2003

Calling their names: a historical genealogy in personae poems

Mary Anne Henson Saunders

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Henson Saunders, Mary Anne, 'Calling their names: a historical genealogy in personae poems' (2003). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations, 16242.

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16242

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Calling their names: A historical genealogy in personae poems

by

Mary Anne Henson Saunders

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Jane Davis, Co-Major Professor
Todd F. Davis, Co-Major Professor
Joanna Courteau

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2003

Copyright © Mary Anne Henson Saunders, 2003. All rights reserved.
Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Mary Anne Henson Saunders

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
Dedicated to all Grandmothers – past, present, and future. (And one or two of the grandfathers.)
Table of Contents

Section One: *Blastocyst*  
New Year’s Eve,  
Aunt Tack’s Easter Advice, 1855  
Amanda Alberson’s Dress, 1847  

Section Two: *Chorionic Villi*  
Mary Henson  
Says Lazerus:  
Malarchi Holder  

Section Three: *Primary Oocytes*  
Mary  
Mary Henson, Mary Henson  
The Last Time I Saw Her  

Section Four: *Mitosis*  
Three O’Harra Women  
Bobie Max Remembers  
Hannah Elderton, Worries  

Section Five: *Quickening*  
Yes, I Channel My Grandmothers  
Susan Ragains,  
Sarrah Jane Early Conceives  
Sarrah Jane’s Husband  

Section Six: *Alveoli*  
Elmoira’s Son  
Ella’s Thoughts on Poetry  
Levi Lemuel Beene  
Mary Clerken  

Section Seven: *Effacement*  
Mary Elizabeth Elderton  
Mary Louisa O’Harra:  
Martha Cartright: Gone to Texas  
Aarron Speaks to Louisa Brown  

Section Eight: *Multipara*  
Great Granny Annie  
Margaret  
Sarah Stays in Virginia
Acknowledgements

I want to thank all the professors without whose advise and encouragement this project would never have been completed: Mary Swander, Sheryl St. Germain, Steve Pett, Kathy Whitcomb, Neil Nakadate, Kathy Hickok, and John Levis. Deb Marquart devised the concept abstract and assured me that a smaller collection of these poems was worthy of a Focus Grant. Joanna Courteau showed me the project from new perspectives. Jane Davis encouraged me and kept my spirits up during many long drives back and forth from Ames to Des Moines. Todd Davis helped me see the project as a whole. I would also like to thank those fellow students who read and re-read these poems: Lauren Allyene, Erika Mueller, Joan Stewart, Jenny Brooks White, Sean Whalen, Dustin Anderson, and Margaret Okere. Of course, the support of my family has also been invaluable.
In our astronomy
the Great Wolf
lived in sky.
It was the mother of all women
and howled her daughter's names
into the winds of night.
The Fallen
Linda Hogan
Section One: *Blastocyst*

About seven or eight days after fertilization, the blastocyst, a hollow ring of cells, implants in the lining of the uterus and the secretion of hormones that indicate pregnancy begins.
New Year’s Eve,
Albert Pike, Arkansas, After the Wolves Came Back

Two sisters read Hamlet
as they camp in the woods,
their hearts open
to renewed life,
their thoughts drawn
to being and not.

Coppery foothills pierced
in yellow pine, rocky
with quartz, carved
slick in rapids, nestle
the campers below
Little Missouri Falls.

Recently reintroduced wolves
raise their first cubs
on this southern edge
of the Ouachita Forest.

To the south and east,
worried ranchers cling
to meager profits raise
nervous chickens
suffer nobly for Tyson.

* 

Two daughters dance firelit,
sing of slings and arrows,
and stand on the brink
of two centuries —
two millennia —
opposing,

Cliff walls surround
the firelit dancers.
A rivulet slows,
hears them dream.
From ridge top to ridge top
wolves circle.
The voices of the wolves hold
clicks and clacks, metal
electronic screams, moans,
barks, and tinny laughter.

The guns of the chicken ranchers
split and crack, repeat
dry warnings,
heartaches.
barbed expletives.

* 
Two women dance firelit,
eat chocolate, drink spumante,
quote Hamlet. Crystal holds
the firelight echoes
the wolves songs
dreams of time.

Shadows of pine
fringe the firelit singers
of pangs and spurns.
Yonder, over the next rise,
ancient headstones crumble
inside the wolf circle.

The voices of the wolves run
down to the east, pop,
skip, repeat up to the west,
eddy, wave crescendo.

The guns of the chicken ranchers
grunt and sweat, imply
chagrin,
bark dry fears,
scorn.

* 
Two wives dance firelit,
sing of undiscovered countries,
stand on the brink
of two centuries —
two millennia —
sashay and purl
the wolves circle.
Hills, valleys, and farms drift
in native hues, one ear
cocked to hear the wolf songs,
odies leaning to orchestrate
explosions, see the lights disappear
outside the wolf circle.

The voices of the wolves hold
squeals and quacks, quavering
human cries, barks,
shiny laughter.

The guns of the chicken ranchers
cower and spit, repeat
flaccid ejaculations,
whines and moans,
beg.

*  
Two mothers dance firelit, shout
eulogies, will the puzzles
resolved, damn centuries, pray
for new millennia.
Bare jagged rocks
and embers fly.

Night sky revolves,
constellations flash.
Moons grow red.
Summoned, their mother
steps out of her
funeral pyre.

The daughters dance firelit.
Cold stars envelope
their grandmothers.
The voices of the wolves hold
screams, laughter,
human cries.
The guns of the chicken ranchers
repeat dry warnings,
barbed expletives.
Thoughts pale.
Aunt Tack’s Easter Advice, 1855

If I tell you it’s Easter, then you dye your eggs.

I’ll never forget it.
The Planting Moon Dance was finally come.
We were all dressin’ in our best gingham frocks
and wool stockin’ s. Mine was a pale red,
the color of sunset. Material come by steamboat
all the way from St. Louis, ordered
from the Sears Catalogue clear back in January.
Got to use the new treadle Singer
all by myself for the first time.
We were to listen to Uncle Red’s fiddle,
Aint Annie’s pianny. Plates of teacakes,
cracklin bread and fried pies were on the
sideboard. We’d been baking for two days
straight. Me’n my sisters -- Cordie, Georgie Mae,
Vera and Velma -- we’d washed and ironed our hair,
blacked our boots, laid out three petticoats each.
The last to finish dressin’, I pulled a gaping hole
in my only stockin’s – we all wore them black ones
I put up a fuss ‘cause it were my first dance
and I, only thirteen or so, hopin’ to spin a reel
or two with Hodgie Splam. He had this fine black
silky mustache all the girls were anxious to kiss.
Aunt Tack – her real name was Lillie Mae,
I don’t know why we called her Tack –
she nipped my hissy fit right in the bud.
I’ll never forget it. Quit your caterwaulin’
she said. Just smut your leg and go on.

Easter Fraiser
b. 1850 -- Marion County, Tennessee
d. 18??
My father’s maternal great grandmother
Levi Lemuel’s mother
Amanda Alberson’s Dress, 1847

I scythe one quarter acre of flax reeds
rot the stalks in water, break, scutch
and hackle across metal-toothed boards,
separate, align the fibers.

Spin three weeks on the low wheel,
weave one month, then cut and sew
the linen for one chemise,
three petticoats, one corset –
twenty whalebone stays in twenty closed seams,
crochet the edging top and bottom,
double line ten lacing openings --
embroider each with thirty tiny roses and larkspur.
I can make a pair of white linen stockings, triple
cable stitched up both sides, in five days.

Shear three sheep, clean and card the wool,
I spin one month on the high wheel.
Collect blue flag iris root,
black walnut hulls, lady bug beetle shells,
In one year, I’ll have enough for two weeks dyeing.

Loom weave for one month
and I make wool cloth for one dress.
Four yards for the ankle length skirt
gathered above the waist,
one yard for bodice,
full length sleeves and pelerines.
Fifteen hooks and eyes
close the center front opening.

Embroider – French knots, satin
and outline – two thousand
sixty two silk stitched vines, leaves,
petals, and flower centers
to decorate the bodice, neck, sleeve
and skirt hems. I purchase the thread
at Floyd’s Mercantile, a half-day drive,
for one dollar and seventeen cents.

The dress to serve my wedding,
and years of Salem Baptist Sundays after.
Section Two: *Chorionic Villi*

The outer cells of the blastocyst are covered with small fingerlike projections called chorionic villi, which burrow into the uterus until they become bathed in the mother’s blood eventually forming the basis of the placenta.
Mary Henson

I was born July, 1780. Fathah, a horse kicked him in the head when I was but three, pained all over nearly a year, until he shot himself. Named Elijah Henson, second cousin twice removed to Aaron’s fathah, called Lazerus. Lazerus kilt his sistah’s husband with a pitchfork for fighting on the wrong side of the war. Complained of it his dying day, though he lived to ninety-two.

Mary
b. 1780 Chatham County, North Carolina (?)
d. after 1850 Carroll County, Georgia (?)
my father’s paternal great + 2 grandmother
Says Lazerus:

It were in the spring seventeen hundred eighty, and I were drafted for three months. Served under Captain Goldson. And General Ramsey, Colonel Literal, Major Birdsong the field officers. Attached to General Gates army, marched from Chatham to Camden, South Carolina. I weren’t in the battle. Ordered to stand guard over the wagons. The Brits won that one. I volunteered again with Captain Goldson and General Ramsey. I were a lieutenant in a light horse battalion to suppress the Tories. We marched the country on Deep River and Rocky River, went over as far as the Pedee River until my time was out.

It were me and my six brothers, (we all married Holder women) our Sister and her husband Jacob White come from Virginia to North Carolina. Then the War broke out. We whole seven took up arms and Jacob too, fought for Independence. Only one, Edmun, wounded. He lost three fingers to a cannon ball, leaving thumb and forefinger sound on the right hand. Then Jacob White turned Tory near the close, was badly wounded the first day.

Course I done it! We all done it. It were our sworn duty to kill Tories. Traitor thought he would get commissioned, lord it over us when they won. Chose the losing side he did. We took care of him with knives, we did. Course Edmun had to use his left hand, but we all got a lick in. Didn’t tell Sister, but she figured it. Begged us to bury him. We done that for her too.
Malarchi Holder  
Sets Lazerus’ Story Straight

Did he tell you that? He weren’t even to home!  
Me milking in the barn when this wounded  
Tory strolls in, asks for help. Had him lay  
on clean straw. Offered fresh milk. Said I’d fetch  
bandages. Safronia and Clarabel  
was over to the creek drawing water.  
(Hotheads run off seeking Glory ‘thout digging  
a well in first. And me with three babes in arms.  
Aaron not yet five.) I waved my  
sisters over. We’d stayed together  
‘til land was cleared, cabins built. Safronia,  
Clarabel the last ones. War slowed things down.

We went in the barn together.  
I hit him in the head with the club ax.  
Clarabel poked him in the neck with a pitchfork.  
Safronia covered him with straw. Lazy  
come home a week later and buried him.  
We recognized him alright.

Lazerus Henson II  
b. 1752 Stafford County Virginia  
d. 1839 Paulding County Georgia  
my father’s great + 3 grandfather

Holder woman  
b. around 1760 Virginia  
d. Prior to 1800 North Carolina  
My father’s great + 3 grandmother
Section Three: *Primary Oocytes*

The germ cells of a woman contain 46 chromosomes including two X sex chromosomes.
Mary

No maiden name, no date of birth, no marriage bond. 
A life marked in censuses, deeds, bills of sale. Here 
her signature, beside a witness's mark –X.

Items inventoried upon the death of her 
husband in 1835: spinning wheel, flat 
iron, five case knives, four forks, five table spoons, pine

chest, pewter dish, coffee mill, tin pan, earthen pitcher, 
cotton reel. Purchased in the subsequent auction, 
presumably for her personal use: bedroom, 
kitchen furniture – seventeen dollars, and one 
cow bell – one dollar thirteen and a half. Funeral 
expense – thirty three thirty seven.

1850, age 70, Mary Henson, 
shown residing with daughter, son-in law. 

1860, no trace.
Mary Henson, Mary Henson

Deeds of sale, 1821 list two Negro girls, both Nancy, sold four hundred fifty dollars. Mothah and daughtah- they were bartah from a business deal—I made Aaron sell them. Our house full already of women. Could have used a new mule. Two freemen, Harris Dark, Beal Brooks, their names were, wanted them for wives. Said they were going to the Sea Islands, in South Carolina. Lazerus, won land in the Georgia Lottery, Franklin County, 1825. And so we all left. Many hands needed to work new land.

In the 1832 lottery, Aaron won one hundred sixty Walker acres.

Wild fringes of stolen Cherokee land. We didn’t steal it. Andrew Jackson give it to us. He told them judges they couldn’t keep us off it. Them Indians had houses and schools way up there. Children singing Christian songs. I hid the deed when Aaron died. Didn’t include it in the auction. Made all my children sign the papers. Darcy’s husband cain’t even read! Had to make a mark. Give the land to the Church. Took fifteen years.
The Last Time I Saw Her

Think of my mother with mint julep,
frosty Waterford glass, iced tea sipped
through a straw out on the veranda.

A bow on her hat and crocheted white gloves.
That isn’t her. She steps on plastic tumblers
climbing down from the couch where

she adjusts the curtains after the dog jumps
barking at the mailman, disturbing her crossword
light. She had been sofa lying, insulated

plastic of iced tea in the floor beside her.
Then she stepped on it. Broke her arm.
Yes, there was always a straw.

Dad says on their honeymoon, Mama broke her foot
falling from a tree. Southern women supposedly
are poised, prim, but she was raised in California.

I do not want to see her naked,
her bladder a goose egg protruding
from the vaginal wall, the tube for

her dialysis hanging in a bloody loop from
her stomach – a pink bow. My daddy,
her caretaker, complains that her pills

make her horny. For the first time
in their forty years he has to say, “No.”
“They’re male hormones, “ she says.

I want to see her in California playing
basketball, zone defense at five-three. Want to see
her as a child playing ball with a Christmas orange

until there’s light enough to recognize and eat
it. Hear her say, “Your dad had a date with my neighbor
until he caught sight of me. That was the last

he saw of her.” His reply varies: “She looked
like Shelley Winters,” or “She had a car.” She says,
“I set a mousetrap and caught my husband in it.”
Watch her run to Daddy, home from the Navy.
Her foot all healed from the honeymoon
And the tree, where “I didn’t fall. I jumped.”

Inez Watterson Henson
b. November 26, 1927 – Treece, Kansas
d. December 12, 1995 – Shreveport, Louisiana
My mother
Section Four: *Mitosis*

The growth of new cells.
Three O’Harra Women
Head for California

Laura Jane Fawbush, 1893

On the northwest bank of the Blue River
we harvest maple sap for sugar.
Tap trees Spring and Fall for clearest risings,
sweet on fingers like slippery water.
We collect it in buckets of copper –
heats quicker, lasting. Boil down to granules that
keep better, light for the float downriver.
Raft from Salem, to Milltown, White Cloud, three
days. The Ohio, one more. Too hilly
to carry much muleback. High bluffs, hickory,
oak meander longside the silver blue
water. That day, I clambered on the raft.
Mary Louisa barely one year old in my
arms. Ed and his mother but to follow.

Mary Louisa O”Harra, 1898

No, No, No, No one floats a flatboat
from Indiana to California!
Once you reach the Ohio, you take a
paddleboat to St Louis where steamboat
Western Engineer takes you upriver
on the Missouri all the way to Mound
City. They say I was too little,
cannot remember the spray on my face,
the smell of hot steam, rumble of engines,
sway of the deck, bald eagles that swooped, dove
for fish at the boat Captain’s shrill whistle,
barges passing, heaped with barrels, boxes,
people going, people coming, people
waiting, hoping, but I still dream of it.

Sarrah Jane Early, 1911

We kept to Mound City Missouri
four years. Worked excavating mounds
for the new museum in Kansas City.
There huge crowds come to see Vanishing Indians.
Mormons headed west through the desert.
We chose south, took the Santa Fe
railroad to Oklahoma, Indian Territory.
Hartshorne? I’m heart less. These last twenty years
seen much moving, nothing settled. Men’r always digging
coal, lead, turquoise, copper. Just rocks, you ask me.
Fever gets ‘em. They think this hole’ll be better
than the last. Without heart,
ripped of it, I’m eighty-two.
I’ll see Mary Louisa done better afore I go.

Laura Jane, 1932

Ah! California. O
the dustless air. Beyond those hills,
ocean. Some say it lifts and curls
all the way to the edge
of evening, but content
to stay where oranges smell
of heaven, I do not
ask for more. M’Louisa’s
ill, she’ll not last much more.
I shall follow soon after.
Grandchildren will thrive
here. Traveling’s done.
Sure they won’t scatter far.

Mary Louisa O’Harra Watterson
b. April 22, 1892 – Salem, Indiana
d. August 14, 1932 – Tulare, California
My maternal grandmother

Sarrah Jane Early O’Harra
b. 1829, Indiana
d. Dec. 30, 1911, Hartshorne Oklahoma
Mary Louisa’s grandmother; Laura Jane’s mother-in-law

Laura Jane Fawbush O’Harra
b. Nov. 7, 1872, Salem, Indiana
d. 1933, Tulare, California
Mary Louisa’s mother
Stoop shoulders, breasts sagging
past the waist of her cotton
print dress, her cloud white hair
crowning her circular face.
Roman nose between fierce
eyes: a hoary barn owl.

I can’t remember her
face, just the thin, white hair
tumbled down. She could sit
on it then. Combed over her
shoulder as she told us
stories about rabbits
who outfoxed foxes.

She hoarded peppermint,
dried apricots locked in
a trunk under her bed.
If your chores were done well,
she’d take the iron key worn
on a red silk ribbon
around her wrist, open
the trunk, let you choose.

Took us to the woods where
we turned rocks over. She
was just sure we would find
a big pot of gold.

Made me wear asafetida
tea in a bag around
my neck ‘til I went to school.
Said it kept rigors, other
childhood diseases away.
Must of worked like the warm
urine she poured in my ear
that time it hurt so bad
all I could see was white.
She recited a Bible verse
to make bleeding stop.

Bobie Max Remembers
Grammy ‘Liza
Daddy told me once they went riding in his Model-T. It had no doors. Her bonnet blew off and she bailed out rolling on the ground before he stopped. Unhurt, brushing dirt when he arrived. Her bonnet on.

Barefoot, dooryard dancing, she taught me do-si-do and allemand left while Daddy fiddled Little Redwing from the porch. She’d throw her head back and laugh her operatic laugh.

Eliza Jane Flatt Beene
1865 – 1949 Annie’s mother
My father’s grandmother
Bobbie Max is the name on my father’s birth certificate.
Hannah Elderton, Worries
About the Census Taker, 1850

Why did he put that check mark by my name? Does he think I am a Jew? These freckles won’t make him think Negro. Do they look for me back in Philly? I have three children now. Will they drag me back to service? Those people were evil. She hit me. He .... William brought me here building railroads. We’ve our own house now. One hundred dollars, it cost us. Can they take it? They cannot take it?! They cannot take me back?! We’re in Ohio now. Come back here, Mister. Why’d he put that mark there? By my name?

Hannah Spaiser Elderton
b. 1826, Pennsylvania
d. ?
My mother’s great grandmother
There are three choices in the column labeled “Color” White, Black, Mulatto.
Section Five: *Quickening*

At about 19 weeks, women who are pregnant for the first time usually feel fetal movements frequently described as “the fluttering of a butterfly.”
Yes, I Channel My Grandmothers

(metempsychosis)

Occasionally they rise
unbidden seek a wake

at 3 a.m. challenge
poems script elude

my shadow halo
microfiche negatives

spool centurion
indecipherable calligraphy

collect cross catalogue
spell vary index sound

subtract date age
poltergeist stare

see past crystal balls
convert fact enjamb

image wonder what exact
couplets could metaphor

one life sit lotused salt
circle candle pentagrams

scroll face yellow blue
washes google historical

societies burn sage study
vernacular automate

iambs meditate smell book mold
diaries letters newspapers

incant rhyme stack libraries hide
poetry desires scribble

sit eyes closed pencil poised open
to spirit séance no answers line
breaks type metaphysical
questions quilt crazy patterns
from datum scraps envision
physical temporal
place draw tarot cards
trace old blood lines
cross ancient maps know
no magic personae

speak poetic rites
tat tall tales from brittle deeds
seek energy fields
sepia photographs
rapidly whisper
shower argue

*Did he say that* Don't
say rape I took him

dont bother me tell the story
this way You call that a poem

*It doesn't even rhyme*
soap tile note wish

nakedly for pencil paper
bother linguistics professors
authenticate diction
regional historical
accuracy count
syllables craft

anapests consult
mediums map topological

terrain read nature guides
herbologies Ouija boards
cast I-Ching follow
migration trails railroad

manifests steamboat
dockets territorial

statehood graphs sense new census
poems unearth forgotten

cemeteries sift dust
and sing bone shards
Susan Ragains,
Carroll County, Georgia, 1828

Five slaves are not nearly enough.
And, they're only field hands.
Two hunnert two'n half
acres won't bring cotton
enough to pay for their keep.
The Doughertys have sixteen.

Four of 'em house slaves.
We need to raise corn, grain
chickens, turkeys, ducks, pigs,
sweet 'taters just to feed
us. Who's it do to with five?
The McKessons fourteen.

We need all five hunnert
five acres 'tween Punkin'
Vine Creek and Chatahoochee
River. Soil's fertile,
but too taken in knotty
pine and tamarack trees.

Sand Hill's to the east.
The Cherokee left here
only two years ago.
Land's never seen a plow.
The Fairchilds have forty
and they're on no plantation.

Need leas' twice five hunnert
five to make a decent
livin'. Who's it to build
my fine new house? Cabin
life vexes me. My hands
rough, cracked, my face spotted
from sun. Who's it to churn
butter while I crochet?
If I'm to sing shaped notes
ever' Sunday in choir,
I've got to have more help!
How'm I to practice my
accordian, French harp?
How to improve my place
among seventy one
members of Asbury
Methodist Church? We all
God-fearin’, God-lovin’

good Christian people. Not
nearly enough! And it’s
not like I’d eat squirrel
shot on Sunday, fried
or stewed. Unlike some, I’d
not ev’n touch the gravy.

Susan Ragains
b. ? Tennessee?
d. ? after 1850, Carroll County, Georgia
my father’s great + 2 grandmother
and my father’s great + 3 grandmother
Sarrah Jane Early Conceives
Her First Child in 1868

My life began again at forty,
His sweat-slicked back, his ruddy hands,
paint streaked face, and braided hair,
green sunlight washed through the open skirt
of that Red Maple. Delaware, Piankeshaw,
who can say these twisted names? Those savages
near civilized now, more’s the pity.
What silk can do what buckskin does?
When Will’s rifle fired, we both ran off.
I circled back and took up the musket.
Damn man’s gun never did shoot straight.
With child at last – a son –
my life began again in Salem, Indiana.

Sarrah Jane Early O’Harra
b. 1829, Indiana
d. Dec. 30 1911, Hartshorne Oklahoma
My mother’s great great grandmother
In Indian uprisings, I
took a musket ball to upper thigh,
I rid us of those naked beasts.
Whilst Union Regulars fought off
cotton soft Johnny Reb down South,
I saved hearth and home, led
Home Guard boys ‘gainst real
enemies. Some of ‘em even tried
to rape a poor man’s wife. I
nearly got off a clean shot
with my new rifle, but
a drunken bastard shot at
me from behind them Maple trees.
I seen her get away though,
he hadn’t time to touch her.

William Martin O’Harra
b. March 15, 1823 – Florence, Alabama
d. December, 1889 – Salem, Indiana
My Mother’s great great grandfather
Section Six: *Alveoli*

Milk is produced in lobes of milk-secreting tissue, called the alveoli, deep within the breast and is carried to the nipple in the milk ducts.
Elmoira’s Son
Mustered into the 101st Illinois Infantry, September, 1862

Look, A.L. Got a letter from the boy!
Thank God! Says he was captured at Holly Springs, Mississippi, not hurt, John’s not hurt!
He’s at Benton Barracks in St Louis.
I hope he stays there ‘til the end of this wretched war. Oh! Let’s load up the wagon,
it’s not far -- three days at most --
we could take him blankets and food.
We could see those iron ships they’re building!
We take enough pies and biscuits, surely
they will let us see him ‘cause it’s Christmas.
We’ve plenty maple sugar to spare. Says he’s signed papers not to bear arms against Southern forces. Perhaps we could bring him home. A.L., get the wagon! I’ll get the children.

Elmoira?
b. 1814 - North Carolina
d. prior to 1880 - Illinois?
my mother’s great grandmother
Ella Cartwright does not want to be a poem.
Strong, made of work, she backs her quilts with chicken
feed sacks. 100 lbs, Horseshoe Mills, Pine Bluff Ark.
No time for pies, fancy cakes, her recipes for
cracklin’ bread, purgatives, soap. No time for dancing,
she has chickens to pluck.

Ella Cartwright does not want to be in a poem.
Broad of cheekbone and shoulder, she sits erect
Unbent, unflinching, without support from the wooden
kitchen chair. Her husband seems smaller than she is.
He keeps the books at the sawmill. Two barefoot boys,
wearing kneepants, stand solemnly at their father’s knee.
Their sister Ruth, covered in baby flounces, in Ella’s
lap. She will one day have silver hair, translucent skin,
and that same straight back. Many of her progeny
will be surprised to look up into her unlined face
at such an ancient woman.

Ella Cartwright does not want to read a poem.
She knows that carpenters have no need of such things.
*Words don’t amount to a fart in a whirlwind.*
She tells her slight husband to take off his glasses,
stop his *high falutin’* reading of newspapers.
She tells him the Hensons were just shoemakers. She
knows this because her husband’s grandmother was also
a Cartwright. She calls my grandfather, Aaron, Earl,
*useless as tits on a boar hog,* threatens to *jerk
a knot in his ass,* when she finds him *loafing* with
a book. She says, *The Bible’s the only thing to read and it’s the preacher’s job to do.*

Ella does not want her grandchildren to write poems.
She wants them to earn a living, not *frither* away
their days, be dignified, use their *noggins for once,*
their hands for hard work. She wants them *countnified*
like her other son, Dewey. The one who worked ‘til
he was eighty in the sawmill her father built.
The one who, after, Velma, his wife of fifty years
died, married a woman thirty years his junior. The
one who, widowed twice at ninety-five, shot and skinned
four rabbits, two squirrels, then cooked his weekly stew
on the same day he died.
Ella does not want poems about her ancestors. She says, *Ain’t you got the sense God give a goose? Them poems won’t last ‘til the water gets hot. Them poets crooked as a barrel of snakes. That white stuff on chicken shit? That’s chicken shit too.* She knows who her parents and grandparents are. As for the rest, *They all dead anyway.*

Ella Cartwright Henson
1876 – 1919 Texas
My father’s grandmother
Levi Lemuel Beene  
Was a Mean Man

He beat a mule to death  
slapping on muddy slopes  
hauling logs to the sawmill.

Caught his wrist in pulley  
belts that turned the saw,  
then jerked his own arm off.

The doctor, who put a  
bucket by his bed, said,  
"Here, kick this anytime."

Levi pitched the bucket  
right back at the doctor  
and hit him in the head.

Later, Levi fell from  
a wagon late at night.  
Annie found him next morning

still lying in the road.  
He appeared to have been  
run over once or twice.

Walked with a crutch after that.  
His friends called him "Timber."  
"Show me your pecker," he'd

say to his grandson. "I'll  
give you a quarter if  
I like it." Then he laughed

at the unbuttoned grandson,  
said, "Nope. I don't like it."  
Sawed the branch off the elm

summer of 1919  
when a man was lynched  
in the town square. Escaped

the Klansmen who chased him.  
Plastered snuff on the welts
from a yellow-jacket sting.

Killed pain. At ninety-two when he broke his other arm and couldn’t walk. He said,

“If I’d a knowd I’d live this long, I’d taken better care a myself” and died.

Levi Lemuel Beene
Eliza’s husband
b. November 13, 1865 – Corinth, Mississippi
d. April 14, 1958 – Gilmer, Texas
My father’s grandfather
Mary Clerken

My mother did not name me after you.
She only knew her mother's name, Mary.
No idea who her great grandparents were.
Her grandparents long dead before she came.

She didn't dream you tatting, weaving linen,
in the central highlands before Erie
reclaimed itself. Didn't know you sent your son,
John Watterson, born amidst famine, off
to America, where you would never
see him again. A preserved VA letter
says you and husband Charles were Ireland residents:
Dervane, Parish Donagh, County Monaghan.

Mama dreamt not of Celtic gods, dolmens,
crannogs from Emerald Isles, she knew no
seanachie legends, Donegal scholars,
had no taste for whiskey cake, soda bread.

I dug through musty census records, scanned
maps for Dervane Ireland, searched military
history in Arkansas, assumed my
ancestor killed the buffalo, displaced
the Indians, patrolled the US border.
My mother did not know his travel stories.
How he met the next Mary, married her.
Didn't know the town where her father was born.

Huntington, Arkansas, where your John’s
buried, mine’s in Oklahoma. My John,
a musician in Company 101,
Illinois Volunteer Infantry, fought

in the Civil War. Yours too young for that.
And of course you are not my grandmother.
And so I do not have to imagine you
Although I already have.
Section Seven: *Effacement*

In preparation for labor, the cervix begins to thin, or efface, then dilate.
Mary Elizabeth Elderton
In Huntington, Arkansas, 1888

This too rocky soil --
its copper and quartz,
iron lumped
in gnarl-rooted trees.

This too sticky heat --
its damp dragging
lindsey-woolsey 'round
dust-stiffened skirt hems.

These too-hilly knolls --
where no corn will grow,
no decent 'taters, no tobacco.
Steeps too tough to plow.

'Course I'll not weep
o'er what's been spilt
nor beg my man return us home
to Missouri nor Illinois.

I'll wash coal dust off
his trousers, bear him
more sons, see them wed.
Whistle yellow trills to canaries.
Mary Louisa O’Harra:
Her life in Photos

This photo shows you in a faded, shapeless dress, center-parted hair pulled back sloppily. Behind you unpainted clapboards scoured by dust. Dorthea Lange’s famous depression photo could be you. Your eyes faded too.

Should I read Steinbeck to find you? Bearing children in Oklahoma towns as you moved westward — Hartshorne, Scipio, McCloud, Seiling — one, three, five, nine years apart. Mining coal? Building railroads?

Were you looking for gold or oranges in Tulare, California? Traveling with your youngest still an infant, my mother only four. Your five other children. Husband, sister, five brothers, your mother.

Echoing her life, her travels from Indiana to Missouri to Oklahoma. Children born in each spot. You, barely six when you arrived in “nineteen ought four.” Did you ever call any place home?
Hartshorne, Oklahoma? You were married there fourteen years later. The buffalo were gone. Perhaps you saw Indians in the Wild West Show? You do not look like Annie Oakley in this wedding photo. Husband in a suit, white tie. You were too late to win a land rush. Saw Oklahoma become a State. I suppose you came by wagon, left for California piled in a truck.

In this photo, my grandfather wears ragged overalls, two of your sons flank him, proud of their tin six-shooters. Dated “1932 or ’33.” You are not there. Is that a palm tree? My mother, wearing overalls, no shirt, plays in sand with her toddler brother behind them. Your obituary says you were forty. Did you see the ocean before you died?
Martha Cartright: Gone to Texas

Pregnant with your seventh, you hid children and horses in a ravine watching Union soldiers smash the rifle found hidden under the mattress between slats of your bed. Did a “sugar sop” quiet them? Were you there again when the Battle of New Hope Church raged practically in your backyard? Sixteen hundred

US soldiers dead that end of May, ‘64. A small Confederate victory against Sherman’s devastating march. Were you tired too easy hiding then, the birth of your daughter just forty days away? You must have been a wild one, eloping Christmas Eve at fourteen. Some romantic notions got from

a man nearly twenty years older. You slipped from the church during the candle lighting ceremony. He told plentiful stories ‘bout the night the stars fell

on Atlanta (Halley’s Comet amidst a meteor shower of proportions not seen before in North America) that spooked his horses, overturned his wagon. Not the world’s end, just your third birthday. Was he already talking about Texas? You settled Cherokee lands in Georgia, survived Northern Aggression, and needed more adventure. Had to load up a wagon, seven children, travel overland seven hundred miles in winter –

a trip that took two months – before you were thirty five. Drove south from Temple, toward Tuskegee, then west through Montgomery, Alabama, Jackson, Miss.,

saw the damage still at Vicksburg, skirted swamps in Louisiana, crossed into Texas near Shreveport. They say you were small, looked like an overgrown doll

behind the counter of that Simpsonville store you ran for thirty years while husband and sons took wagon trains of cotton bales to Jefferson, returned with
staple goods, calico, gallons of Kentucky bourbon shipped by steamboat down the Mississippi, the Sabine. Did you meet gunslingers and Texas Rangers?

Were your thoughts on your husband, dead at eighty, three years before, when your heart stopped at your daughter's front yard gate where you had walked five miles just to visit?

Martha Cartright Henson
b. 1832 Carroll County, Georgia
d. 1895 Simpsonville, Texas
My father's great grandmother
I tended your rose bushes
and fruit orchard forty three years after
you passed. Dead ten years, you missed the gun
battle in 1900, that killed
your son, wounded me, sent your
brothers to Indian Territory.
Two murder indictments with malice
aforethought dismissed 1903
for lack of evidence.

Tennessee born, near Nashville, at ten
you climbed aboard a steamboat, three years
before our Upshur County marriage.
By twenty, you had seven children.
You worried about taking them from
the safety of my parents’ cleared land.
Home, a big front porch, a through hallway
that separated kitchen, dining
from the living area (where your

mother’s grand piano would later
take up most of the room), you called “the
owl farm,”’ so we did, though no one could
remember the time the owl got in –
that pin oak where you shooed it still there --
before the new kitchen garden had
come up, that first year. Age fifty-two,
I lay four days between death
and life after the shoot out, abided

thirty one years more. Kept your picture,
china-painted Easter egg, a curled
lock of red hair, owl feather, dried rose
in the top shelf of a steamer trunk,
to show the grandchildren when they cried.
Louisa Brown
b. 1850 Tennessee
d. 1890 Perryville, Texas
My father’s great grandmother
Section Eight: *Multipara*

The time required for cervix dilation is shorter with subsequent babies.
“Sissy, there’s another one,”
her renegade father-in-law cried,
hallucinating on his death-bed
and handing her his six-gun.
“Quick, shoot the snakes.”
So she blew another hole in the wall.

---

Great Granny Annie
In a letter received after her passing.

My Dear little great granddaughter
this is Sunday and I Don’t
thank of anything nicer than
to write you a little note
I got the cornbread in and
the burnt sugar pie is made
Your Grandmother and Grampa
is coming to see me so I fried
up some chicken and put
some fresh butter beans to boil
Your Grampa did not like
them when he was a boy
but he eats them now
I don’t even have to take him
cross my checkered apron no more

She fished at the otter pond
with her “nigra” friends,
Marianne and Puddin,
all their lives. They “learnt” to dip
snuff out there. Chewed the ends
of hickory twigs ‘til they softened
then dipped them in the Levi
Garrett and chewed on them
some more. Kept rag stuffed
cans inside their apron pockets –
a place to spit delicately.

I don’t rite to good
my hand cramps so Bad
so if you can not read it
get your sweet mother to Read
Your grandmother tells me you
have some teeth and maybe
you'll be walking soon
when your mother was a little girl
she was always runnin
her feet would be churnin
Before she touched the ground

At home, she caught wasps
with scissors – seemed to always
have scissors in her hand –
pinched “them devils off’n”
the screens on the veranda,
stuffed them in alcohol but,
“Cain’t do nuthin ‘bout
their nests,” in the rafters.

I am sorry I have not Rote
you sooner But someone
Coming in and out
all the time
They like for me
to beat them at dominos
It is my birthday this month
They like to make a fuss
when a gal gets to be
ninety or so

A shotgun by the screen door
Helped her keep the chicken hawks away.
One shot and they were dog food.
Shot at Grampa
once, after he threw the
dishwater on her, and she – “slipping
and sliding before I got holt to it” –
knowing he was too far
away for any real damage.
I know you will be surprised
To get this little note
But I just wanted
To tell you
That I love you
Lots and lots
And wish I could see
Your sweet face again.

8 Great Grandmom

Annie Hester Beene Dooling Henson
b. March 17, 1893 – Mississippi
d. March 17, 1985 – Gilmer, Texas
My grandmother
Margaret
Calls Her Own Name, 1694

Grandmama, Gramma, Grammy,
Mammaw, Meemaw, Momo,
Granny, Ganny, Nana, Ninny!
Abominations all.
My grandchildren will address me
as Grandmother Smith-Henson.

Margaret?
b. 168?
d. after 1700, Stafford County, Virgina
My father's great +7 grandmother
Sarah Stays in Virginia

Shoes, shoes, shoes,
I always sold the shoes.
Leather brought to thickness
curried over wooden
beams. Smooth side goes inward
for there is no lining.
Then dress the rough outside
with soot, lard, bear grease, and
some beeswax.

Lazerus, he left us
when the oldest was ten.
Couldn’t stay put. They, none
of ‘em could. Following
rivers, feuding with French
over fallow land dreams.
Why’d they think them Indians
wouldn’t never switch sides?
Cherokee got him.

Seven boys, one girl, I
raised up myself and kept
the trade too. Lazerus
always off fighting. First
for King George, then again
the French. The Indians
killed a hundred Virginians
that time he didn’t come back.
I kept on.

A straight last
soon molds to the foot.
Expect soft toes, square, black.
Never swap shoes. Fine way
to tear up the latches --
re-setting the buckles
each day. Sturdy low heels
stable on rough turf or
cobblestones.

Green satin clogs, narrow
braid. Brocaded slippers
with leather heels. Blue silk
worsted damask, silver lacings. Cream taffeta with ribbon bows, metallic trim. Applied silver on leather and lace, tall heels. I kept on.

Children moved on to North Carolina, fought the Tories from there. Years with only letters, small words from travelers. New homes being built, new children born, died. Always the same question: Why don’t you join us?

Sarah
b. ?
d. after 1792 Stafford County, Virginia
My father’s great-great grandmother
On Becoming a Grandmother:

As I lay
pinned to the operating table
all white sheets stainless steel
and bright lights, my arms and legs
spayed in a giant X,
the surgeon cut a line three inches long
three inches deep, severed
the herniated disk
that radiated pain, burning
and throbbing to my toes
and back.

As I lay
pinned to the operating table
my husband kept vigil
outside the birthing room
observing his daughter –
my step-daughter’s --
mirrored face through
the slightly open door.

As I – wicked step-grandmother -- lay
pinned to the operating table
the real grandmothers wept
inside rose bordered walls
hung with garden paintings,
sat, when they could stand it,
on purple couches while my
step-daughter labored in
purple sheets.

As I lay
pinned to the operating table
I thought let them have it
I'm too young I've a thesis
to write papers to grade
a teen-aged son causing
teen-aged trouble a sick
mother-in-law a lonely
step-mother other
obligations...
As I lay recuperating from surgery
my daughter handed me
a red-haired step-grandchild
with scaly bumps on its face
no eyebrows, a lumpy head,
long pointed fingers
with sharp little claws,
and blue eyes.

Violet Marie Terry
b. December 10, 2002, Des Moines, Iowa
my step grand daughter

Mary Anne Henson Saunders --
conceived, 1956, Marshall, Texas;
born, 1957, Long Beach, California;
raised, Shreveport, Louisiana;
maried and acquired two step children, 1986, Olympia Fields, Illinois;
bore a son, 1987, Chicago Illinois;
having traveled to every state in the lower 48 except North Dakota;
currently residing in West Des Moines, Iowa.
Section Nine: *Puerperium*

The six weeks following the birth of the baby is a very active time for a woman.
Pvt. Saunders, E.R.
Where You Headed?

The single flap of a butterfly wing
creates the winds of a hurricane
Lao Tzu

PFC E.R. Saunders S/N 5987643215
ships out today.
Three years ago, before this soldier
left for Boot Camp,
we hiked the Cascade Mountains
following butterflies.

PVT Saunders, E.R.
stalked the white tiger
swallowtail.
at Sunrise Peak
amid August snow
and wind-gnarled evergreens.
We sat with our backs
to moss-fringed granite
a violet sky
between our boot soles.

PVT. Saunders, E.R.
spoke of
college tuition
plans to study fashion design
showed me the purple
tear-drop shape – eye spots –
on lower wings to disguise
which way the white tiger
swallowtail is headed.

PFC E.R. Saunders S/N 5198764325
at Boot Camp
bested track records
drove tanks
tossed live grenades
and learned to bravely
shower with other naked soldiers.
PVT Saunders, E.R.
three years ago
wanted
medical insurance
computer graphics training
described how a white
tiger swallowtail in August
in Washington State
might fly to Argentina.

PFC E.R. Saunders S/N 5219876435
ships out to the desert today.
Tongue stud, navel ring removed
corn-silk hair hidden
beneath a desert camo cap
size 5 boots spit-shined
extra small fatigues
over underwear regulation white
over the white tiger swallowtail
butterfly tattoo – compete with violet
eye spots -- at the small
of her soldier’s back.

PVT Saunders, E.R.
three years ago
at Sunrise Peak
hunted a swallowtail
chrysalis, described
the pupa and larval stages
explained how
The National Guard would
fly her to Norway
where her best friend was
having a baby.

PFC E.R. Saunders S/N 5321987645
ships out to the desert today.
Among her regulation gear
a hospital grade breast pump
to help me wean her
infant daughter
eighty-nine days old today.
PFC E.R. Saunders
three months ago
straddled purple sheets
labored
brought forth
a red-haired girl
and named her Violet
while I lay pinned
to an emergency operating table
as a surgeon splayed open
the small of my herniated back.

PFC E.R. Saunders S/N 5432198765
ships out to the desert today
equipped with chemical
defense masks
and friendly fire
deflection indicators
afraid Violet
won’t know her
own mother
in a year.

PVT Saunders, E.R.
three years ago
at Sunrise Peak
amid August snow
sat with me, our backs
to moss-fringed granite
a violet sky
between our boot soles.
We watched two black
S-curved bodies
anchored head to toe
white tiger swallowtail wings
thrown back spiraling
in tear-drop nose dives
purple eye spots facing up and down
below the cliff edge.

Erin Rene Saunders
my step daughter
Mom, did you get me from the hospital?

Green-papered humans bathed in white light surround us all talking at once to the air the corners of the room.

Fetal heart monitor strapped around us both beeping and graphing to protect the hospital.

Before I was a baby
   I was in your tummy
   Right?

I was a bus --
   a sperm whale.
You kicked the dog off my stomach.

Nine months waiting for my belly to stick out farther than my breasts. Does now.

The empty sack that was my stomach -- a cradle to your life support system.

The milk woke me up. Hardened breasts spouting unprovoked -- I was a Barbie Fountain.
How'd I get
out of there, Mom?

Six weeks of La Maze'
Twenty Four hours of labor
contractions five minutes
apart forever.

Flat on my back
we can’t even
get gravity
working in our favor.

Primordial jelly,
    Blue-Black Blood
soaking the sheets.
    Spotting?
Bloody show?
A Rainbow!
Won't be long, now.

White lights and chrome
    confine us.
Morphine quiets us.
The red-hair nurse
clump-squishes by outside
while your father dozes
in a chair.
Wish we could be that
    comfortable.

PUSH,    PUSH!
It’s time to push.
BREATHE.
Ha Hee, Ha Hee,
You’ve seen it
    on TV.

Keep pushing now –
    UH- OH!
Loud squishy slurping sound.
Bone smacking bone.
Doctors call these bruises
stork bites. Yeah. Right.
Blood caked head,
hairy, slimy body,
long blue tail
    still pulsing.
eyes

Eyes
looking back at me.
You recognize my voice.

You put a face on god
for me.
We teach each other
to nurse.

Alex Robert Henson-Saunders
my son
Cacophony

I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout birthin’ no babies
They come through you; they’re not of you. You must
always put them to sleep on their stomachs.
A girl? May she always be beautiful
and simple; a girl can survive only
if she’s beautiful and simple.
A daughter is a daughter all of your life.
Leaving them to cry is good for their lungs.
The pain’s punishment for the sin of lust.
I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout raisin’ no babies
You can’t never hold ‘em too much. Don’t want
to spoil ‘em. Mine was a fighter. She come
during the war. You can’t make ‘em sissies; we
gotta work from can to can’t. What d’you mean
“We’re pregnant”? Ya’ll ain’t connected at the hip
from what I can see. Just ‘cause he there
at the beginnin’ don’t mean he can suffer
through to the end. Men’r too soft, squeamish.
I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout birthin’ no babies
You ain’t no kin to her, she just your step
daughter’s child. They step on your feet when they’re little; step on your heart when they get big.
Blood don’t mean a thing it’s familiarity counts.
She could’ve had anything she wanted
from her daddy. All she had to do was
bat those long dark eyelashes at him. Good
thing she never knew. Pretty ain’t worth diddley.
I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout raisin’ no babies
Sometimes God needs a little help. Breathe, Baby, breathe. You want to live, you want that baby alive, you gotta help God. Keep breathin’.
Yeah it hurts. Makin’ babies takes a lot
outta ya. Spent half my life making babies,
the other half bearing ’em. Fun’s in the makin’.
I ain’t got time to be coodlin’ children,
specially girls. Babies ain’t no trouble.
It’s the near-grown ones cause the most grief.
I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout birthin’ no babies
Sometimes you just gotta kick a mudhole
in their butt and walk it dry. I love little
children, little girl children especially.
They're best in a nice stew. You must never put them to sleep on their stomachs. You can
never hold them too much. Holding doesn't spoil them. Girls need fresh air and sunshine, they need to run and play in bare feet without corsets, they need exercise same as boys.
I don't know nothin' 'bout raisin' no babies
The first one may take only five or six months, but the rest always take the full nine.
Not married? Not the first. Won't be the last. That woman done had so many men and babies her female parts are leathery as a satchel.
Don't worry, you'll figure it out. Motherin's no mystery. Takes nine months 'cause by then you'll endure anythin' to get it out.
I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies They figured out what causes that you know. A sugartit will stop its cryin', or we'll glory in its spunk. A girl? Let's go shopping. I know where there's the prettiest purple dress with a lace jumper and shoes and a tiny purse, some lovely hair bows.
If she doesn't have hair, we'll glue them on.
I don't know nothin' 'bout raisin' no babies Old enough to bleed, old enough to breed.
I heard over in China, they drown girl babies 'cause they're useless. Useless?! Who does their washing and cooking over there? Who hauls the water? How d'they milk the cows?
'Move me to China so's I can be useless. That's enough gawking. Leave 'em get some rest.
Finding a Long Gray Hair

I scrub the floorboards
in the kitchen, repeating.
the motions of other women
who have lived in this house
And when I find a long gray hair
floating in the pail
I feel my life added to theirs.

Jane Kenyon