Penetrations

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Penetrations

by

Jennifer Marie Quinlan

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

Department: English
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For the Major Department

For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1995
To Gregg

for believing in me
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Park of my childhood

There
are the double
oversized swings
where my father
used to give me and my older brother
underdogs
pushing and pushing
and finally
running under as
we towered above for a second

There
is the old fire engine
we used to crawl on and through
and fight over who was going
to get to drive
And the tornado slide
painted in red and gold
we climbed repeatedly
waiting in line at a steep slant
and if we were alone
we would scream
on the way down
our noise
reverberating in our chests

There
we are at the picnic table
there and there and there
It seems we ate at all of them
Cokes fizzling in their plastic cups
the best part of the meal
Mom's fried chicken
wrapped in kitchen dish towels
still warm as we bit into it
And there we are
and we're laughing
Awakening

I unlocked the door
to what I expected to be my mother's angry face
surprised by blood tears,
breath—the sour smell of beer,
a smell I once had liked.

As an offering,
I handed her a wet washcloth
but reclaimed it from her motionless hand
and scrubbed her bloody face
as though she was the child not the mother.

Face dark as a mask
body drawn in
he came around the corner
as though nothing was wrong
took over my work:

Go to bed.
I'll take care of it.

Sitting next to him in bed
the night light, spotlight
the blue comforter hiding everything,
she didn't say good night,
her face beginning to swell.

I climbed to my room,
peeked in at my siblings...somehow sleeping
sat on my bed,
listening.
Reading the body

I follow
the bruises
on my body
I memorize
size
shape
color

Pink Minnie Mouse pajamas
covered my small form
as I watched them fight
I was hypnotized
by their actions
until my father's fist in flight
bound towards my mother
grazed me

She loved him
like an addiction
She couldn't get enough
called him at work
two or three times a day
just to say hello
just to hear his voice
bore the bruises
because she only wanted him

He wanted the noise
to stop
Her voice demanding
in his ear
Everything was never
enough
Never enough
of his time
Never enough
of him
All he knew
how to do
was thrust out

Out of the door
out of the house
where violence
kept us
into adulthood
I escaped

Escaped
into flesh fascination
I'm obsessed
with all
that is marred
The steppingstone

The red square back VW
warm honey in my mouth
from the jar that had broken
as we played
in the space over the engine.
The smell cooked into the car.
The penny
hot in my sticky
child hand
a reward for being quiet.
We drove to the lake
our small family
just a mother, father, son,
and me.
We arrived,
climbed over
endless mirror
families
smelling like
coconut and sweat,
claimed our territory
with a ratty plaid blanket,
and moved towards
the brown surface
alive with
masses of green
we avoided.
I feared it
wrapping around
my legs
and growing on me.
We attempted
to cool ourselves
in the warm water.
I watched as
green dots spread on
my yellow swim suit.
My mother
called me
away from the couple
whose faces
were pressed together
their bodies obviously
entangled.
I tried to open
my eyes under
the water
but couldn’t see anything.
And then the moment:
my father back
from the raft
too far off for me to
swim to,
resplendent in
cut off swim trunks,
lifted me high in the air
and let go.
I was flying and free
until
I hit the murky
brown water
again.
"She'll never be happy"

I hear the words
and do not feel that they belong to me
I'm surprised to find
they are the sign
someone wants to hang around my neck.

Happiness is the possession
I'm always buying
Its value I learned as a child
my mother with her bent nose
purpled lip and blackened eye
was the teacher.

Year after year she burdened it
would not change, could not change
the cycle of violence
looked to the next year as though
it held the end
of it, of him or of her.

As all children believe, I knew
I was going to be better than my parents
knew how to do it right
I learned to grow wings
and flight became my birthright.

I never stay long enough to be wounded
I vanish before the slaps
the punches the kicks
I vanish at venomous words
I purchase the easy things
the quick fixes
and cheap highs
available for escape
I never get too close to anyone
I am not chained
as my mother was chained
And now they say
I'm just like her.
My heritage

As my husband
slams me into the bathroom door,
I look into his face
and see my father
with his
rage
directed into
black eyes
broken noses
cuts above the eyebrow
on the billboard
face
of my mother.
I feel the
circle closing
inside of me.
The destiny
I feared
holding my throat
wanting to strike me,
gouge me,
break me,
with the hands
of my husband.
I feel these
very hands,
the ones
that have caressed me,
soothed me,
saved me,
taken care of me
and these are my
father's hands,
and the rescue
was not a rescue
at all.
I will never be able to hold your hand again

The lined loveliness of it
the long delicate fingers
with rounded nails
the brown hairs
leading to your wrist

Its secrets are silent
except
It and I know
the way it can
fly through the air
and strike
the buzz
of a voice
Escapee

Blown out of the house
by a dark rage
I learned to live outdoors
Stealing matches
I mastered fire
setting weeds to flame
learning to control
what burned
I made a clay oven
practiced future meals
by forming mud patties
so perfect and smooth
I wanted to eat them
I dug out old potatoes
from the garden
hiding them away
with my provisions
stolen bits of candy
a bag of sunflower seeds
my favorite doll

I planned to steal fresh food
the night I escaped
all of my family asleep
and me gone
I knew where I would run
an abandoned house
down the road
trees thickly protecting it
I could travel there on foot
through a cornfield
the stalks guiding my path
I could live there
the screaming left behind

Now as I drive by the shack
I see her dash for cover
from my knowing eyes
She is free and still alive
I go to my parents
I embrace them
We all pretend
their little girl
never ran away
Pulse

I count the clocks
in my grandparents'
house
six per room
the constant ticking
a background
noise to the rhythm
of their voices
my grandmother
repeating herself
like the clocks
chiming
a weight to the air
a heavy hand
pressed to my chest
resting on my body
counting the
dying moments
My grandma’s purse

Tucked in the folds of your lap
I saw my reflection
in the black plastic leather,
leaned against your plush breasts
cushion-like
As your hand of down
dug it its caves
  for bits of spearmint chewing gum
  for me to munch
discovered butterscotch hard candies
  that you and I rolled on
  our tongues
as we giggled over pictures
  of my father as a baby
  and you as a young woman
  hopeful, eager to jump off the page
shook your change purse
  clinking with pennies,
  nickels, even a few dimes
  reminding me of treats later at the Ben Franklin
pulled out colored scarves
  like a magician
  red, fuchsia, yellow
  to wear in your hair
  the colors dancing over my grasping fingers
  they smelled like you
  that glorious smell of sweet lilacs
  mixed with powder

Now
as I hold
this purse
in my grown hands,
I open its depths
and look
for you and me
inside.
Bloodline

I stare at my grandfather's
wedding photograph image
half grin
his eyes meeting
the camera lens
gentle upward slick of his hair
away from his pale forehead.
It's there.
Hidden behind
gray double breasted suit
dotted tie flared
as he presses into
my grandmother,
a young woman.
Her timid smile
with its slightly
crooked teeth
reveals the truths.
The gentle
trusting eyes looking off
slightly to the left
share the visions
locked within her.
The sleeves
of her dress long,
the collar sealed
with an ornate heart pin
to hide the bruises
already growing
in flesh
of new
wife arms.
The break
in the thin line
of her dark
eyebrow,
a scar from
his raised hand.
It is there
between them.
The legacy
my father holds
in his falling fist.
Breaking point

He had not intended
for his fist
to jerk out from his side
finding contact with her jaw
But her mouth
would not stop running
as he tried to focus on the TV
and he had warned her twice
Now he could not hear anything
with her weeping in the corner
It added to the chorus
of the day
all the voices picking at him
his kids, his co-workers
everyone and then her
and he could do something about her
her flesh gave so easily to his force
In a way he felt better
even with her crying
He knew she would heal
like all the times before
Elegy for an aunt unknown

The night after your sister
took the brand new kitchen knife
her husband had just given her
and slashed her wrists
and throat
in the basement shower
you awake to her
at the foot of your bed
as if somehow
your eyes had
lifed her out
of the white floral wallpaper
Her gashes gone
Her mouth whispers explanations

I am growing inside of you
at his death
never to know
my aunt Marilyn
You press your hand to me
and understand
what your Catholic parents cannot
The baby that died
while inside of her
so far along
she had to give birth to death
No matter that she had
two other children
a husband
and another baby after the loss
no matter how much life
there was
there was still only death
eating it all away

You forgive
what your family
and church will not forgive
You release her from
the trap of ideology
and Catholic guilt
You understand that
life is only separated
from death
moment by moment
by belief
and by this you know
you do not mean in a god
As she disappears with your thoughts
you curl back down
into sleep
feel the baby move inside of you
wait for your husband
to come home from the army
and believe
Acceptance

Sex
was my mother
and my father
the unconditional
approval
I sought
all packed
into a
"man" of 16
and yeah
he'd
accept me
if he could
fuck me
and since
sex raised me
I'm still 14
caught under
that adolescent boy
every time
still whispering
no
as I do
everything that
says yes
and hoping
that this
time it has
something to do
with love
The lesson

The creak of the porch
brought my eyes around
I nibbled on a ratty pigtail
and peeked through the window
to you
baby sitter.

Black moonlight licked at
your hair
I watched as he caressed your shoulder
your shivers
the way you pressed your lips
to his throat
drawing the life
out of him, into him
through you
the thigh against thigh
bone into bone
the small groans of pleasure.

I watched you like TV
better than strawberry ice cream
better than coloring in my books
better than making the Barbie dolls do it
(that came later of course)
You,
center stage,
performed.
Rooting out

She came
to him
to have flesh
purpled and browned
in dying flower
by thrusts
into wall
rigid and unrelenting

She wanted
the hairs
on her head
pulled tight
as fine strings
music rattling
through head
and teeth
finding rhythm

She desired
teeth breaking
at ripe skin
of neck
taut and flowing
gnashing
redness

She longed
for him
to rip inside of her
pressing deeper
deeper still
but never
depth enough

Later
in naked silence
of cold bathroom
bulb light
she would account for
marks
tightness of
muscles extended
too far
burning
between her legs
but everywhere
pain still
unexcavated
Trappings

He presses the coat firmly to his chest.
It's his.
He likes the feel of the fabric
her skin presses against him.
will not give it up
never take it off

He adjusts the hat at an angle
then he tries another.
He likes the way it crowns his head
her ringlets frame his face.
will not give it up
never take it off

He smoothes the pants.
He checks this side then the other.
He likes the line on the legs
her black stockings straight on him.
will not give it up
never take it off

He checks the gleam on the shoes.
The black patent leather crackles.
He likes the way it shines
her eyes gleam up at him.
will not give it up
never take it off

He smoothes the gloves to his hands.
He corrects each digit.
He likes the efficiency of the look
her fingers stroke his palm
will not give it up
never take it off

He glances at the mirror.
He sees an image there
    her face looks back at him.
He will not give it up.
He'll never take it off.
Doll

*Transformation*

As she removes
her clothes
for another stranger
She feels her lips
hardening open
her hair attaching
itself around her face
yellow coloring
as her head becomes
rubber
her arms and legs
grow light
rising out
ever ready
for any embrace
her breasts growing
nipples enlarging almost
plastic like
her belly
flat
her vagina becoming
a particularly thick
layer of rubber
ready for any use
any size
all the rest of her disappearing
replaced by
simple air
perfectly fuckable
The possibilities

She can press her arms
above her head
she can wrap her legs
around him
she can be taken
from behind
she can give him head
it's perfect—no teeth
she'll do anything
look
she's becoming a pretzel
beautiful
She'll do it standing up
sitting down
upside down
with him
and his friends
She's not particular
she doesn't care
she won't complain
or scream for help
or grow tired
or dry
She won't
want to use protection
call it rape
tell him she loves him
She'll last as long
as he can keep it up
hell she'll last longer
she's always available
she never has a period
she can fuck 365 days a year
24 hours a day
if she pops
she can be replaced

The act

He presses his penis
into her rubber vagina
thrusting and thrusting
squashing her into the bed
takes this inanimate thing
and fucks it fucks it fucks it
the sounds of pleasure mute
except for the squeaking
like rubbing a balloon
the gentle hiss as the
unnoticed air is fucked out of it
Previous dried sperm
peeling from puckering skin
he comes and pushes it away
withered plastic and spit
the discarded sex doll
falls to the side
mouth open in a perpetual
oh
Sacrament

As she moves through
the people-filled sidewalk
her body aches from
the sexual positions it
discovered with a stranger
the night before
she can feel the imprint
of hip bones into hip bones
she can feel her arms ache from
being pinned above
her head
she knows
she stinks of sex
The raindrops pelt her
with a sense
of baptismal obligation
She falls to her knees
a puddle extends before her
yielding her reflection
marred with the grains
of the storm
her sins
all rejected
by the sky
She presses her face down
chin to chin
she kisses
all of her flaws
Her lips wet
with the anointing
she stands up
and walks forward dripping
Flesh revelations

I'm doing
sex
like a fix
sniffing it off
the car seat
or bed
hell
I'll do it
off the bathroom sink
just tell me
where to put my leg
I'll take this
injection deep
and hate my dealer
as I worship him

I'll spin out of control
on this trip
pressed in lycra
and jeans so tight
they sing into my thighs
deciding which man
should join my high
slip into his car
with practiced ease
go to a place
I've never been
or never left

Afterwards
I'm left useless
on the floor
overdosed
bared
to myself
Learning to believe

I will wear the holy cloths
and press my face into my hands
for redemption.

I will be the vestal virgin
throwing off this skin of the Mary Magdaline.
I will find a new religion.
I will name it "my self."

My prayers will be cunt and breast.
I memorize skin.
I will learn again cock and balls.
I'll know how to fondle.
I'll know how to wrap tongue.
I'll whisper the commandments of the flesh,
as I gently drag my tongue across your chest.

Serpentine, I will wrap myself around you.
Here, in our Eden of smells and liquids,
I will cast off my former self,
be anyone you wish to make me.
Just tell me what to be:
the whore, the virgin, the mistress.

We can fall to our knees
and practice derelictions.
We can fall to our knees
and practice everything
we've ever been taught.

I'll put the hymnal here between us.
We will remember the words that bind.
We will hum them under our breath
as our fingers trace the holy objects.

Come lock your fingers with mine.
We will say the vows
that only ever really matter.
The vows of pleasure
the vows of flesh
that vows that always bind you
to the person you touch.
Hostess

I enter the shack
I live in.
Dirty tile floors
show what is missing
by the holes in the dust.
All my belongings
stolen except the answering machine
clicking in the corner
and the VCR.
They didn't seem to want
anything that would record,
though they took all the poems,
the pencils, and the paper.
My search for the perpetrators
leads me to a party
populated by faces
drawn from my past.
They've all just dosed on acid.
I know they are tripping
on my couch and TV
I know they are smoking away
each book of poetry
with every pass of the pot pipe.
This party is on me,
and they laugh
when I protest.
Consuming

You are taking the breath
from my mouth
snatching it up with your
fingers and
eating it with delicate bites.

You are taking the ideas
from my head
prying them out with your
voice and
stuffing them into your pockets.

You are taking the warmth
from my body
lifting it away like a shawl with your
eyes and
absorbing it into your being.

You are taking the blood
from my veins
sucking it out through my finger tips with your
mouth and
licking it from your lips.

You are taking the bones
from under my skin
prying them out from the canopy with your
hands and
licking each one clean.
Mute

You
put the razor blade down
your weapon
you vanquish
My fingers move to my
back
come away
confused with blood
You've carved
messages on my back
again
It's the way you've always
communicated
It's indecipherable
My fingers cannot
read the gashes
I grope in blindness
I never understand
I give up
on this on us
the wounds heal
vivid vines of scars
marking me
my fingers
memorize the ridges
my mind
tries to give them text
I'm determined
to someday
make a language
out of this
Demarcation tattoo

You wrote into my body.
I have always
been affected by
what is written.
With each press of
the tattoo needle
into the white
of my hip
my body
sucked in your ink
parched.
It released nothing.
Like after
our sex
when it drank
of your sperm
so that none escaped.

Here too
was our half communion.
A ritual passing of fluid.
It is visible.
You inside of me
rising out
through the skin.
I can no longer
contain it.
Your miser motions
marking where you end
and I begin.
The street light stands a sentry in my yard
as I crawl across the grass
toward the safety of the empty house.

I want to hide, between the cracks in the boards
eat dust and mildew to survive
But the moon illuminates my breath
the trees record my every movement in their branches
So I shall remain frozen on the yard
to escape from you.
Things I want you (my ex-husband) to tell your male friends...

You know the ones
who think I'm a bitch
the ones you've trained
to imagine me as slut
cunt emasculating wench
Those friends of yours--
tell them to imagine what
it feels like to have someone
say 90 lbs heavier than they are
slam them around their own apartments
the places they consider to be retreats
safe harbors
theirs
tell them they are absolutely powerless
and can do nothing but wait
for the assault to finish
until this attacker decides it's time to go
tell them this person is someone they married
someone who tells them they're selfish
that their identities are wrapped up in sex--
to reinforce it grab their balls and squeeze
say without these they're nothing
This continues for the entire night
this continues into the next day
this continues for a year
but no one will believe them
no one cares
tell them this and then
they'll know who I am
"I stop somewhere waiting for you"
from "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman

Hello
Walt
it's a pleasure to meet you
let's walk through this cornfield
You can tell me of the beauty
of life
of nature
of the self
We will weave daisies of
delusion in my hair
and your beard
for I don't believe you, Walt Whitman.
The world is an ugly place
to me right now
and my self--the one I almost lost
to him--is a dirty empty closet
I live in.
I feel no happiness
in grass
in animals
I feel the echo
of a door clicking shut
the bitterness of distrust on
my tongue
the loneliness of an unoccupied
apartment
the ability to simply swim
through time
without touching it, affecting it
just pushing it away
like water.
Walt,
I want to
believe you
but can't
I'm too busy
drowning in
this self of mine.
On the way

You find death
in bus terminal
after bus terminal
waiting in each corner
lingering
on green plastic seats
stained and broken
whispering
from dirt streaked floors

You know everything is dead
as you are brought closer
closer to the body
by this metal box
moving over the time road
You can't get there any faster
but you are already too late

You're whispering good-bye
to strangers
As if they would understand
You ask the lady next to you
for one more moment
but she cannot give it
Recluse

I know the walls of this apartment better than I know anything
I can tell you about the cracks
all the holes and that dark mark
that runs down the wall that has
been there longer than I've been here
I often wonder how it got there
I also know these stains in the carpet
there are exactly sixteen of them
dark like birthmarks
on pale skin
They form a path

I can tell you about television
its voices fill these walls
without them I hear every car's tires crunching
the bricks on the road outside
and the click click of a woman's heels
on the sidewalk
and the angry rhythm of these city dwelling cicadas
Every noise roots in my head

I watch the news
four times a day
punctuation for my programs
Capital comma comma period
I always end the day with the 11 o'clock report

I do all of these things
but I cannot turn the handle on the door
I never want to walk down the front steps
of this building
It hurts me to leave and go get groceries
I'll make do with this loaf of bread
for as long as I can
and water is just as good as milk
Sometimes I forget to eat

As I sit alone and listen
my neighbors' noises
creep into my apartment
I hear their televisions
I hear my programs
And though I never see these people
I know I'm not alone
Closing time

My life has become a waiting
a pause between moments
pressed in corners of silence
letting time slide through my fingers
every granule counted.

I am the hands on the clock
feel each second ticking through me
ring out at the hour
announce the new one.

I change with the trees
shedding their clothes
of white for green
green for brown
always desiring adornment.

I count under my breath
every passing
the sun setting again
another Tuesday
a holiday ending.
I move time this way
picking it up from the pile on my right
setting it down in the pile on my left.

I occupy the spaces on a calendar
I fill in each box
reaching into the next
moving week by week
closer to you.
Disembody

topics raining
onto my lap
white chemical dust
collecting on my fingers
as I dissect
the Polaroid
with my small
sewing scissors

each thin length
the shard
of a mirror

slivers of a body
fall away

I see
what it is like
to cut
the naked self
to bits

can look
at this photograph
and feel
no connection
with it

who is this woman
draped across
the water bed
toes curled
around the edge
skin so pale
it radiates up
from black sheets
as if floating

who is this woman
who would let anyone
see her this way

who would let someone
capture her
on quick action film

who would wait
and then laugh
and then pause
as the outline
of her body
became discernible
then filled in

it didn't show
her at all
just the husk
of me
Massage

Fingers dig into flesh
excavating skin
to press into muscle
ease out tightness
I watch
two couples
caressing each other
public intimacy
at the poetry reading
I don't hear it
I'm too busy
listening to bodies
crying out
My eyes are watching
white hands
kneading
brown shoulder blades
and tightened fingers
raking on a red haired scalp

My body relaxes
with theirs
leans forward
wanting something
that connection
that touching
How even here
I want it
how I've always
wanted it
hungered
to be held
caressed
to I've looked
nto so many eyes
nd every part of me
except my voice
was asking
calling
begging
for someone to fill
that original
untouched need
left there
an empty hole
by my mother's
unmoving hands
The mommy design

I rename all of my dolls
Annette
after you
and plant them in bed with me
so their pale plastic feet
touch my feet
thighs
arms
shoulders and head.
I am in the middle
of Annette
the center of your world,
finally,
Mommy.
Uncaging the silent word

"Being silenced is something women—regardless of ethnicity, clan, or color—know only too well." -Marcia Ann Gillespie

Arms wrapped around her knees in fetal position, she never stopped whispering.
Her mouth created pictures of a bird so beautiful:
You could see each red feather stroking the other, your grandmother brushing your hair.
You could hear its song curl into your ear, natural as your mother's heartbeat.
You could feel the air open as it takes wing, a welcome from a sister.

Her images were of such beauty that they caused discontent from minds that could not know flight.

They stuffed her in a box to shut her up, but the cardboard could not contain her words, and the bird flew around the box to keep her company.

They drowned out her noise with music, but her voice became the beat that kept time in their ears, and the bird's song was the melody.

They sewed her mouth shut with the coarse thread of ignorance,
then her hands began to speak.
The bird was more beautiful than ever.