The color of broken summers: poems

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The color of broken summers: poems

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Language, sound, and erotic sensuous play with meaning and imagery have helped me to center my poetry in the midst of woman, nature and the divine. My background as a visual artist and my love for rich, juicy oil paint, as well as my sense of interconnection with all living and inanimate creation, spill onto the page and throughout this body of work.
The color of broken summers: poems

by

R. Christine Kieltyka

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Debra Marquart

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Ames, Iowa
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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

R. Christine Kieltyka

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor
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For the Major Program

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For the Graduate College
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The Jewel

There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds.

James Wright
BORROWED AND BURROWING: AN INTRODUCTION

Outside my bedroom window the Rose of Sharon was silver in the moonlight, even though, at its heart, I knew it was salmon pink. I wanted to write that color, that humid softness of a summer night, into being. I was thirteen, and I started to paint and to keep a journal. By my twenties I read lyric poetry out loud to my children -- and the tales of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkein; I read their music and savored it. I rolled the words on my tongue. At thirty I gathered my passion for the soil, and all that it grows, into canvases that glowed life and green under artificial lights in galleries, and by thirty-five, I wrote poetry and knew that I had fallen in love.

Language, sound, erotic sensuous play with meaning and imagery: I had found IT, or if not IT, then a path that helped me to touch, however slightly, the magic of the divine. I could imagine Her kissing me as I placed my cheek against a warm boulder on a sunny afternoon, and I could feel Her energy pulse up through my horse and into my body until I could come on sweet-earth joy alone.

This sense of interconnection with all living and inanimate creation around me spills into my poetry and is nourished by such poets as Susan Griffin and W. S. Merwin. Gary Snyder's saunas and James Wright's Minnesota ponies nudge my frost-covered trees and dialogue with nights that cup the stars. These are my mentors, the "nature poets" -- from Pattiann Rogers and Mary Oliver to William Heyen and Sheryl St. Germain -- the people who look into the trees and earth and swamps and who know that we carry the earth within us, that our feet are soil, that tallow from our bones, burns the candles. We do not make the light: we are the light -- and the dark, and the ugly, and the deformed, and the brilliance of poppies flaming in the field. Their orange smudges our fingernails, spreads
unexpectedly on our sheets, and drips petals into the sink.

On a still afternoon I can hear the aspens speak to their neighbors. The oaks hold their own counsel, but sometimes, when I stay silent on a bench, my pen in hand, words will drop, will form, and suddenly I am privy to their very thoughts. I am awed by their solidness, their astute-ness — how they observe us and wonder about our busyness, our mobility, how the younger ones want to lift up and run, only for a bit, before they sink their roots — deep — into veins, and arteries, and the flesh that supports their life.

This then is the difference between humans and trees; they know, without any doubts, Who their source is. They know, calmly and with infinite patience, that their lives are collections of every single person and creature that has walked this earth, that their leaves cover our vulnerable places. This is their secret, but it only stays a secret because we — as a culture — do not listen, and why I can hear these voices, why I not only see the colors of the forest floor, but I touch them, smell them, and eat them, I do not really know, except that I want to. There is an ache that makes me want to burrow under the tomato vines, to press their fruit to my breasts, to feel the juice run from my elbows. This, on a sky-baked Iowa afternoon, is an experience of the divine; this is the music I choose to sing, to let spill from my body.

My pen holds purple sticky liquid from the plum and the pear and the cherry and chartreuse from the ice-green iris and autumn-gilded hedge apples. It holds the urine from horse barns, the giggles from two year old sons, and the tears of separation from Wisconsin woods. It holds the smoothness of my lover’s body and his fine brown hair.

My words are not my own. They are only borrowed and rearranged, carefully, with fullness of attention at their fragile, yet iron-like threads, the ones that bind me to my mother and my aunts and my best friends and their gardens and the old-fashioned roses that
fall over the trellis in my own front yard. When I brush their glossy leaves, all other poets hush and wait, hold their breath to see which of their words I will take, which I will use and which I will leave out. They chuckle at my wit, and cringe at my awkwardness, but they hold me in their cradle of words and interconnections, and we read each other's books and say "yes, yes, 'there is this cave/ in the air behind my body . . . ' "
What he carries with him

He was birthed here, in the shadow of birches
on a perfect October day. He looked like
a root-bound cabbage.
We had to pull tendrils from his face.

On the north side of the hill
the house sits in the lee of something larger.
From the front porch we see the moon rise,
or the reflected clouds of the sunset,
no longer vivid but skeletal, sleek.
Wisps of pale wings, opalescent, streaky with golds
and green, alizarin crimson, lavender gray.
The air holds pine scent, still hot from the sun.
Scarlet runner beans swing from the trellises,
trail over astilbe and tarragon and mint.

He didn’t even cry that day. He’s cried seldom since.
Yet from the beginning, he had no fear of the night.
I would find him sitting on the floor,
starlight touching his hands and face, listening.
He could hear them singing, he said,
the singing he thought we all could hear,
below his windows where they danced.
They knew he was there, he said.
And they weren’t afraid either.

He’s over six feet tall now. He walks the hills,
remembers the trolls and Grandfather oak.
When he leaves Wisconsin, he grieves,
tugs at his roots.
Chlorophyll stains his hair.
Almost time for bed

Softly,
I move into your presence

The shadow of the black wall trembles,
fire crackles, pine dust sighs under my feet.

A door clangs from the shower house --
glowing cast iron, rocks, steam, laughter, and sweat.

Tensions drip from the toes. Quiet --
behind eyelids, and under skin.

Quiet melds through my cells
to an easy calm, a hush

that supports the night
cups the coals.
Those blue bottles in the window

Remember how we vowed
to drink nothing but Cobalt Blue--
the water so pure would make our bodies
last forever and for each other.
We’d walk in Minnesota sunsets,
in those lakes the Hamm’s bear
made so Romantic.
We’d have our rustic house,
write like Gary Snyder,
sit in the sauna, and laugh.
But the woodstove turned to gas,
the composting toilet
wasn’t classy enough for guests
and our big commercial venture,
the Bed-and-Breakfast-in-the-Country,
had spiders, and Great Horned owls
made rabbits scream
in the night.

What does it matter now
except the nights are lonely
and I miss propping my feet
in that yawning oven
pouring out tea
I had harvested
with my own hands.
I miss the trees,
the woodsmoke,
the drying plants,
the chickens in the yard.

Well, maybe with cats and dogs
and a neat yard in town
I’ll have time to listen and to write.
Maybe I’ll grow mint in window boxes.
Maybe I’ll just miss the seventies.
Divorce

*You don’t know who you are until you know where you are.*

Wendell Berry

Spring mounts in the old white house.
Water shoulders its way
through cracks in the basement,
mud cakes the floor, boots
are shoved against the wall.
Tall pewter pitchers cradle
dogwood branches and lilac boughs.

The quince plants are seven years old, barely
a foot high, and fill my hands with chartreuse fruit.
It took six years to wrap and steady the wounded willow
that towers over the house. Nick’s placenta nourishes
the climbing tree and the whurr
of ruffed grouse and pheasant squawks
sound just beyond the hostas.

I could have gone to the city and got my Ph. D.

Windows send back red, pink, and coral --
geraniums getting the jump on crocus bulbs
not yet purple and gold. Tiny breezes sneak
through aging sills and assault my senses
with buds, mud, and sweet turned earth.

The plum is budding.
The kids are gone.
The spade stands ready.
It might as well be my thumbs.
I walk on glass the color of broken summers.
sun motes dance on somebody new

glass bones shatter into schisms
fibula tibia ruby and amethyst slivers
hang by thin gilded wire bob
over curly and brown-haired heads
shift ever so gently moved by the breeze
from an open door throw prisms
onto faces plates the eight-foot table
in a windowed room flutter color
onto people I've never seen

but my bones built these walls
  my spine carried the boards
  my sweat oiled the floors

pretty left-over splinters
swing on a chain spill orange
lemon maroon and plum
sun motes dance removed
randomly scatter onto somebody new
love dismissed

crinkles into hardware
silver handles prod and dig
in soil and soul prune hard edges
dip into the meat stand
bleeding next to the shed.
Sometimes love doesn’t know it’s dead
crawls with slippery fingers whimper
like broken plants in broken pots
dreams in the sun
pulls itself to rainy spots and sucks
up moss to line its empty space pieces
reinstate themselves into a different shape,
generous easeful colors wait for the slightest
breath of gentle to fill the gaping ache
Seventeen years of bread

The house sits next to a south-facing field,
open on one side to rows of trees: plums, cherries, and apples.
Currants and quince grow close to the ground.
Lilacs scent the air through open windows
as bread rises in the sun.
Blossoms float on to the porch roof,
the sidewalk, the window-sills.
Two times a week, the bread gets molded
into French, rye, or six-grain loaves.

The endless cycles of lilacs
have blessed the yeast and the even strokes
First their delicate spring leaves, then the rich full purple,
finally their solid green shield from the road
As the sun would stay longer
the Granny Smith and the Delicious
would show softly burgeoning fruit
and the jays were the persistent pickers
of the last dripping blackberries

With the first chill of autumn
the wood stove would send blue-gray smoke
to russet colored oaks, flaming sumac

But this year, the windows are clouded
squashy fruit lies on the walk
the bread bowl waits on the table
and the opposite of apples
is empty.
The Reading

"Let me see your hands," she said.

"Oh, you came into this world with a strong spiritual drive. Look at those long, slender fingers.

And your use-hand now. Hmm. Let's see. You have worked hard and been practical. What happened?"

What happened, indeed. Poppies, red wine, and C. S. Lewis. Dragons in the garden and waxy ranunculus heads that bounce their burning yellow near tin-roofed sheds.

But the dreams -- organic earth, solar heat, hard work 100,000 bees, a man with silver hair, a head band, and so much anger -- the dreams began to jangle and screech like splintered tin and that streaky gold light that is me leaks from jagged holes I have pounded in my skin.

"Look to your hands, my dear," her voice a whispered breath. "An early grave. Don't lose yourself."
Summer Rain

Sometimes young love doesn’t end.
It just gets played out for one
like thunder rumbling over the corn,
and lightning that sweats,
or skin that gets stretched from over-long days.
Darkness and thunder.
Pink heat streaks like varicose veins,
sidewalks steam, trees whisper rice paper words.
Lawn furniture hulks together and windows slam shut.
Except by the crazy, the grieving, and the empty
who stand unmoving under the eaves,
thirsting for the warm, gentle rain.
For cool washed faces. And no dreams.
Only thunder.
Only the rain.
like Chinese maples

black against the light the newly divorced
play games in the dark wait for the moon
to lift them to dreams cream and maroon
splinter through cracks in the glass
make fingers drip with blood when it’s only
memories of another’s dark hair and smooth
veined hands the bed and reading lamp showing
empty white sheets walls where thrusting forms
have no hope to press through only to slip past
to trickle under until there is another wet
no-where land of exhaustion
and sometimes even peace
She waits beside the bench

Sodden leaves sprinkle the path
branches of orange linger near her hand.
The rain has ceased -- silver still eases
off the maples melts on her skin
she remembers -- oh, the beat so slow
she knows who is walking
who moves to a rhythm no longer her's
the bark, the jagged white of birch
women meet her void walk smile
a hedge toward gainliness itself a balance,
a laugh in the face of a world slid sideways
The stomp of the woods mars her perfect
peace perfect peace She stares
into the trees sees herself march
forward grasp a rod in her hand,
even her gait rebound with short
sharp steps lies the shawl
of earth snug around her shoulders,
falls quiet as the night.
Walking the dog

There are little bits of crud
stuck to my shoes
but I don’t stop the walk,
I grind them down, the dog
stops at every bush,
my plastic bag is in hand.
Basset Hounds are a peculiar breed.
All they’ve got is their looks.
Big feet, sad eyes, and tiny souls.
Still when they love, they do.

So why does it feel so sad,
to stand out here
in the pink glow of light,
to pull all these threads together,
and still not have a carpet.

The maples, the ginkgoes,
the walnuts lying green
effervescent in the street.
Half-ripe apples interest him
only for a moment.
Kids ask to pet him, and I say,
“Well, why not, it may give him focus.”

I saw a movie once
where a giant’s finger
twirled our miniscule planet,
sent it spinning, a green marble
pulsing into space.
Maybe there aren’t any threads,
or maybe they are driven
into a tangled mess with
an indeterminate beginning
and a chopped off end,
like fingers in canning jars.
I'm old enough
to remember
the stories,
why we'll never
eat factory canned corn.

Another thread.
If I pull it, the porch swing might
fall and the bug lights
explode,
and then where
will I walk my dog
on hot Iowa nights.
Crystal parakeets on her clothes line

The sun is lemon green
    reflects the brightness of your eyes
She hears your clear water-like notes
How fragile you are
    like the bones in a woman’s hand

Caressing the clothes, hanging the sheets
pulling them toward her on a windy day
She feels your presence
She knows you would sit on her shoulder
    nest on her pillow
if only it didn’t rain
if she could leave the windows open
if you weren’t just a visitor
    and if she had time to listen.
Touching the pulse

If you refuse to meet my eyes,
the tenuous thread that binds us will snap
and one part of the tapestry will begin to fray,
but if you break bread, share a cup of tea,
walk in my garden, we'll watch new strands
gather strength, see the hummingbirds come,
watch the bergamot dance in the sun.
Those translucent webs that call us back
to who we are will lead us to cousins
and cool beer and feet on the front porch rail
where we smell a raku sky, listen to cicada chant,
slap mosquitoes, and tug at our shirts in the skin-wet night.
Even in cities there is a tree or a patch of grass
or a fresh-worked bed of soil where naked feet
can play, where toes can stroke the broken clumps of earth,
feel the cool travel in through our arches, up through the heel
into the ankle, on to the knee. It bubbles and presses to the groin
where it finally breaks into a sweat that bursts
like fresh-pressed milk from the pores of our breasts.
When something is good

the breath is complete
a sigh holding nothing back
the fragrance of juicy oils, pungent turp
the color yellow in daffodils
or skin against skin, wet and gentle
the softness of satin sheets
and a feather tick
spring, earth-scented caresses
sun and wind stroking my hair
a son’s blue eyes and laughter
replete, in a moment’s stillness
One o’clock on a fair day

Air through the kitchen window
A softness from the north -- and warmth
Iris leaves and hyacinth,
the wish for strawberry bloom
    and red-berried tongues
Pale cold suns and blue ice moons
    have taken their turns
Black earth is tilled, lilacs swell.
Winter onions and tender nettles
    settle into ceramic bowls.
Chives and green and crocus colors.
All from a dreaming breath,
    deeply inhaled
over suds-covered blue and white china.
Windows

Geranium warmth
    orange coral and white-starred centers.
Impatiens blooms hot-pink
    blue-purple, and magenta.
March's water-filled skies
    lend teasing promises --
    hours, maybe a day, of sweet,
    of sun, of jacket-less shoulders,
    and wishes for toes in the soil.
Early morning sun baths for the cats,
    tea on the front stoop.
Basking, dreaming thoughts of love and home.
Early spring pulls you in, holds you for a moment,
    and moves on toward April rain.
A Sonnet for the Sisters

Sister frogs, green spring leaves on the sycamores
sing B. B. King and Stevie Ray Vaughn
tease Sapphire's Uppity Blues Women
to weave their dance into beckoning hands

move like amphibian climbers, magenta and red
that swim in slippery-warm green moons of thought
juicy beams that slide with ease from orange to lemon
sing from bayous to hills to gloss blue lakes.

Shaggy she-wolves gather spirits, purple and slender,
linger in twilight edges, caress sulking oaks and cypress
savor Beefeaters, lime, and cross-harp frenzy,
expel sweet crescents of breath

Sisters, women, and wolves
green spring frogs, sing in the sycamorees
If I am the song,
who does the humming?
I feel her movement
even when cold blue stones
sit at my center.
Black half-notes lean
against lavender sharps.
Piano keys rattle in my chest.
I look for comfort
and cradle my face
next to my lover’s breast.
But in the morning
by a window
or out on the porch
I can hear the sun rise
slide, careen
over the edge of the earth.
She laughs at me then
and squeezes music from the corn,
presses a half-held chorus
of light to my skin
She watches as it drips to my toes
splays into circles
and sparks lilies into gold.
My mother, my aunts

Women without
squishy oils or
prismacolor pencils
sculpted
in glorious
creative
color
walk-in-your-art
gardens.
Spider-wort and zinnias,
cool Love-in-a-Mist,
lilies -- showy Moonlight, Regal white,
roadside Turbans-and-at-risk,
freckled carmine, or azure green.
Wild orange whimsy,
joyful and melancholy purple,
iris, coneflower, or fragile coral bells.
The hum of hot-flash summer,
toes tangled with earth,
backs aching to the spade,
clumps and humps of soil.
Earth, woman, and art --
a shimmering legacy
blessed by sweat in the sun.
The gardener

her hair bound in a blue cotton cloth,
rests her body against the gate.
She knows each fragrance,
the caress of soil on her sandaled feet:
yet she hesitates. Strange spots
have appeared on her hands,
her scent seems narcissus thin, her eyes
see pebbles between the roots.
Her husband Jim, the children, seem far away,
on the fringe and not quite real.
Each tiny nicotiana, each hollyhock stalk,
burns on her retina, singes her mind.
Half-forgotten thoughts of breakfast, of laundry,
her lover's smooth skin meld with her hair
into streamers of sun, pollen, golden
flickering like afternoon stars. Her body sways,
she can hear the corn growing.
She can hear the corn growing.
She bends to the task but her fingers blur,
become one with the earth.
Her toes change to mold,
her legs turn to oak.
Passion Flowers

I sleep under glass
roses tumble over trellises
onto the roof
drip through the panes
into my hands

Caught in bed, half in dream
tea-cup size roses
mauve and cream
soaked with scent
spill puddles onto my skin

Gallicas, Damask,
Rugosa's thorns and castles,
Rosamundi and Floribunda
protrude cascade compete
over-extend themselves
near peasant rue, rosemary,
peppermint and sage.

Oh, Common Moss
and Baron Prevost, your
tight held buttons
tempt me to touch, to lust,
to want to twirl
like a mahogany Tuscan superb
spread open those places
hidden
where fuzzy gold filaments lay
fragile on heart-dark purple

Corals, peaches, almost black
wrinkled leaves of apple-green
I count you by spray,
by bud,
by petals
shed on my pillow,
by whispers in my ears,
lascivious sharers of my bed.
Saying blue but meaning yellow

The blue melts the air
freshens the clothes on the line
drips into my windows
plays hopscotch with dust motes
over my quilt. Even the paintings
adjust themselves to the tenor of
evening songs sung at mid-day
when crows hide in the shade
and robins have agendas to fill
and the neighbor’s dog is too hot to bark.
Blue fills our pores, robs our skin of dry
and milks our very patience
till it cries for snow,
or at least for a breath of fall.
altars of sun and earth

You are my brown-haired girl, he said, my little princess as we drove on gravel country roads. We sang, “How much is that doggy in the window?” His voice tinny but it didn’t matter. “Daddy the moon is yellow, almost orange.” But no, “There’s no such thing as an orange moon.” Still the coziness of the cab, the darkness of the night, and that hot August moon stay cradled in my memory. “My brown-eyed Susan,” Aunt Mabel would say, and my sister, her butter-ball. I envied that sweet-name, the way it was said. Yet, for me, love was red kool-aid and pork roast, sometimes even apple pie and wasn’t my name sake those burning yellow and brown flowers out by the road. She picked them and put them in vases, altars of sun and earth. I didn’t even know they were “Black-eyed Susans” till I was twenty.
Do you remember last summer?
The river reflecting green, the mosquitoes,
the sweaty unkempt bed.
I can't help but smile --
the dog by the foot of the bed
you and your long white shirt
your arm, so light across my belly
And what is so good anyway
except the murmur in my throat
and the curve of my back into your body,
my cheek on your arm, goldenrod and phlox
scenting the heavy air, your breath on my neck --
almost asleep.
This time of year

The sycamore snuggles its musk to itself
    crumbles and crouches on my walk.
The crab apple across the street is naked
    except for its tight held
        clusters of red.
Rain has greened the grass
    into one last sensuous soaking
        carpet for gold-turned leaves.
I change the sheets on the bed,
    run the dryer,
        fluff up the feather-tick,
            and curl up with my cats.
Rain beats silver fists on my windows
    and stained glass throws cranberry
        swathes and slits of lime
            onto butter-soft walls
Thunder rumbles and I relish its music,
    the death of summer,
        the quieting of the earth.
What then is death
    but one oak leaf, letting itself go
        to whirl on the edge of a storm?
The Seasons Breathe

When you bathe in the moon it turns your mind, makes prisms play finger tunes, runs rhymes across the floor spills speckled runes

that slide beneath the door.

Waning moons can pull you in take you places you don’t want to go. Wearing a hat won’t help and sliding into dark corners only makes the silver

sly and patient, liquid quick

It waits, hidden between the notes, for an unsuspected breath a half-held sigh, caught out of sequence, and there you are in someone else’s room where shadows clack, and corn rustles and birthings of animal dreams stir ancient steps

She will have her way after all. Some must come to bless the harvest.
the return

cacophony of crows
against a Mars-black sky
they pick and they twist --
a cool marble
    of sly intelligence
    watches,
remarks raucously
    on those who cannot fly.
Turn around

My mother said
when the season ends
we gather the rose hips
and remove the dead soldiers.
We lop off heads of ruby bergamot
and purple, flat-headed yellow tansey,
and spindly mellow phlox,
commit them as one to compost.
Peony bushes get leveled,
our shears are ruthless.
We carry their bodies
in hand-made tumbrels
leave their seeds to molder in the dark
We dump, we prod, we shovel under
gray and green, tangled decay:
Warm in winter’s sun.
Prairie grasses no longer green
are brittle bits of glass
champagne next to chocolate soil

Caution is not what I feel
Sweet desperate surprise is what I need

Wind tears at my hair
lashes water from my eyes

A strange becoming wildness
seizes me, pulls me deeper, closer

the shriek and moan of invisible spirits
somersault, spin past stunted trees

Serviceberry red glitters next to gray
seed pods and bergamot heads

Insolent sloughs, puffed and crushed,
gold glints off deer stamped beds

Turns and laughter and shot gun shells
From death to joy in seconds
Yearning is a form of prayer

Latticed opening into the trees,
framed by wisteria.
Silver in the moon’s faint glow.
Lace-like beams
waver in that silent space
fall fragmented,
scented petals of light.
I want to know such a place.
I want to feel the greens slide past my face.
To breathe

On a small wood bridge
you stop to listen
to see the bubbles that form
around gray shining rocks
You sit cross-legged on the boards
and look up to the woods
A childhood scripture flickers at the edge:
I will look up, unto the hills
from whence cometh my help.
The sun is warm, the earth is fresh
and brown with scent,
leaf decay and water.
You know the bark on the trees
would quiver
at your touch.
Solstice

I am moving quietly through this season.
My spirit fills over and spills sometimes
but I let it come as it will.

The river, the train, the cat licking herself on the bed.
My house in the woods, the tumbled flowers
and falling leaves and the scents of autumn.

Oh, sweet goddess, who cannot believe
that there is something more?
You fill us and spill us and pull us apart.

We fall crumpled to the earth to die,
and the bits and pieces coalesce
to become something new, something blest.
Water Monks

They sit, three of them, by the tree.
Heads bowed over their drawn-up knees,
White and gray garments drift, whisper
quiet, seemingly separate
from the breaking waves at their feet.
They do not speak or gesture with their arms.
Sometimes when I look, they are gone
or are only shadows, echoes
of robes, and beads, and silence,
an almost forgotten chant I can barely hear.
November 1

The veil has torn,
split by the holiness
of the night.

She shifts her bulk, stretches
and hunkers down.
Wind howls and burps,
she pulls herself tight
ready for the frost, the cold
hard steps across the stubbled corn.
She shudders, but she knows the rules.
So she waits
for the white wool
of winter to cover her open places
to mitten her fragile fingers.

The constancy of nature is the only god
who makes any sense.
the old religion

altars tremble as we caress our bones
milk-white feathers tumble over thyme
fingers flutter, linger lovingly,
as they smooth a place for the tiny figure

in the woods, on tables, desktops,
or on elongated rocks
summer pussy-toes, dusty miller, mint
sandalwood sticks, a fractured marble
amethyst

a child's clay pot, necklace beads
an icon of Gaia, the Virgin,
and a toothless Crone
we worship, we wait,
we live with visions
and vanity mirrors,
bottles and potions
the real and the dream,
offerings in fragmented symbols
home and healing and hands of women
earth-stained, dark, and strong
But can we swallow the stars?

to Jane Evershed

Only if we spin on our axis
    and let the dew fall in our ears
and eat peaches till the juice
    runs between our breasts

Then we can lie on our backs
    beneath the cup of the moon
our hair spread on the down of a goose
our mouths open to receive great
    globular drops
that pitch and twirl in an orange mist
and skim our flesh
    and laugh
as they trickle into our eyes.
luminous lunar wish

I dance with abandon
on your silver dish twirl me
who am standing alone
not on top chocolate soil
slide viscerally deep into sand
spun with sugar
only to leap spin onto my back
laugh show my teeth tease
silence so large it shrieks
shrouds me mine eyes that blink
drink the velvet blue, become new
with night longing for innocence
betrayed but tossed limp
like silk howling to hug --
am rocked in your lap
Moonrise and rivers

water spirit dancing purple
next to dawn
you pull small red streaks
from me, move me to music
press mud to my lips
stars to my eyes.
tomorrow is now.
you test the cusp
of beginning tears,
lace yearnings
to pungent sorrow,
offer aromatic feathers
that stick to my tongue.
You push me to the river
only to fly like cobalt wings
into jewels of eerie light.
The moon and chocolate

Soft silver wrappers
snuggle onto my quilt
lie next to gibbous-ridden
squares of Swiss-melt velvet
ready for my tongue

Can there be a pool
where my hair floats free
warm and mint-flavored or orange?
Wherever I stand
rivulets of rich dark chocolate
drip from my elbows
puddle around my feet
My nipples are milk,
purple and sweet.
Double Chocolate

I wonder if I planted this chocolate square
If a chocolate tree -- or chocolate bush --
would appear
with glossy cocoa leaves to lick
and berries to crunch between my teeth
Would there be Swiss-milk shade
and a sampler of scent
a place of truffled light
where I could hide
in the quiet of a smooth-drawn circle
Where I could purr and wait
content, curled up like a cat.
Waxing Full

I love that rough old cart
How we hammered that sucker together
My brother and I
The pony would snort, blow smoke from his nose,
Toss his mane in the mist and shrug under a winter coat
But sometimes
When the woman in the sickle turns on her side
I strap in wolves who laugh and let fly
Saliva in great moon-yellow gobs
and we careen over castrated soil
Crazy and wild, moss like bouquets flung into my hair.
On these dark woods nights
we pant as one by the cookstove fire.
Those Quilts  
\textit{to Susan Shie}

Those mad and golden moonbeams and  
"Remember to wear a hat in the full of the moon."
But what of the silver light that sneaks  
across my bed and seeks to bathe my flesh  
and drip onto velvet, cambric, denim squares  
that float with colored words.  
Moon-pull like god-pull.  
Do the lustrous sparkles stay in our blood  
to only wake when our tide meets yours?  
Lulled by the stories of our mothers, I crawl deeper  
Pull moon-streams and satin around my body  
into a cave where my toes make choices  
and my cheekbones emerge at will.
A love poem

Hi. Is Callie there?

Nah, she's out walking.

Walking? The wind is shrieking out there, there's thunder and lightning cracking off all the hills.

Yeah. Well, you know Callie. If it gets too bad, she'll just grab on and ride it out.

Huh?

Ah, you know. She'll just turn into a rain cloud, or something, and drip all over us.

Uh, like, I'm not real sure what you are talking about.

Oh, I thought you knew her. She's one of those fringe people, y'know. She doesn't talk to trees, they talk to her. She goes for walks with raccoons, and deer stop over for a chat. Sorta rings my bell.

Oh, well. I think maybe I, uh, sorta got a wrong number.

Hmmm. Yeah, well, I'm not too surprised.
But there has to be a window
in this room of my own.
A view where I can stretch
and leap and run to greet the sky.
Yes, a place where light falls through
where words dance and crack
Not just androgynous
But Self
At home on the sofa, feet in the air.
Graffiti Bones

like women’s words
fall into cracks of granite
slip into chips that shift
for people to walk upon
except once in a while
someone picks one up
and smiles
allows it to form letters
signs, notes that we’ve hummed
under our breasts
With infinite care, we collect them,
shake them, pray with half-closed eyes,
and turn them loose.

A stream washes through the caves
of mothers and daughters
For a moment we remember
the strength we gained in darkness
when we spoke an ancient tongue.
Dear Aunt Gladys,

Boy, is it frosty today. Cold might be a better word. Opening day, you know. Sounds like a war. Is it power they need, or food. I have a friend who hunts religiously. Now that's a good word. They only eat what he provides. Can't say raccoon would thrill me too much unless it's that one that's raiding my chickens. But I'm not too excited with beef or sausage either. I had a grilled tofu sandwich at the Co-op the other day. Not as good as eggs, I'd say.

Is November as ornery in town as it is out here? Face-slapping bitter, but somehow, satisfying. To stay out long enough to smile, like wine, it's so clear and fresh it hurts.

I fixed pumpkin pie for supper. You remember how I hate to cook, but I couldn't resist the color. Deep, red-orange. Heirloom seeds from Leslie. They sit on every step, fill every window and door. I brought all my flowers in too. Looks like a jungle. Tubs of sultana, begonias, and green striped ribbon grass.

Dear Gladys, how is your poor cat? Her ears okay by now? Lacey's fine, that sweet dignity still lets her move with grace. Take care. Say "Hi" to the boys and my favorite uncle.
II

So Aunt Gladys,

I know I wrote last week, but you know how life for a parent centers around the kids. Does it work that way with you? Surely not, with both your kids grown and kids of their own. Still I wanted to tell you about the wreathes and ask if I should send you one. Dominic helped prune the grapes, and oh boy, do we have vines. We are adding greenery from the pines we sell. The customer gets to choose the size of his tree and we get the leavings. Then we add thin iridescent purple and pink ribbons and candles for Advent. These we sell, or keep to place on the sideboard or the wheel hung over the table. I just read that this is actually an old Druidic custom. Nice the way our customs blend with myths. And whether we are Christians or pagans, we love our rituals. My old friend Carol says we need to savor every taste, even unpleasant ones. I think she means that we need to recognize each moment, then to let it go.

Did you like the article I sent you? Several friends are making non-traditional quilts. It requires a skill, and patience, that I know I do not have. You do though. Your red and white school house hangs on the east wall. It’s cheerful and reminds me of you.

I look forward to your letters.

III

Dear Aunt Gladys,

Our first real snow today. The kids are ecstatic. Skis and cocoa and Meeting by the stove. We couldn’t get out on the road. It was fun having worship here. Listening to the kettle hum and looking out the windows to the bones of the trees on the hills, stark against the white of earth and sky. And the silence, only a whisper of wind occasionally.
I did have some disturbing thought during the quiet time though. My sculpture looked so fine against the outdoor white, elegant and simple. I thought, “I’m good at that, at my art and at my writing, even my cooking at times. But how about mothering? I lose it. I yell. I’m only human but do I want that for my kids -- an excuse for losing it? I think there is something more. An integrity that leads to peace, a gentility within. I guess that what I want from life, to live honestly, to be gentle, and to have enough of a sense of humor to not take myself so, so seriously.

IV

Dear Aunt,

Okay, I have to tell you the latest saga of Nobbie. I heard him barking, all saggy ears and mournful longing, his big feet planted and worried. I called to him but he wouldn’t come. So I had to go and find him. And it was easy. There he was, five feet from the house and stymied. Those renegade chickens had taken the porch and he was afraid to approach them. Lordy, I love that dog. I rescued him and brushed him off. He’s toasting by the fire now. Maybe “steaming” is more like it.

A little junco flew into the window yesterday. I held him in my hands till he flew away, but did you ever wonder why they are called snowbirds. They are so tiny and fragile. The kids and I realized that they always arrive about three days before the snow. Did you get the wreathie yet?

V

Dear Aunt Gladys,

Remember the Christmases at your farm? Every other year we came to your house. It seemed so tiny in the Iowa fields, smooth hills, only a few trees. You always fixed fudge, and I was a spoiled brat. I always wanted more. And oranges -- how they glowed in our hands on Christmas Day. Were things really simple then? You worked so hard.
Your hands were red from the cold and the wet of the barn
and the cows and the wind. Yet you led me gently
to stand by the old cave to watch the sky turn rose and gold.
I had never seen the ball of sun burst over the edge
of the earth before. That’s thirty years ago, my aunt, and it’s still brand new.
I know today I’d be labeled an environmentalist, but I learned
so much from you. “Look to the earth, and it shall teach thee,” you said.
Is that Quaker wisdom, or simply wisdom?

So Christmas is almost here. We make our gifts as usual,
have singing and baking be our fun, the rituals that give meaning
to the day, to the season. We’ve already thanked the tree, the woods,
and the earth. We’ve come a long way, I think, in beginning
to recognize the source, the interconnections.

VI

So Aunt Gladys,

What did Uncle Cecil say about the glads?
Do you think it will work?
A scientific experiment with lots of soil
and sun according to Nick. Then maybe
they will bloom like tulips in those dark days
of early spring. We’ll see. March’s water-filled skies
seem far away just now when my Christmas cactus
is still hanging full and heavy, orange and old-fashioned.
I suppose your’s came from the one Grandma had too?
Down through Mom, of course. And the amaryllis
holds two perfect apricot flowers. Gifts from three
generations.

Tell me about your plants. I like to picture where they
are and which are blooming. How about that yellow bromeliad?
I want to hear how the greenhouse looks too.

VII

Dear Aunt Gladys,

This is one of those heavy letters.
I have a question I want to share.
I don’t mean to be unduly cynical, but do you think that life could be a huge cosmic joke?

I mean I had to stop my car and chase a deer from the road. It’s the fawn of the next-door neighbor, another of the great-white-hunters. And Joshua got a scholarship to his least favorite college. And I hate working with technology, machinery, noise, and busyness and I just got hired to teach English in a computer lab. Is there something I need to learn here? What is this? I know Zen says there are no coincidences, so are these lessons, like learning to not judge someone by their age or looks? It feels like there is some crazy balance weighing itself and tipping from side to side. Well, I’d like to hear your thoughts. I know you never set aside my questions as unimportant. I would like to think that every woman has an Aunt Gladys in her life.