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The summer piano

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The Summer Piano

by

Marylou Linda Eggema

A Thesis Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the

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"... I wonder if memory is true, and I know that it cannot be, but that one lives by memory nevertheless and not by truth. But through the crack of light in my bedroom door, time dissolves and I again see the images of my lost world. Mama has gone to her room, my brother is asleep in the other bed, and all is still in the house."

Igor Stravinsky
PLAYING PIANO IN SUMMER

I used to play piano,
alone in the house in summer.
Windows open, curtains blowing,
white and filmy.
The scent of roses blending
with the lemon of furniture polish.

My brother played basketball,
alone outside in summer.
The beat of his ball,
percussion.
Dribbling and shooting lay-ups,
he kept time with my music.
APPLE STORM

I looked up
against the sun.
Green branches hid most of my brother
and all I could see were the muscles
taut on the backs of his legs
as he stretched for more.

One by one
I caught the warm apples he dropped
and piled them in a sky-blue basket.

My brother looked down.
I heard his raucous laugh
as he crushed a mushy apple in one hand
and tossed it at me.
I screamed;
he shook the tree,
hard.

The apples showered down like hail,
soft red baseballs of hail,
on a hot summer's day in August.
BLACK STOCKINGS

Our springtime stockings were black, knee-high stockings of liquid soil my sister and I put on each night as we walked barefoot down the lane to the cow pasture. Sometimes forgetting that it was milking time, we stopped to wade in the deepest ruts, feeling the cool mud squoosh between our toes, and watching it work up our legs.

"Ka Bos! Ka Bos!" we'd hurry and shout, the way we heard Dad and his dad do.

We carried long sticks to prod the cows who tried to grab a mouthful of grass from the side of the lane or reach over the barbed wire with saliva-dripping tongues to tear off corn leaves. Their full udders swayed like nursing women's breasts and leaked rich white drops.

The mud was dried and crusty
when we reached the barnyard.

We raced to the hydrant
and squealed at the numbing water
as we washed off our black stockings.
Then we lay on our backs in the grass
and raised our legs in the air,
white as milk in the moonlight.
ROSA

Once a year I went to her house across the river, the white farmhouse with picket fence and screened-in porch sat back from the road, hidden from view by rose bushes. She always met me at the gate, wearing a red silk dress and a tarnished locket. "Watch out for the gypsies, little girl."

I sat by the wood-burning stove, looking at ads in 30-year-old magazines, an old woman with her teeth inked in, an old man leering down at a girl with her head scissored out. Then I tiptoed into the parlor to stare at the velvet love seat and upright piano covered with a Spanish shawl and photographs. One showed a soldier in an open field of poppies; behind him, a camp of gypsies. In a faint hand on the back, "Romania 1918. Love, Roy."

She lived alone until one spring
when she fell
and broke her hip.
I visited her then.
"I'm Harm's girl . . .
Harm . . . Harm's girl," I said.
We ate chocolates; then she sat up in bed,
her eyes alert.
"I saw the gypsies with their red bandannas
camped in my fields,
the same ones that kidnapped me years ago.
I ran from the black-eyed devils
until one of them pushed me
and I fell . . .
They want my land . . . my land . . .
save my land," she said.

Sometimes now
in the evening
when the mist hangs low over the river,
I can see a band of gypsies with red bandannas
camped in Rosa's fields.
I

I

Dad's face shone red like the coals in the heart of the furnace.
"What will we do when it's gone?"
I said.

"We'll burn hay if we have to."

His hands blackened with coal dust.
"But what will the cows eat?"
Dad didn't answer.

In my room,
blue curtains waved in the draft as I snuggled in a feather bed.
The next day, Dad closed off all the rooms except the kitchen and ordered me to wear his sheepskin coat.
I huddled in front of the stove and Dad schooled me in 500.
"Can't I go outside for a change?"
"Stay here—keep your feet warm."
Dad handed me one end of a clothesline, tied the other end around his middle.
"After I do the milking and gather the eggs, we'll make ice cream."
II

The water swirled through the culvert and over our gravel road.
The yellow bus couldn't follow its route.
"Why can't I walk to school the way you did in the old days?"
I said.

"It's too far—I'll take you with the ten-sixty-six," Dad said.

As I came out the door, Dad raced the engine and stood up, whistling.
I clambered into the shiny green wagon.
"You've got lots of room back there. Let's stop and pick up the Wilson boys."
When the wagon wheels sank in the mud, Dad carted me up to the tractor.
I stood on the tailgate and grabbed the seat.
"Hang on!" Dad shifted gears with one hand and braced me with the other.

The next day I couldn't go to school.
As I waded in the creek, Dad dumped two bushels of mud in the garden.
His knee-high boots glistened with black soil as he said,
"Let's hold a contest to see who can make the best mud pie."

III

That night, Dad prodded me down the cellar steps into blackness.

"What is it, Dad?"

We listened as trees crashed.

I shivered in my nightgown as Dad lit a kerosene lamp.

His shadow crisscrossed with mine on the cold concrete.

In the morning, we couldn't walk through the yard because of the rubble.

The uprooted elm tree barely missed the house.

The leafy branch that used to hold my tire swing balanced a bird's nest.

Dad brought me unbroken eggs.

"We can cut the wood and burn it for fuel this winter."

IV

The barn burned while lightning flashed.
The drizzly rain saved the machine shed,
but when Dad rushed into the barn
to open the livestock pens,
he soon stumbled out.
His eyes fired red.
"Skittery fools!" he shouted.
The hayloft crackled and black smoke
shot out the top.
Dad walked into the house
and shut the door so he wouldn't hear
their screams.

"Daddy! They're dying!"
I pounded my fists on the door
until I pushed it open.
In a straight-backed chair,
Dad sat, facing away from the fire,
and said, "Let it burn—
we can always rebuild."
SNOW MOTHER

She was already the mother of snowflakes in the 5th grade, performing in a play for a junior high assembly, to show the beauty and usefulness of snow.

By the beginning of her senior year, she was wearing a diamond ring. And her goal for the future was to be the model farm wife.

"You will help the world become more beautiful," wrote one of her teachers in her Graduation Memories Book. "Remember your motto, success and achievement first,"

wrote another.

By her 23rd birthday, she was the mother of three girls—or was it of three little snowflakes to show the world her beauty and usefulness?
This morning I watch the sun shimmer on the corrugated tin of grain bins built by my brother. In the distance they look flat, like metal mountains. "Thirty-five hundred bolts," he says, "in one bin."

This morning he turns twenty-three, builds as many bins in one season. He shows me the latest, raised for Dad. Jumping up the steps of a blue ladder, he turns and his calloused hand pulls me up.

"Why did you build a bin instead of a silo?" I ask, climbing behind him. "We need a bin to dry corn in."

"What goes in the bin besides corn?" "What do you think?" he says. "Beans mostly or oats."

At the top, I peer over the edge, down into the blue dome.
at the round slab of cement.
"It's empty!" I say.
"Of course it's empty. What did you expect?"
Flies circle and buzz,
then light on warm tin.
Giant dragonflies,
one gold, one blue,
hover at the top like tiny helicopters.
The sunshine glimmers on their filmy wings.
My brother shows me a bolt—
one end is threaded, the other rounded—
then slides it into a socket
to fasten two sheets of metal.
The dragonflies dip and swirl in the light,
the colored stems of their bodies
like exotic hatpins.
As my brother speaks of cement and bolts and blue tin,
his deep voice echoes.
Snow crunched under our boots
and the windmill creaked
as Grandpa and I walked to the barn.
He pulled a red stocking hat
down over his ears.
"How are you feeling, Gramps?"
"Oh, I keep growlin' around
like an old bear," he said gruffly;
then he grinned like a little boy
and chuckled so that his chest shook.

Unlatching the barn door,
I smelled hay and must and dung,
and felt the sheep crowd us.
"I like to just watch them eat," Grandpa said.

As I helped him feed the lambs,
I saw that two of the ewe pens
were old horse stalls.
"I remember your draft horses, Grandpa.
One was a sorrel with a front white sock.
The other was a chestnut with a star
on his forehead."
"Doc and Barney . . . " Grandpa nodded his head.

"Switched over to tractors in '57.

I need big machines now to pull my twelve-bottom plow and planter. Gotta keep up with the times, you know."

"But the horses . . . what about the horses?"

I asked. "They were so pretty with the sunshine gleaming on their backs."

Grandpa spit a stream of tobacco.

"Why, I buried them years ago out in the south 40."

II

Grandpa helped with the spring planting that year before he became too sick.

Grandma said he often rose at four in the morning to sit in the cab of his biggest, newest tractor at the end of the lane, facing the south 40.

What, Grandpa, did you think about as you sat there dying, looking out over the cornfield where, years ago, you buried Doc and Barney?
GRANDMA'S GIRLS

Alone on the farm my grandpa left her,
Grandma kneaded bread, tended garden,
cared for chickens.

She wore comfortable cast-offs—
a faded dress and moth-eaten sweater,
a grandson's unlaced sneaker on one swollen foot,
a granddaughter's soft slipper on the other.
"1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . " she'd count
before struggling to her feet.

Each morning her face brightened
as she limped out to the chicken house.
Hens cackled as she moved among the nests.
"How are my girls today?" she'd call out,
holding warm eggs in crooked fingers
before slipping them into apron pockets.
"My girls never let me down."

I, too, tried not to let her down that summer day
when I came to help with baking.
I braided my hair in two pigtails like hers
and wore a long white apron
that Grandma said was mine.
"That was Ma's good linen apron
that she wore on Sundays."

We filled the house with the smell of pastries
made from the recipes in Grandma's mind—
of Aunt Clara's favorite chocolate cake
and Grandma's secret brown sugar pie
and what I liked best—
deep-fried doughnuts.
Grandma sat hunched on a high stool,
cutting out circles of dough with the rim of a jar
as I leaned lazily against the wall,
slipping dough into bubbling deep fat.
"I enjoy making good things to eat," Grandma said,
"if I feel all right."

She told me how she learned to cook as a girl,
how her ma gave her a set of patty pans
and showed her how to make her own pies and cakes.
"And that was how I first started to cook,"
she told herself, while I listened.

I went home late that summer day with my arms filled
with warm fry cakes and my head filled
with fresh thoughts of Grandma's girlhood
while an old woman hobbled out to the chicken house
to check on her girls once more before bedtime.
I follow Grandma into a blue-shingled room,
one that Grandpa tore off when he remodeled
twenty years ago.
Here, a pot-bellied stove warmed
my mother's first family.
Grandma points to a box marked "fragile."
"Will you open it? I can't—it feels bad today."

Inside, I find a crystal basket
with the curved handle of a rainbow.
"Years ago, I gave it to your mother
for eighth grade graduation.
When she married and started a family,
she gave it back, afraid you might break it."

I turn the basket upside down.
Blue, dried petals fall out.
"Darlene liked to pick wild flowers
for her favorite vase," Grandma says to me,
and I see Mother as a girl
standing under a poplar tree—
baggy corduroys, puppies licking her feet,
arms filled with bluebells.
Mother, I remember
you carrying a shovel in the car,
digging on your knees in ditches,
then transplanting lady slipper
and jack-in-the-pulpit
outside the kitchen window.

"My ma got the vase on her Wedding Day—
she kept her dried bridal roses in it.
After I married, she gave it to me.
I used to cut garden iris for it."

We leave the blue room
as white flakes powder the air.
Grandma limps in floppy slippers,
then stops, like a weary shepherd,
to lean on a broom handle.
"Are your feet cold?" I say.
"Look at the ice on the hay stacks,"
Grandma says,
"it reminds me of spun glass."

I look at Grandma with her arthritis.
I think of the great-grandma I didn't know,
holding roses at her wedding,
of my mother, digging on her knees in the earth,
and of myself as a girl,
sitting cross-legged under a lilac bush
as snowy petals fell.

With one arm, I steady Grandma.

With the other, I carry the glass basket.
HAY SEASON

In the heat of August,
we baled hay
at our flat bottom farm—
my dad, my sisters and I.

Heat waves quivering on the horizon
made me dizzy.
My sister touched my arm;
I saw her bangs, flat and wet
against her face,
as she handed me her straw hat.
We stood together on the hay rack
behind the green baler,
flexing our fingers in old gloves
that smelled of oil and manure,
listening to the clickety-clack
of hay being tied,
bracing our feet against the wooden floor
as our third sister guided the tractor
over the bumpy ground.
The tractor's chimney crackled
and smoked black.

As the baler sent twined hay out the back,
my sister grabbed one string
and I, the other,
to lug the bales back to Dad.

Bits of hay clung to his sunburned arms
as he swung the bales up,
one row lengthwise, the next crosswise
until there was no room to stand.

As the tractor curved around a corner,
the baler missed the windrow.
Dad jumped off the rack,
raked up the strewn hay in his arms,
and with grasshoppers scattering,
ran in front of the moving baler.

Clawing their way out of the hay,
some stuck to his soaked shirt
while others spattered against the baler.
Sweat streamed down Dad's face and neck
as he bounded back onto the wagon.

One fearful grasshopper poised on the bill of his cap,
then vaulted back into the hayfield.

I still see Dad
running in front of the baler,
throwing hay over his shoulder into the rake tines,
chaff blowing up in a cloud,
grasshoppers leaping in his face,
red against the sun.
BRUISED

Whirling maple leaves
rustled against the windshield
like red demons trying to break in.
As the air cleared,
I saw the gaunt-faced farmer
and his wife harvesting corn in the field.
The woman, round-faced and running,
wore a red scarf on her dark hair,
the way Mother did
when Dad shouted from the yard,
"Dar! Come out here! I need some help!"

Each fall, she drove the wagons of corn
from the field up to the yard.
On and off the tractor,
she gathered bruises along with the grain,
purple and blue bruises like butterflies
fanning their wings
on the insides of her white legs.
I tried to count them once but couldn't.
There were as many as the blood blisters
splotching Grandma's arms when she was sick
or the freckles dotting my face in the summer.
"Dar! You better be careful!" Dad said.
"I don't want you to hurt yourself."

Together Mother and I climbed the rickety ladder into the corncrib and walked on loose planks laid across the beams.

One on each side,
we held the green elevator spout
as ears of yellow corn clattered down the metal shoot like bullets.

We turned the spout this way, then that way, to fill every cranny,
while our arms strained with the weight.

I watched the dust
turn Mother's eyebrows and lashes gray.

At the point of overflow,
when I imagined being buried by the hard thunder of corn,
Mother motioned to my sister below
to turn off the power.

You work now, Mother, for A.C. Nielsen's measuring what other people do in their spare time.

On your first day of work,
you picked me up after school, your face gray,
your mouth set in a straight line
and said, "Your mother doesn't know anything."

Sometimes now,
when I'm undressing at night,
I'll see a bruise on my arm or leg
and I won't know how I got it,
a ring of butterfly colors,
purple, blue, and yellow,
healing from the center outward.
COCOONS

I

Mother's sudden cry startled me.
As her newspaper slid to the floor,
she pointed towards the rinse tub
turned upside down on the porch to dry.
A monstrous moth struggled to break free
while opening brown, rose-spotted wings,
wet and bright like fresh paint.
"Hurry! Get a quart jar!"
My sister clapped a blue glass jar over the moth,
then dipped cotton in alcohol
for its execution.
The long feelers twitched once.
My sister stuck a pin through its fuzzy body,
mounted it in one of Grandpa's cigar boxes,
and labeled it "Cecropia moth."

I took it to school for Show and Tell.
"It's as big as a bird," said one boy.
When my classmates crowded to see,
massive wings moved against the clear plastic.
"It's still alive!" one girl screamed.
I shuddered, ran outside,
and tried to let the moth go.
The whir of the sewing machine stopped. I looked up from my suitcases to see Mother in the doorway, holding a wool skirt. "You should be all set for college now." She sighed, "You know, it's harder for me to see you leave than the older girls." "I know," I said, pointing to brown boxes. "These are the clothes I can't wear anymore." Together we carried them into the hallway, to the foot of the ladder leading up to the attic. Holding a lantern, I climbed up through the dark opening in the ceiling. A bat flew overhead, among the rafters. "Be careful! Walk only on the solid beams—you'll fall through the insulation." Mother handed up the clothes and I set them beside a dusty trunk. Opening the lid, I stared at a crumpled shadow box. In the center, lay a huge moth with only one wing. Beside it, a wispy cocoon.
EAST WINDOW

You tried to tell me about your wife's death
as we sat on the antique love seat
in front of the fire
that had died to red-orange embers
like the color of tiger lilies, I thought,
that grew wild in the ditch near my parents' farm.
We used to fill the house with tall jars
of graceful orange and black stripes.

You rose to get more wood and said,
"I counted four cardinals at the feeder today."

Mom called us four children out in the yard
the day she spotted a rare Baltimore oriole.
We strained our necks just in time to glimpse
the bright flit of orange
among the leafy green branches.

You returned with an armful of ash wood and said,
"Nature heals, if we're open—
I often stand at the east window to watch the sun rise . . ."

In the old farmhouse, the sunshine used to fire
through the east window.
My sister said the yellow daisied wallpaper
had captured the sunlight
and our little brother believed her.

"... and I like to hear the soft coo
of the mourning dove," you said.

I used to wake to the call of the bobwhite,
the trill of the meadowlark,
and the clank of my parents' milk pails.
I'd skip out to the wet pasture
where Dad turned Guernsies out to graze.

You threw more wood on the fire as you offered;
"Let me show you the terraced land beside the house
where I transplanted bleeding hearts
and white violets last May."

We used to hunt for violets and bluebells
on the river cliffs at Grandma's.
Laughing, we stuck soft petals behind our ears,
braided blue garlands for our necks,
and sucked nectar down dry throats.

"The bleeding hearts didn't grow at first,
but it looks like they're fine now," you said;
then you turned to me,
"Those were her favorite. I thought I planted
them for her; now I think otherwise."
I thought of those bleeding hearts
and of your leaving
yesterday as I woke early
to watch the sun turn my wallpaper yellow,
to listen to my neighbors' delicate windchimes,
and to transplant wild roses
just outside my east window.
A GIFT OF SPACE

Dad phoned early on my Saturday birthday and when I answered in a craggy voice, there was a pause.
"It doesn't sound like you," he said.
"Are you sure this isn't a house guest?"

He and Mother drove down from the farm in the dented green pick-up with a box of red meat, home-canned peaches, and four quarts of oil for my car.
"Are you sure that wasn't your roommate on the phone?" Dad asked. "Well, it may not have sounded like you, but it sure looks like you."

Mother fixed her maid-rite specialty while Dad sat in the rocker, and his Pioneer Seed cap sat on his lap.
"We've got a dozen baby ducks at home—quack, quack," he said, flapping his arms. "They don't like to be penned up; they like to roam through the grass in the orchard. I know how they feel."
Dad walked over to the window,
touched the dirt of the hanging Swedish ivy.
"Your plant's thirsty—needs a drink."
He went to the sink.
"How does this faucet work?
I can't find the warm water."
Then he saw the macramé towel hanger.
"What's this knotted thing made out of?
Looks like baling twine! Say, do you remember
how you helped bale hay? What a job . . .
stacking bales in the hot field,
grasshoppers flying in our faces . . ."
He watered and pruned the ivy.
"Where's your room?"
As he stepped into the crowded bedroom,
he said, "so this is your little space."

Dad touched a deck of cards on my desk.
"We played a lot of 500 in the winter,
didn't we? I remember that blizzard in '66
when we played cards for three days straight."
He turned, looking all around.

"What's this painting on the wall?
Look at that girl on the prairie . . .
her arms reaching that way,"
the barn tilted to one side like our old granary
at home . . . Nothing's moving . . .
no ducks or cows grazing."
His forehead wrinkled as he peered at the painting.
"What's it mean? What's she laying there for?"
Then he called to Mother to come and see.
THE SUMMER PIANO

During the winter
the piano sat in the frosty glass porch,
an old upright piano
I had painted hot pink
to cover the scratches.
My mother called it an eyesore.
She said I had to wait until the sun
thawed the out-of-tune keys
before I could begin my lessons.

Sometimes I’d throw my coat around my shoulders
and steal out through the red glass door
leading to the porch.
While my breath rose in white puffs,
I ran my hands up and down
the keyboard once,
then pulled up on the keys remaining down
like ice cubes frozen together.
As sunlight through the red glass
stained the keys and my hands pink,
I thumped the foot pedals
and lifted the piano top to strum the wire strings.

When summer came,
I practiced "Flight of the Bumblebee"

for my mother who hummed in the kitchen.

I thought about my next lesson

while my brother blew his trumpet,

and Dad shouted, "Quiet!"

I didn't know what the pieces sounded like

until I played them at Sheila's house.

My soft-spoken teacher sat beside me

at her spinet

with the glossy black and white keys.

The notes rose to meet my fingers.

As Sheila turned the pages,

silver and red stars flashed in front of me.

I felt like a deaf child who could hear.

The notes moved across the page

until they blended with the stars

Sheila had pasted there.

As I listened to the fluid music filling her house

like cream rising to the top of milk,

I was hearing each song for the first time

and I didn't want to stop.