the hilt of a luminous broadsword, point
Aimed at Swaledale, or Dobbs—a light which cast
No shadow.
Glenn Miller's "String of Pearls" ended
In a voice droning about an eighty
Percent chance of snow by morning.
Above Clear Lake a grey-white mass
Done in Pointilism, without edges, diffused.
The radio was thumping static, like temple
Drums, or a thousand soldiers' hearts.
the chaplain smiles too many teeth
shining polished stones
in rows like landscaped walls
he offers consolation over oleanders
and sweet-smelling marigold dust
but his house needs paint
where the weathered clapboards crack
in wind and salt-sprayed lies

perhaps he should have built stucco

his lips part to reveal
a tongue like the brass clapper
from a mission bell ringing off key
too late the congregation notices
they are alone in another county
the words are foreign to them
the chaplain tour-guide offers
directions to a row of worn
folding chairs at a way-station
but the agency has already changed
his address
and none of the travelers find instructions
no mileage scale on the map
no compass point marked north
Maybe she always was crazy.

It's hard to tell, when we're all busy lookin' for work,
for a meal,
for a place to sleep.

I guess maybe some of us envied her.

I mean, here she was, takin' that damn chicken so serious, takin' it with her everywhere,
eatin' eggs for breakfast like la-de-da,
thinkin' it made her different.

She talked to that skinny half-naked bird, but never to any of us,
at least not after K.Z. died.

She spent hours "chatting with Goldie," that's what she called it, all about some far-off home where there was "poultry,"
goin' on about how to raise 'em proper, how to butcher 'em, acted all the time like it mattered--
just dumb damn chickens was all it was.
Oh, we could see how some full-of'emself cops
was like fancy roosters,
and K.Z. said he recollected some ladies
that was like nice fat hens, wearin' feathers,
cluckin' objections when he made 'em.
We laughed at Maggie keepin' a Post Office Box.
Hell, she never got mail.
And far's I know, Goldie never got none neither.
Flight

Every night Carlotta climbs into the molten ebony sky of Easter fizzy-tablet tints far above minarets and pink pagodas from ramparts' wall walks to gun sites between rounded towers

She soars high with arms outstretched a seagull crucifix swooping low over the courtyard where Spanish lace and jewel-combed women dance with men in tall turbans and white robes.

She is SheherazadeCleopatraAphrodite-- a twelve-years-old goddess-- swirling above peppered-oak foothills holding suns below horizons following thermals along Rockies and dipping over silent dunes.

But day's peach-fuzzy glimmer heavies her air. She glides unstoppable toward black dawn silhouettes of weather vane roosters readying.
he said a message from GOD, it was, and GOD would strike
him dead without the help of faithful followers
floundering at sea
below his marbeled tower of mortared money-stone.
the believers below beckoned with ropes and harpoons sent
in feeble aid.
he should flee until they could come up with something but
the GOD sees all and disallows escape. he heard a whispered
mashed potato and pebbles-in-mouth response that
GOD would grant a small time delay, slightly bending
this granite omnipotent non-justice, never in-justice,
just supra-space.
when the chimes rang time in, the faithful believing followers
gathered in the
multitude, massed on the hill above Joshua Tree Lone Point
waiting, wanting;
he the white robe-clad perched upon the bicep of an oak
to join great good GOD as
foretold in whispered works, a hazy dream of substance
subsisting, lacking funding for queries into life's
metallurgy
where the copper bush was set aflame but did not burn; he
said it was a speed limit sign post
past all understanding.
in thunder flashing fashioned brilliantly deaf bolts
    of pure poison power, all were taken,
sucked up by Satan's rings spinning and thrown to a folded
    forthright universal firmament forever,
but he remains, unexpectedly untouched under oak leaves
    unburnished; unnoticed GOD loves the faithful.
his baptized biblette
tells how crossed CHrist called forth HI's famous FATHER
    the one and all undivided to forgive them, unaware
as they were; and HE forgave and
forsook not them. CHrist still pinioned-nailed-waiting
    overlooks the mounds;
the center of Isosceles subsumes the wicked waspish general
    of CHristian soldiers, who alone is left behind.
Fortune Teller

Focus on the porcelain
the artisan's gift in minutiae
with background hazy--
a picture thrust among images like a postcard
out of place on the rack.

Was it in the year of the dragon
or the ox?

The places change where the cliff
falls off into the sea--
roadbed and bridge wear away.

Ancient ones knew even stone castles decay
left behind
in the alcoves below sunset.

The tea cup will not remember a far time
when shaggy beasts return on the mesa.

Overturn the leaves
face down in a saucer.

Turn them round three times left.
Listen with eyes closed for the canyon to speak.
Carol A. Larkin was born Carol Ann Spohr, in Palo Alto, California, December 31, 1949. Though a fifth generation native Californian, she has lived in Rochester, New York; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Omaha, Nebraska, prior to moving to Iowa in 1979. She received both her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees in English from Iowa State University. She currently lives in Huxley, Iowa, with her two sons, Beau and Jonathan, but hopes to move to the Northwest to teach and to continue her writing.