Shuttlegirl

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Shuttlegirl

by

Julie Anne Comine

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

Major: English (Creative Writing)
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Julie Anne Comine

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
for Jeff,
with great impatience
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I. The Astronaut’s Bride

On foot
I had to walk through solar systems
before I found the first thread of my red dress.
Already, I sense myself.
Somewhere in space hangs my heart,
sparks fly from it, shaking the air,
to other reckless hearts.

— Edith Sodergran
The married planet

(1)
Milk spills. No reason.
Gravity, maybe. The astronaut's bride
sips wine instead, shoves
the cereal aside.

(2)
His white suit, zipped tight.
His voice, hoarse via satellite,
crackling: *miss you, miss —*

(3)
December. The slow
scrape of the county snowplow,
roving before dawn.

(4)
Tell me —
How many light years
before I am able
to sleep through the night?

(5)
A gold wedding band
keeps swiftly spinning Saturn
trapped in ice black space.
Reputation

They have been talking about me again.

Those stones they sling sink inside me, soften

like chocolate. When they try to see to the bottom,

I slide to new hiding places. The truth is darker

than they would like to believe. The rivers rise,

uselessly. No flood can wash me clean.

I carry this filth in my blood; forever my name will be —
hoopskirt

Opening tip:

Coach hangs a basket high in the Garden, lets the peaches spill out.

Adam spots the trouble right off. "There's a hole in the bottom," he tells Eve.

"Better clean up this fruit before it smells to high heaven."

The breeze blows cool in the middle of the day. Eve works with great speed and style, gathers peaches into piles. Above her, the basket looms in the tallest of trees. How to knock it down? A rock, perhaps? The peaches, unripe, are just as hard, and so she heaves one skyward, watches it float through the opening like a soundless round bird, a small orange ball, then catches it, on the rebound, before it hits the ground.

"Coach!" Eve hollers, lifting her eyes to the scoreboard. "Watch me now — "
And she unloads peaches
from the far corners
of the Garden: over fig trees,

  deep behind the arc
  of dark vines, weaving
  through the foliage's
dense press. She is a
sure shot, and none
of the other creatures
can match her game, except
the 7-foot serpent,
who posts up like a dream,
catches the fruit
in his mouth and slams it home,
original alley-oop.

Eve and the serpent
play one-on-one
all day, until Adam hears
his wife whoop
after a sweet three-pointer.
He sticks his fingers
between his teeth, whistles
hard. “What kind of playground
do you think this is?” he yells,
crying foul. He climbs
the tree, retrieves the
basket, forces it over Eve's
head. It comes to rest
on her hips, a slatted lampshade,
a barreled bell.

“A new uniform,” Adam
commands. “So you may learn
the ways of proper women.”

The skirt leaves
splinters in Eve's legs.
It is not easy to run
in a hoopskirt.
It is not easy to sit.
Still, she finds her place

on the bench, peels
peaches
all through the day.

Post-game:

Coach retires
to the locker room,
won’t come out.

The serpent turns free
agent, playing in another
Garden, another town.

And each morning, before dawn,
Eve dashes outside,
does wind sprints

in the tall grasses,
end to end,
her lungs filling with fire.

She bathes, then slides
in beside her husband.
The hoopskirt hangs

on the back of the
bed board. “I wanted you
to play, too,” she whispers.

Adam snores
like a storm, like a hundred
buzzing flies.

Eve dreams of eating
a peach, waits
for the sun to rise.
Today was hell. I made the spaghetti with a white dress on. What do you do with so much splatter? My apron is no good shield. So you soak in ice water. You bleach and rub. But the spots cannot go blank.

Every night, the men come into my house, stinking like horse races, stinking like the cigar. They hunger always for more. My sons yell: *Mama! More antipasto, pronto!* and they slide the black olives on their fingers like wedding rings. My husband laughs so loud behind his napkin. When I fill the wine glass, my hands shake. I do not like it when his gun lays down next to his plate.

Long time ago, I take a slow ship across the ocean, and when we touch the shore I say grace: *Bless this safe place.* Then I am married, with a burning in my stomach, and blood in the morning. I kneel down to my mother Mary, and she whispers three tips in my ear. *One:* Squeeze juice of the lemon on your hands to take garlic away. *Two:* Sing with the radio for learning good English. *Three:* Always use your noodle God gave you. Ah, Mary. My Lady Liberty statue, my big lamp. How could I refuse these sound advices?

Over many years, I add one extra thing to the recipe. *Three-and-a-half:* Let them kiss you like a mother they love, but keep your face clean. Lock the bathroom door, and make the water steam the mirror while you wash. Now. Wipe away, and see yourself better.
To the memory of Mrs. Seuss
(for Helen Palmer Geisel, 1898 - 1967)

We had no children,
except in the books.

We would not, could not,
have them. Though perhaps
we should have.

Oh, the gymnastics
of imagination!

The alphabet of time!

One fish, two fish,
swimming in my womb.

Ten apples,
a turtle —

I always made room.

In our nonsense
we were not lonely.

We laughed until
we were old,

until my own story
hurt too much
to be told.

* * *

You will marry again,
I know. Your heart is
three sizes too large.

You will give your new bride
a new ring-a-ma-thing

and sail round the globe
on a thing-a-ma-barge.

Then one grey afternoon
with nothing to do,

I will pay you a visit
to show you who's who.

You will pick up a pen
and try to begin,

but your hands
won't let you forget.

It was my cat.
And my hat.
My eggs.
My glorious green ham.

Pay no mind
to those new muses

with their sweet,
suntanned songs.

Listen:

Here I am. I am. I am.
Canticle of tentacles

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,*
*as a seal upon your arm.*
— Song of Songs 8:6

My love is a green, green hose
Octupled beneath the sea.
My love puckers up his suction cups
And squeezes me repeatedly.

So strong his limbs, my mollusk-man,
So gargantuan his grasp —
He jets across the ultramarine
To lasso his lonesome lass.

Till the heavens boil and seethe,
Till the vast oceans evaporate,
I vow to strap on the glass flippers
And submerge for my sweet invertebrate.

And if the salt should sting my eyes
Or the air in my tanks run dry,
Fear not:

    for I feel there are 800 arms to hold me
    and a million ways to dive.
The torch singer who came in from the cold

Once, the City of Angels
sang in my ear,

so I followed the wind west
to become a star.

The sun was blinding.
The heat burnt the skin from my lips.

When I opened my mouth,
puffs of steam poured out

and the crowd sank
slowly into their drinks.

Back at the hotel, I draped
a washcloth over my eyes

and dreamed of the color of snow.
Sarcastics anonymous

God grant me the insanity to say
what I do not feel, and to feel what I
cannot say. Stand back! My mouth foams with bright poems, my tongue flies like a bird of prey.
Trust me — this cool ridicule rises straight from the soul. Inspect (please) with your keen eye, crack this safe to get a good look inside.
Count the riches: I hate and hate and hate and hate and hate. And then I fall asleep.
When I awake, your hand covers my heart.
Beneath, the trick of the hypnotist beats in 4/4 time. You flash me a dance card.
You sing: come on, baby, let's do the twist.
I bite my lip so I cannot be kissed.
dada

(for sylvia)

you do not do
you don't not do
you donut nut

now don't denote
a new etude
to tune into

a dewy tent
to nod at noon
no nudity

no oddity
no antidote
ten-dotted toad

dented tin tine
two-ton Ted
too tidy deed

you know no note
you need no tide
today to die

do you?
Decree

(1)
And we were severed,
clean, and you rose
from your chair, and you said
my name, my first name.

(2)
The neighborhood dogs
croon through the night.
They are hungry.
They know I am awake.

(3)
Fifteen years, two months,
six days.

(4)
My mother urged me to learn
to bake a strudel, to stitch
an opulent quilt. But my mind
wandered.

(5)
Slowly, the bartender stirs
the cauldron: toe of newt,
tooth of snake, tongue
of near-sighted adulteress.

(6)
Behind our son’s left ear
is a birthmark
in the shape of a fish.
(7)  
Your lawyer has the greenest eyes  
I have ever seen.

(8)  
The insanity of choosing June.  
The church was stifling.

(9)  
The pastor shook so badly  
I thought the book would bounce  
out of his hands. Perhaps  
he had forgotten to eat lunch.

(10)  
Alimony. From the Latin *alimonia*,  
sustenance, and *alere*, to nourish.

(11)  
Fate is a storm cloud,  
a whirlwind, a late night in a hotel  
lobby. Then the morning breaks,  
and you see.

(12)  
I show our son the calendar,  
when he will be where.  
He asks: Is it against the law  
to love more than one person  
at the same time?

(13)  
In my dreams your heart mends  
nicely, sets like gelatin.  
I unmold you, and you drift  
in calm waters.
The church was stifling. Out of the corner of your eye, you could not tell if I was perspiring or crying.

I did. I did. I did.
Breaking down is hard to do

Down doo-be doo  down-down  
Down doo-be doo  down-down  

And the sound of my heart  
pounds a mile underground —

Down doo-be doo  down-down  
Down doo-be doo  down-down  

I have slid into the pit,  
the dark tar of the drowned —

Down doo-be doo  down-down  
Down doo-be doo  down-down  

No sweet song can save me now;  
blessed be the tie, unbound —

Down doo-be doo  down-down  
Down doo-be doo  down-down  


The book of Sarah

But Sarah denied it, saying "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.
— Genesis 18:15

He did not choose me for my good looks, for the sweet peach of my complexion.

Everyone knows: it was my humor Abraham loved, the giggle rising from my haggard heart, the jubilance of my joke-making. Lo, the young girls dance with tambourines, but they smile only to entice. Not to please for a lifetime.

So come closer, let me entertain. Have you heard the one about the 90-year-old woman who got pregnant by her 100-year-old husband? You hoot! Ha! So did I one morning in the cool of my tent, my face buried in my palms, my belly tender and bloated as a river toad. I laughed until I cried. But when the Lord heard my laughter, he believed I was mocking him, and so he cursed me. Could he not see how wonderful I thought his comic timing? How powerful his punch line?

No, this Lord has no funny bone left — he tore the mirth from his body and gave it to the lady Eve. And you remember her story. So I shushed my delight and laughed no longer; I turned my face into a stone. Now each night I wake
to the howl of the hyena, her song pealing over the mountaintops. The cackling beast and her rabid music! Why does it not stir the rest of the world? I can feel a tickling inside me, a feather in my womb, convulsions of pleasure up my spine.

But it is too early; surely my labor will increase for days, and surely it will not feel this sublime. I do not disturb my Abraham, though the moon casts my face in a more favorable light. Instead, let me kneel in the dirt, lips sealed, throat stopped, so my prayer may be seen but not eavesdropped:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{God grant this child} \\
\text{his father's glory,} \\
\text{but do not deny him} \\
\text{his mother's wicked,} \\
\text{wicked wit.}
\end{align*}
\]
Hymns & hers

I have seen the face of God and it is split—
A charcoal line drawn down the midst of it.
The left side wears the countenance of queens;
The right, in shadow, the grave aspect of kings.

Half God's face, painted gladsome and pink,
And half, self-conscious, must turn the other cheek.
One eye winks with a glittering lid,
While its counterpart glowers upon our sins.

From which slant may I view my God clearly?
There is such scant light to perceive which earring
Dangles from which earlobe. Lord have mercy.
Could the queen be king, or perhaps vice versa?

Our father, our mother, host and hostess—
Behind the guise breathes the most holy of ghosts
Who sings a song from both corners of the mouth:
Amen! Awomen! O savior androgynous!
Diadem

*Fame of Myself to lack — Although
My Name be else Supreme —
This were an Honor honorless —
A futile Diadem —*

Emily Dickinson (no. 713)

(1)
At the end of the tunnel
there is white light, and a dress
of unfamiliar design.

(2)
The woman in the dress
sings spastic hymns,
strange nighttime rhymes,
and when Diana reaches
to touch the garment,
flashbulbs explode — wild lights! —
and the poetess whisks
her aloft, to a stratosphere
of blue gauze and silence.

(3)
The clocks, stricken
but unchiming. The eve of September,
summer fading to black.

(4)
On the way up, the horses
drawing the chariot wear blinders
over their eyes.

(5)
The princess, asleep in the back seat —
while the poetess writes straight
through the dawn, her hands
icy and cramping, ink blotting
the cuffs of her dress.

The ridiculous music
of vowels and consonants.
It does not stop:

Diana — diadem

dying — to Hide away —

Every night, the princess
has three nightmares, always
in this order. First, a speedboat,
careening wildly in the wind,
the driver’s hazel eyes flashing
go, go! Then her young sons,
drowning in a highland marsh.
Then the cloudburst. The sky darkens,
and a million magazine covers
pour from the sky, close-ups
of the princess’ face. She watches
as her image dissolves
in the mist, as the photos
melt into flowers when they hit
the ground.

Around the poetess’ neck
hangs a brass locket. Inside,
a sepia portrait of herself,
age 16, thin and severe,
lips pressed flat. The only
snapshot that survives.
Industry, the enemy of grief.
(Was it her father who told her this?) So she offers Diana a pair of work gloves and a cardigan sweater, escorts her to the garden.

Autumnal leftovers: potatoes, turnips, mums and asters, deep purple asters, their blooms the shape of stars.

Soon, a fourth nightmare. "Shooting stars!" the princess cries. A vase, hurled across the room. "Did I not tell you?" she whispers, helping to sweep up the shards. "This was how the photographers described their livelihood."

Feeble trinkets, words. Playthings of the brain! How the poetess wishes she could paint in oils, or dip her mind's eye in chemicals, nitrates of bold color.

In her own dark room, a child's song, transposed freakishly onto parchment:

When you Wish
Upon a Shooting star —

The next breakfast, she presses her locket into Diana's hand. "I should like to see myself in a new design."
(16)

Lights.

(17)

Camera. An old box model, balanced atop a rickety tripod. The princess squints, then requests that the poetess adjust her posture.

(18)

"I fear I will be unable to smile," says the poetess.

(19)

But it is too late, and the shutter captures everything in an instant, the morning sun igniting the poetess' hair like a sudden, gilded eclipse, as if the very top of her head has caught fire.

(20)

The princess pulls her hands from the camera's face, takes two steps back. On the earth below, the portrait floats in negative relief, white on black on blue. She must shade her eyes, for the picture is far too private and far too lovely to be believed.
II. The Best Actress

Go thy great way!
The stars thou meetst
Are even as Thyself —
For what are Stars but Asterisks
To point a human Life?

— Emily Dickinson
I come from a long line of loners.
We dwell in the middle of the middle
of the west, where there is much unrest.
So our silence has been hard-fought.

We sleep all night with the box fan on.
We must remember to latch the back gate.

Down the street, they are digging holes
for new houses in the dirt.
I go there, after school, to see
what the workers have left me.

In the shade of new, clean pine,
I raise an empty soda can
and make my toast:

welcome.
Fight song

(Omaha, 1977)

Me and the kid brother,
pre-game,
radio tuned
to KFAB,
1100 on Omaha’s
AM dial.
Big Red fever
scorches
the state,
Scottsbluff to Ogallala,
Valentine to McCook
to Fremont,
even down here
in the
basement.

Kickoff:
We run
pass formations
with a throw
pillow.
We clip and hold,
high-five and spike,
quarterback-draw
and go deep
depth
depth
for the
bomb.

Our mother and father,
non-spectators.
Upstairs,
cheerless in their
great American
pastime: trying
to call
the coin flip
without a
referee.
Halftimes,
my brother and I
huddle on
the sidelines,
drink sodas,
listen as the
Cornhusker marching band
strikes up our parents'
fight song.
What girls aren't supposed to know

(1)
There is no wind or rain on the moon, so the astronauts' footprints won't ever wash away.

(2)
If you tie an earthworm into a knot, it can free itself, Houdini-style, and wriggle back into the dirt.

(3)
The fastest way to clean a room is to throw everything in the closet.

(4)
In 1970, Tom Dempsey of the New Orleans Saints — who was born without a right hand and only half a right foot — kicked the longest field goal in NFL history (63 yards).

(5)
A good belch feels infinitely better than a good cry.

(6)
Forts may be made from a variety of materials, but snow works best.

(7)
Sometimes, after midnight, you can hear UFOs landing in the neighbor's yard.

(8)
The secret to winning a race is all in the start. At the sound of the gun, you explode.
The God of all snow days says no

so in the morning,
the munchkins
line up
for the bus,
backpacks stuffed
fat as turkeys.
Two girls,
boxing the cold
with inflatable
mittens,
puffing their breath
like cigars,
and two boys,
one with a plaid scarf
teaching the other,
hatless,
ears red as Russian
beets,
how to wipe
the fog
from his glasses.

They are like angels,
leaping
up and down
to stay
warm,
so close to flight,

and the bus,
grimed
and sloshing
to a halt, parting
its hot gates
to swallow them whole,
is hell
on
wheels.
Oscar night

I am 12 years old. I hold
a bottle of wine, cool
from the fridge but still corked.
Through its foggy glass,
the TV swims in dim, strawberry
light. My parents are asleep.
They do not care who the best
actress is.

From the sofa I rise and float
to the podium, wearing
a gown of emeralds and foolish,
satin heels. I gasp and weep
on cue: I have nothing
prepared. But with practice,
I can make my name appear
in the envelope.

Over and over I whisper
these speeches, hours beyond
bedtime, deep into the midnight,
because I already know
how to lose,
and I’m not sure who to thank
for that.
The death of superstars

Shrunken idol,
cool white dwarf,

you seem to have
lost your glimmer,

your prizes,
your good shoes.

The trades say
you are dying,

surviving only
through your stubborn

self-promotion.
You insist you’re fine,

full of vigor
and hot prospects;

nevertheless,
when you watch

the planets dance
and twirl,

you fear you
might explode,

and nothing
will stop you

from falling
off the map

while your
billions of fans

speed-read
the sky

with naked
eyes.
Steve McQueen and the sadness of the world

He got my fan letter on a Tuesday,
and three days later he’s parked
outside my parents’ house in a solid gold
‘67 Mustang. I leave a note on the fridge,
promise to make up my schoolwork
soon. I’m a good student.

He has never been to Nebraska before.
The flatness unspools ahead of us,
endless reels of blacktop and big rigs.
“Act like someone is chasing you,”
I say, and he laughs. I watch too
many movies. Then he floors it,
and we fly.

It will take 52 hours to get to Tijuana,
where he says the ocean smells like grapefruits
and you can buy almost anything for a dollar.
First, though, we have to stop in Dallas
to pick up two boys at a juvenile detention
center, then in Santa Fe for a homeless lady.
“Maybe I should have brought a bigger car?”
he asks. I tell him I love this one.

We drink root beers and turn the radio up loud.
I play the drums, two fingertips atop my knees.
He is the worst singer I’ve ever heard,
his voice raspy and off-rhythm. But he knows
all the words.

At dusk, he takes off his sunglasses.
His eyes float like blue planets on the surface
of the dash.

Then the night drops dark and heavy,
like a velvet curtain, or a fainting spell.
I fall asleep, slowly, in a cloud
of Steve McQueen’s cigarette smoke,

and when I awake, somewhere outside
Lindsay, Oklahoma, there’s a trooper
with a flashlight and a fat notepad in his hand,
and he wants to know why we're in such a goddamn hurry, and why the girl is wearing your jacket, sir, and I reach for the glove compartment, hoping for a gun, or maybe a smoke bomb, but all I find is a bundle of letters, a few black-and-white studio stills, and a bag of saltwater taffy.

Steve unwraps one of the taffies, hands it over to the trooper with a smile. "Well, officer," he says, scribbling his autograph on the speeding ticket, "I have cancer. And the kid here has a broken heart."
The solace of soap

You were always too quiet in the afternoons, mother. Your children, swallowed up in schoolrooms. Your arms, hot and labored with towels from the dryer, toys scattered like dust. By lunch your fingers twitched at the controls of your twin addictions: daytime drama and nicotine. You smoked for three hours straight, through all your favorite shows, and then you did dishes. You brushed your teeth. You took a nap. Even then I knew you were bored, and when I came home I would trace my finger across the screen's fine static, frosting upon a crackling cake, curling a heart or a peace sign or a "wash me" on the glass. Years later, on the phone long-distance, you tell me you were sure you would die before the age of thirty. When I ask why, you exhale slowly, a great, grey cloud brewing in your kitchen. "I don't know," you say. "Just a hunch."
What you find while ironing your father-the-banker's suits

1/2 stick spearmint gum
matchbook (Omaha Country Club)
name badge, with safety pin clasp: "LARRY"
wadded white handkerchief
1 charcoal grey button
tube of Blistex, steamrolled
2 Maalox, dust
37 cents (3 dimes, nickel, 2 pennies)
pocket change
yes sir.
A goodwill is hard to find

The rich are different. They find no beauty in old toothbrushes, no magic in broken lamps, no salvation in a three-legged chair. Why not purchase anew? Ah, why not mint money in mid-air.

Let them laugh as I stitch my stockings again. My cup runneth over with tea bags, lemon rind, fat rubber bands. Are there not a thousand uses for an empty egg carton? If you lift a jar of pennies to the rising sun, does it not shine like medallions? Give not short shrift to these sweet gifts. Sift for truth. Though the cheap skate round the edges of life, the thrifty thrive and thrive.
Shuttleboy

You get your first suitcase when you are three years old. On Fridays, you fill it with things you can’t find at your father’s apartment. Your favorite socks. The right kind of cheese curls. A mixing bowl, if you need to throw up in the middle of the night. During the ride over, you listen for golf clubs, rolling in the trunk like lumber. On Sundays, Mom teaches you how to unpack. Then you fall asleep, fast, jet-lagged, in one of your beds. You feel lucky: two beds are better than one. I have left for someplace called college. I have four suitcases, and I sit on them to make everything fit. My car always smells like cardboard boxes, even with the windows down. Our father buys a new house. I move to Kansas, to Des Moines. You learn to play “London Bridge” on a recorder. Mom gets a duplex, lets her custody run wild. You learn to tie your shoes, to dial long-distance. You ask: “Do you ever wonder where we came from? Like, who was the first Comine?” I move to Indianapolis, to Spokane. On the interstate, my record albums melt in the sun. That summer, you smack a stand-up double to left field and brush off your knees. But you are afraid to throw out your stuffed animals. “I believe,” you whisper, “they can hear me.” On your birthday, you get your own TV and a telephone in the shape of a rocket ship. You ask: “Who really shot JFK?” I land a new job, buy a bed. I am tired of sleeping on the floor. In school, you study the history of Canada. You mow the front yard by yourself. You eat chocolate chips out of a bag. You ask: “When are you coming to visit?” I listen carefully to how you phrase the question, the words you leave out.
Shuttlegirl

Take the A train to point B, and in between, take notes. How can you travel without travelogue? Keep your head down, your eyes on the page. If you never stop scribbling, no one will ask questions.

In the next town, rent an old Oldsmobile and drive only with your left hand. With the right, compose poems in your road atlas, on the wide open spaces of Nevada, Nebraska, North Dakota. There are fewer words in the middle of nowhere, more room to make your move.

You break down, inevitably, in a bus station bathroom, holding a ticket smeared with lipstick and your sister’s phone number. Where are you? she wonders, waltzing through the night with her portable phone. How can I help? On the back of your hand you reply in blue ink: beer, blankets, tow truck, hurry.

So you pack it in, start over. It’s like riding a bicycle, really. Or falling off. On weekends, you pedal fifteen miles to the airport, buy postcards at the gift shop. The jets leap into the sky with the grace of reindeer, and all around you families kiss each other goodbye. The postcards are slicker
than sheets of ice. You flip them over, slowly, and sign each one with the same P.S.: Weather is here. Wish I was fine.
A supermarket in Middle America
(April 6, 1997)

The morning after Ginsberg’s death, the Sunday after Easter Sunday,
a windstorm blasts this two-bit town to hell,

flips garbage lids and church-dressed kids, raises roof shingles
like magic carpets,

60 mph gusts of verses and hearses, flying the great gay poet
to his next gig, some smoky microphone, some hip corner
of the sky.

In the express line I’m buying a newspaper and a cup of coffee,
one dollar forty-seven cents, when the power goes out, the cash
registers crash, then resurrect themselves in the half-glare
of back-up generators —

and the Lord says: Let there be fluorescence, motherfuckers —

and the old man in front of me scratches a lottery ticket with his thumbnail,
wins nothing;

and in the next aisle, a cart full of children, who don’t know poetry
because it’s not out yet on videocassette;

and all these lonely women, with their grapefruit juice, dozen eggs,
paper towels, magazines, Sizzlelean, squeezing loaves of bread
like old lovers;

and these beautiful check-out boys, sixteen, seventeen, rolling groceries
into the cold, shirttails and ties dancing like veils, cheeks red,
hair swirling.

I read your obituary in the car, let the coffee exhale. “Candor ends paranoia,”
you say, and so I crack the window, just enough to hear your crazy
whistle, the sound of your storm siren singing.

Blessed be he whose voice still surfs on air! Blessed be he whose breath
haunts our parking lots, our concrete rows! Blessed be he
who wakes our faint-hearted, who nose-dives south by midwest,

who seeks out assholes, stale lives, endless new minds to blow!
Unfamilial

(after William Matthews)

The dinner hour, vanquished,
long past repast. I have eaten alone
for a decade now, life à la carte,

and any damn time I please. Ravioli
at midnight, cereal during sit-coms,
cheap paper towels crumpled in my palm.

Across the TV tray, the news anchors
grin but say no grace; the game show
hosts refuse to pass the pepper. Ungrateful
guest stars in my cramped family room,
and yet in their presence the house
feels full, their faces spying mine,

their voices buzzing like electrons
around my nucleus, as fast and loud
as I like, the company I keep under
remote control. Still, there are times
I prefer the silence of vegetables
cooling on my plate, the singular ping

of the microwave, that modern
cow bell: come and get it.
So it's not the chatter I miss,

(for with chatter inevitably came
argument, the clash of dishes
against kitchen walls). What I grieve

is the nightly ensemble of the table,
the idiosyncrasies of multiple forks,
clicking and falling, the array of odd
hospitalities: ketchup married
to eggs; bones carefully extracted
from cod; a teetering, multi-layered
gelatin mold, ushered from the fridge
to great applause. Then afterward,
all those elbows resting on linen,

and never any leftovers, not one
scrap. If I tried to explain the secret
to living alone, you would slap

my face: so much waste. Yet I
believe self-reliance is an acquired taste,
something that melts slowly

upon the tongue. On my own time,
I have learned to mind my manners,
clip coupons from the paper,
casserole recipes, tips for energy
conservation. I do the dishes
almost every day, I swear, sculpting

Towers of Babel from suds
in the sink, and before I pick up
the phone, before I find your number

in my brave black book, I swear
I remember to dry my hands.
The telephone receiver is pricked

with holes, like the top of a salt
shaker. I toss it over my shoulder
for good luck, or something

in that neighborhood, and then
I ring you up.
On the meeting of Anne Frank and Jackie Robinson in heaven

She is still a frail bird, with circles under her eyes. The claustrophobia has followed her here. Most days she stays crouched, slumping and immobile, staring out a window that will not open in her mind. Her stomach answers only to potatoes. Her journals are full of poems about trains and blue ghosts and wire.

In the spring, he slips a note under her door. Dear Anne, it says. Every time I stepped onto that field I was afraid.

He has heard of her fondness for hats, so he brings a Brooklyn cap, plus a soft, well-worn mitt, to the park. Her hands are cramped and brittle, an old woman’s, but her reflexes are sharp. The ball falls into her palm, safe and solid and stinging like a small sun, and she laughs out loud.

She tires quickly, though, and has to sit down, cross-legged, on the dirt. Please, Mr. Robinson, she says, in a strange and musical English. Now you will show me this, what they call, home run?

The sky smells like new turf, like popcorn, like the biggest city in the world.

And when she tips her cap, exactly like he taught her, she can hear the crowd behind her. They are cheering, and she is beginning to recognize every one of their faces.