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A FRAME FOR THE ANGELS

1. Sunday afternoon: sunlight blazes
Through icicles hanging halfway to the sills,
Brahms' Violin Concerto enlarges
Our green livingroom, seeming to inform
And even possess the dazzled walls and windows.
Music and sunlight, the rug, chairs and piano,
Books row over row — as Heifetz plays
The tense cadenza, time itself becomes
A presence transforming everything in the room,
The icicles outside seem now to hang
In deep listening suspense, the rockingchair,
Intensely motionless, seems now to know
The life in chords flying about the room
Like molecules inside a heated beaker,
Until the silence, wherein I hear the drip,
Drip as the season falls from points of ice.

2. Here two unearthly faces smile the same
Faint smile, and I smile back at them, at these
Winged women filled with the hush of loveliness,
These angels — saffron, rose, and gold — who tend
Our life on Earth. Four hundred difficult years
They've made the pure serene of soul look easy,
And behind the calm and ecstasy of what
Strange peace they know, the feathered wings provide
A limitless unneeded power, wings
The angels seem hardly to know they have.
One looks boldly, gently, out toward time,
The other slightly downward. Canvas and oils,
The female form, ideas about the world
And otherworlds and past and future lives:
I hold the print, and it holds me completely.
I brim now with the hum of what they are.
3. Perhaps I know enough to make a frame.
The angels require a wide border, a frame
Of dark Renaissance green edged with gold.
Boards, sandpaper, glue and nails, my hands
Guided now by that design, a way
To frame their knowledge, summoning the mood
Of blessedness, thoughts puffs of rose smoke
Floating across imagination's gold
And grainy air, into a deepening green.
Chisel, square, mitre-box, stock and drill bits:
Exact tools which measure a maker's hands.
I measure its length and breadth, and then the print
Springs back into the scroll-like shape it's held
For months now in a closet. Kneeling awhile
Over the stack of seasoned boards, squinting,
I choose one whose fragrant length is true.

4. The sign above me said Moore's Monuments Inc.,
And I knelt in its shadow, twelve years old,
Laboring at a polished granite surface
With bucket and brush and chemical solution.
I scrubbed weather-stains from nameless gravestones
For fifty cents an hour for old Tom Moore.
My father had no marker, his ashes blew
Over sand dunes. A hundred miles from there
I stared at the grey-black stone and saw my face
Below its surface, as vague and distant as
The memory of certain sounds, of surf,
My image moving where someone's father's name
Would be sandblasted beneath the fine vignette
Of leafy vines that represented life.
I scrubbed it harder, and as I worked I felt
My face rise to the surface, face to face.
5. On winter mornings I'd take the ashes out,
A bucket of ashes, the cold remains of all
The heat we'd had the day and night before.
Ashes are good for garden soil, I'd walk
Over ice-crusting snow past the woodshed,
Past the asparagus bed, the stalks brown now,
Sticking up through the snow like brittle fingers
Broken by wind and pointing every which-way.
I dumped the ashes onto the frozen snow,
Watching the silent stirrings of air begin
Streaking the white with plumes of dusty ash,
And thought of my father, thought of muddy spring.
My breath hung frozen before my face, I felt
My fingers stiff in my mittens. And I ran back —
My boots breaking the snowcrust, the empty bucket
Bumping my leg — tripping and stumbling back.

6. Sometimes the things around me seem to whisper
Uncertain meanings, uncertain, but urgent as
A tired voice, far off, calling my name,
Calling, See how your wife's fingers repeat
Bach's fingers at the keyboard, See how your child
Stares out the window, See how your mother's voice
Shivers along the telephone wires, See
The angel at Fatima Shrine, how her wings bear
The burden of snow, and snow dusting her eyes,
See how the block plane lifts a golden curl
Up from the board, and how the paring-knife curls
The apple peel, See how the child's breath
Has fogged the pane, the faint circle of moisture
Shrinking, fading, until another breath
Enlarges it, a pulse, a tide, See how
You've tilted your head a little, seeming to hear.
7. *The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's
Teeth are set on edge.* I think of the sons
Of Abraham, Ishmael driven out
Along with his mother, wailing beneath a bush,
Isaac bent beneath the bundle of kindling,
Climbing, and him the sacrifice. Remember
Sitting high in the elm, or peering through
The picket fence at traffic whooshing by,
Remember your father's solemn words, remember
Anything at all and ask, Am I Ishmael
Or Isaac, banished or chosen for doom or glory?
Remember hiding under your bed, cool,
Listening, the cat, the broken plate, the long
Silence after the snowplow passed. Then
The outcast meets the chosen, then you hear
The voices crying, *Brother, I love you, brother.*

8. Last year, at Christmas, I asked my brother why
He'd run away when he was fourteen, gone
Six bewildering months before they sent him
Home from Florida in handcuffs. "Are you kidding?"
He spit it, his face twisting ugly and flushed.
He meant our stepfather, he meant living in fear
Of physical pain, the terrible, terrible beatings.
He began to say more, but stopped. His mouth
Went white and tightened, his eyes glazed and burned
With furious hatred, hatreds two decades old.
I changed the subject, embarrassed for us both,
But thought all afternoon about the miraculous
Power of metaphor to save our lives.
He had none, none at all, only a white
Lincoln, three-hundred-dollar suits, money
To bet heavily and, if he wished, to burn.
9. The frame's four sides are cut, the mitre-box
Left set at 45° with drifts
Of sawdust around it now. I double-check
The length of each side, and find each right,
The thing imagined slowly comes to be.
When I sit here at the bench, I often recall
Moments out of the history of work
I've lived, something from twenty years ago,
Or two, or twelve, some incident in which
I've handled tools and done a job and judged it.
These are the little parables by which
We come to guess a thing or two of life
And love and even death, the common tasks
Which in the doing show us what we are.
This metal tape, drawn out, measures the frame,
And is forever the measure of itself.

10. Roofing once, a late afternoon in August,
Working too fast, racing the thunderstorm
That weighted the sky, growling lower and nearer,
Straddling a dormer peak, I cut myself.
I was cutting capping, the xacto knife sliced
The inside of my left forearm — I stared at a gash
Four inches long and spread a full inch wide,
And then the gush of blood. I clutched the wound
In my right fist, as one will clutch a shirt
Tight at the throat against an icy wind,
And sat there helpless. As soon as he saw, my partner
Helped me down, but, for awhile, I sat
Without the use of my hands, no way to move,
To get to the ladder. The knife slid to the gutter
Beneath my feet, and the rain began, fat drops
Splattering on my face and bloody arm.
11. One February night the temperature sank
To -20°, and the waterpump froze.
I clambered down to the cellar to get it going,
Down through the trap door in the kitchen floor,
Down rickety steps to cobwebs, stones,
The dirt floor, the frozen musty odors.
I cleaned the kerosene spaceheater, changed the wick,
And lugged the two-gallon tank upstairs. Outside,
My eyes stung in the cold. And, there in the dark,
The dry snow squeaking beneath my boots, hunched
Behind the woodshed, bent to the oil drum's spigot,
I watched the spumes of Northern Lights above me:
There in the black sky washes of green.
Silver, red, like imagination itself
Rising over the frozen world. I shivered,
Swayed in the spectral thought: *my life, my life.*

12. The summer that I was eleven Weston's Pond
Diminished to a brook. Drought crowded
The snaking channel with fish. Blue Herons came,
A pair of Great Blue Herons, and I was amazed —
I'd never seen so large a bird, so blue,
The tinkertoy legs and scissor beak, yet there
Those fishers were, making their summer home.
Often I saw them rise to air, the wings
Hugely unfolding, hugely kneading the air,
The great bulk barely lifting, the tremendous labor
Of undulating wings at last successful,
The Heron rising slowly over the cattails
And over oaks and birches, the wide wings now
Graceful, wondrous, an image of hardwon flight
Charged with the thought of flight, and charged too
With whatever it is that send chills up the spine.
13. I walked over the dunes where telegraph poles
Were skinny crosses, a long wavering column
Held up, it seemed, by the wires strung between them,
The poles and crossbars black against the still
Rolling of sand, the wires invisible
Until I walked near them, beneath them, wondering
Vaguely about the messages tapped out
By Coast Guard personnel — a danger of shipwreck,
An enemy submarine, or, I wondered,
Some mention of a man whose ashes once
Were scattered here, blowing over the sand.
I stood beneath those wires listening, the wind
A moaning in them, a moaning along the wires
Or some one crying, crying, crying a need
That wind and sand had not begun to answer,
The long moaning from cross to cross to cross.

14. The Spring that I was six I found in the woods
Far in back of our house a little dump,
A pile of rusty cans, bottles, and one
Treasure: an Underwood typewriter, ancient, rusty,
Rusted solid in fact. But the black keys
Had not rusted, the bakelite or whatever it was
Had held the letters legible there in the woods,
And I, who knew the alphabet, had stared
Dumbfounded at the mysterious order. *No wonder,*
No wonder they threw it out, the letters are all
Mixed up. I hunted for A and B and C
And through to Z, touching them one by one.
I remained dumbfounded long after I'd asked
And learned the reason for that disorder. The logic
I lacked there in the woods was, all along,
Right in the very structure of my hands.
15. We built a lean-to in the woods, two boys
Nailing branches together, piling on
The pinebough roof, weaving the pinebough walls,
Three walls and a roof between two trees, a place
To eat a sandwich, to sit awhile, thinking.
The sun filtered between the green needles,
The fragrant sun, and high, high overhead
The wind moved in the oaks and pines, stirring
The high boughs, the restless wind that was
Searching for someone, asking of every tree,
O where? O where? while I sat crosslegged, head
Tilted a little forward, trying to hear
The answer that never came, hearing only
The wind moving again, *O where? O where?*
Over the fragrant sunlit woods where I
Tilted my head and listened, utterly still.

16. As Venus rises over the snow, a pale
Blue presence bent in the icicles hung outside
This window where my breath is fogging the pane,
As far from here a cold surf beats and foams
Against a beach, and a dust of snow is blowing
Over the frozen dunes, and Venus rises,
As eleven miles away my children sleep,
Dreaming, perhaps, about their father bent
Over his workbench, sanding a picture frame,
Or dreaming themselves as Icarus, that boy
On whom they look with fright and fascination,
Rising by sleep's huge effort toward disaster,
As somewhere deep in my house a waterpipe rattles
I feel the overwhelming need to ask
My father something, anything, to see him look
Up from his sadness, and smile, and answer quietly.
17. The frame is nearly finished, the glass in place,
The print, the backing board. I'm drilling holes
For chrome screw-eyes, the wire is measured and cut.
The drill-bit draws out golden curls of wood
While my wife practices Bach, The First Partita,
Repeating a passage, this time a trifle slower,
The music's rich precision vivid here
Two rooms away, chords leaping over the air
Like spirit-words, a host released from verbs.
Outside, two dozen chickadees are hopping
By turns up to the feeder, and hopping about
On the snow beneath, pecking at seeds and suet,
Chattering, sharp eye out for grackles and jays,
The patterns drawn by their nervous motion making
A magically changing design, a cat's cradle
Of thin hunger they pinch in beak and feet.

18. I stood alone in my study holding my book,
Flipping the pages, their edges riffing beneath
My thumb which shook a little as poem by poem
The things I'd felt and thought fluttered before me,
A stereopticon of words, their meanings
Forcing to mind an image of flashing lights —
A trailer truck overturned on an icy hill
At night, phosphorus flares spluttering hot
White light at intervals along the gleaming road,
A trooper's flashlight dancing erratic patterns
Like a red bee as he keeps the traffic moving,
The revolving blue lights of the patrol car
Sweeping the scene, a still and sickly glow
Over the wreck, over the trooper's face
As, far off, the ambulance wails nearer
And the trooper bends toward him still pinned inside.
19. My ninth grade science text revealed the world
Of radio waves, long waves and short and how
Transmitters and receivers work. Our radio
At home was old, cabinet-style with fabric
Over the speaker, and smelled of heat and dust,
But it had a short-wave band. I strung a wire
Across the lawn from tree to house, fixing
The glass insulators, screwing the lead wire to
The radio's back and, finally, turning it on:
The sky was alive with language, the atmosphere
Awash with eerie pulses, and late at night
I crouched over it, my cheek pressed to the wood,
The scent of warm varnish and the orange glow
Of thirty tubes tinting the bodiless voices
Rushing across the stars — French from Quebec,
Spanish from Quito, and always the intricate static.

20. I want some logic in it, but memories
Will form no sequence, they form instead a pattern,
Like photons etching a photographic plate,
Dreamlike as random images take on
Extraordinary value. On August nights
I watched for shooting stars, craning my neck,
Scanning the wide sky till, like a cry,
A meteorite streaked silver, and then was gone.
I'd scan the dark again till — *There! Another!*
The random light, the necessary watch.
That was the same sky that arches tonight
Over my house, the sky that arched over
The rise of man, and Western Civilization,
The sky where Pisces spawned as great a myth
As man has ever known — *There! Another!* —
Patterns of light, the watch, the cry for meaning.
21. The angels are framed and hanging now over
The velvet loveseat, watching over the room,
The marble table, the piano, the hanging ferns.
When I put it up, my wife stood grinning, my children
Grinned, their delight like the happiest applause.
The angels change the room, the room and frame
And all it represents alter the angels,
As in chrysalis, our very thought and feeling
The damp cocoon from which they quietly came.
Sunlight slants through the icicles, falling across
Their faces as I sit, watching. The house is still.
These angels will be a presence here, knowing
The life we live even as we know them.
One looks boldly, gently, back at me,
The other slightly downward, hearing the drip,
Drip as the season falls from points of ice.

Paul Smyth

BASUALTO

Así la poecía no habrá cantado en vano.
Pablo Neruda

I. Parral, Temuco, Santiago; 1904-1927

1.

From sound to sound, like an ear
that arrived and was hungry, like a heart
made of soil and syllables, you came,

Neftalí, the dust of Parral leaping
in your blood, hardening in your bones,
your soul like a baker's, like a bowl,

like a cave full of rivers and workmen.

2.

I would have you open with the sea
rolling out, the sea like a harsh tear
falling from your lungs,

from your vast chest made of horsehair
and fish, of guayabas and birds,
of hulays stretching, flowering,

bending until

your youth emptied
like a vault pried open,
like a kiss that poured from a bucket.

3.

It wouldn't rain that morning. The fog thinned
and turned into air.

Like a brown ghost
your father went falling,

You looked in your poem for a shovel,
and a stomach, for words to assemble and make up
your mouth.

You looked, Neftalí, with your miner's eyes.
You looked in its heart but it had no heart.

II. The Fable of the Wind and the Fat Man

Once the fat man came
with a rough new prize.
No one knew what to call it.
Everyone watched his blood grow,
like bread dough,
everyone watched the wheat
and the bunch grass,
the four o'clocks up past midnight.

No one knew what to call it.
Like a river
the earth dragged inside him;
stones and salmon, pieces of timber,
the anemones trapped at the delta.

He drew love from the skunkbush
and sun from the sand.
It was an attraction:
buildings shrank and leaped in his pocket,
pieces of towns lingered behind him,
shadows escaped like ghosts from the alleys.

But then it happened:
the wind got lost
and no one could find it.
The fat man looked in the trees,
and in his mouth.

He looked in Rangoon,
Colombo, Batavia,
Singapore, Buenos Aires,
Barcelona, Madrid, Paris,
and Mexico City. No luck.
The wind was gone
and that was that.
Ripples collapsed in lakes everywhere.
Windmills converted to power.
Workmen had to wipe their own brows,
from then on.

But the fat man walked
through the thickened air.
His soul dried and brittle.
His chest hardened like homemade wall.
O dilapidated heart of marmalade!
O soup of the saddest vegetables!
O soul fragile as dove ribs!

And so what if fences limp in the Andes?
And so what if sap runs down trees?
And so what if barking dogs
bite their tongues? What does it matter?
The fat man walked as calm as a fish.
The fat man gave the names to the trees.
The fat man blew his breath through the cornfields.
Fuck the wind and its pompous air.
I would call him Whitman
but my mouth won't let me.

III. Hacia la Ciudad Esplendida

I.
I am dreaming of natives running,
of Balboa, Almagro,

2.

Rest with me, Neftali,
safe in the Andes steep breast of snow.

A meadow opened; the jobobas
around you grew from a dream.

You remembered the horses sliding
on rocks, sparks flying from their iron shoes,
from their bleeding fetlocks,
sparks flying
as though their hooves crushed the stars.

You remembered them pausing, pawing,
entering the river like bashful women,
all nostrils,
stretching their necks as though being born.

But then the cowherds
dismounted and walked in the meadow.
All around you fell the substance
of dreams: cream cactus, cassias,
a hope among men,
a pact between travellers,
between chuckwallas and smugglers,
a pact with no words, a gift without thanks,
a liquid that pours from the face of the sun,
from the face of the earth . . .

Oh, Neruda,
your slow and pious face.

And in the center of the meadow
sat the skull of an ox, an altar,
an ox skull open like the breasts of a mother,
the exhausted eyes of a donor.

You said: *Wait!*

We are the fish and the skull is a lake!

But the cowherds approached it
 more timid than nuns,
 like mule deer
 the cowherds absent of sound,
 and in the ox skull's sockets

 they left coins to be eyes,
 they left bread to be sight,

 they left their hats in their hands
 and danced in a ring, singing,
 and you danced
 and you sang,
 and you gave praise with them,

 your breath with their breath,
 your voice in their mouths,

 and from the meadow
 a sound rose and covered the mountain,
 and a drop came together
 on the tongue of a traveller,
 and like a corpse
 you understood the unknown's attraction,
 the blood that runs through the broken.

IV. The Black Island

Speak through my speech, and through my blood.

You wished to be silent,
 like bread.

 Sometimes a gate slams,
 women run out of houses.

 or if it is light
 it will be the moon, a fire

burning in a ruined hogan,
a poem broken
and lying in the street,
glowing just a little
but smoke rising, almost blue.

I tried to wake you
but you never got up.
I brought sea stones
and oysters,
little loaves of sweet bread,

I said: *Get up, Neftalí,*
cut out this nonsense.

I said: *Let's go for a walk,*
for a swim, why don't we have a cup of coffee?

But it was useless.
Sometimes a gate slams,
a red cup passes,

I think I see something
offshore,
I might
if I were you
get out of that grave,

wake up this
black island,
unanchor,
cut loose the sea,
and glide, hover,

float away
like a nipple
freed of its breast . . .

Frank Graziano

FROM THE TOP OF THE HILL**July 4, 1955**

Here I am then, on this train
playing cards with a sailor
to make time go.

In a few days
I'll be at Gaga's, and the nurse
she'll have found for me will undress me
and starch me and tuck me
into bed at night. But right now
I'm not twelve, as long as
we're moving and she can't get on
and neither can you. I'm just
a girl on my own, playing poker.
Nick taught me. He's the Y.G.L.S.
(Young Goodlooking Sailor)
that I told you about

and don't look that way Mama,
it's only a game. Only a game
if he takes me back to his compartment
and sucks my nipples, his head
almost flat on my chest, and
I'm scared and I say no
but he says it's only a game
and we'll never see each other again.
And I'm flattened as the Kansas fields
we pass under his heaving sky and I
say, not so loud, let me go, please,
but he says it's only bodies
and Mama, it felt good, and if
it did happen, it was only a game.

May 8, 1959

Dear Mama why is it
that I always tell you everything
though when I tell you
it just makes you hate me more
and I know it but I have to keep
on telling you until we both choke
on the words: I have something to tell you.

You know at school we eat in the dining rooms
in the Res? Well, there's a Puerto Rican cook
there who makes the food. And you know
that we wait on tables to save the maids?
Well, last week it was my turn and we had
tamale pie and Miss Bacon said
it was burned and to take it back so I
put it on the tray and carried it
through the swinging doors into the kitchen
where it's so hot and Jose was there.
And I brought him the pie and said:
Miss Bacon says it's burned and I'm sorry
but do you have another one.
And he just looked at me.
And I felt wet and prickly between my legs
where his black eyes went in.
And I felt cold and I began to shiver.
Then he took the pie and handed me another
and I went back through the swinging doors
and Miss Bacon said Why were you so long Lola?
And I said Jose was slow. And when I ate
the olives made me think of him
and I was eating his eyes all through dinner
and at night in bed I touch myself
and the swinging doors open and Jose is there

looking at me, and my fingers are his eyes
and his eyes are my fingers
and we twist and turn til morning, so hot.

January 14, 1960

Dear Mama it's Sunday again time for church
and I can see you now singing the hymns tone-deaf
and saying the prayers loudly as if you were teaching them
to someone. And Daddy's standing beside you
singing as if he were in the shower. If I were
there, I wouldn't be so don't worry. You can be
just as loudly pious as you please.
And when you take communion Mama, you'll have
fewer sins to be sorry for.

Sunday here is all rain and popcorn.
Down the hall someone has the radio on
and some of the girls are dancing.
With each other of course. Don't worry
Mama, penises disqualify you here
except on special occasions.
Does that shock you? Perhaps
you'd prefer tallywhackers.
You once did, didn't you?
I remember when Daddy was away
sneaking downstairs one night
and your bedroom door was locked.
But I was scared so I knocked
and I heard you and Bill giggling
before you opened the door
and I heard him go out. Was that why
you held me in your arms so long?
I was so much more frightened afterwards, Mama.

It's dark here, it's night and
they won't let me have the light on

but I have a flashlight. They don't know.
If they knew they'd take it away
from me and I'd be in the dark again,
a little girl beating at your bedroom
door that was when I stopped coming
downstairs at night and I used to lie there
with moths circling the bulb
and pounding against the screen
and the radio on until some dream came
and said are you still awake
and rocked my eyes closed.
So goodnight Mama I'll finish this

October 7, 1957

Dear Mama and I'm not even sure about that, after all you sent me here and they're all telling my secrets and laughing about me and they promised never to tell, and Chris Morrison laughed at me in gym in front of every body because I don't have any hair yet, and the smell of sweat makes me sick.

And they put me on the second baseball team though I worked and worked pitching at their targets. I got your letter at lunch yesterday and I've been thinking what to say to you ever since. It's study hall now, and it's getting dark already it seems like it's always dark here though I guess that's just because it's winter still I don't remember dark like this even at home, even at dinner with you and Daddy screaming at me and me leaving my plate half-finished and crying to my room, even then. I'm supposed to be doing algebra now but instead I'm writing you, the truth is I probably wouldn't but they won't let me have dinner Sunday without a letter home which they collect at the door. Did you know that? I'll bet you thought your darling daughter just wrote because she couldn't help it, she missed

you so much. Was that why you sent me away exiled like some Jew, so that I'd have to miss you? Well, I don't miss you. I don't.

So what's new? Nothing you'd care about. I still make A's in English and History but I hate Math. We had an algebra quiz yesterday and I did the first problem over and over and never got it right so I didn't get to the other twelve, and Mrs. Sample said I failed which isn't new. And I'm the ugliest girl in the class. And that's not new. But guess what? I saw a butterfly yesterday right up close and it was going from flower to flower and it would climb inside each flower and suck the sweetness out and then it would go on. And its wings had huge eyes and I've heard butterflies don't live long but I guess they get what they want. Anyway give my love to Daddy and write soon.

Your Exiled Child

June 6, 1961

They call Sue Brock Beaver
and they call Brooks Clyde Brooksie
but I don't have a name.
Not Church or Slide or Bear
or any name but what you call me.

And when I meet them
years later, when they've streaked
their hair and wear Dior Suits
we won't have anything to remember
but then I'll show them this ring:
Class of 61 which married me
and they'll have to have me.
And then they'll peer at my nametag
and say oh yes the tennis team,
you were on the tennis team,
and I'll agree and then I'll leave

their hors d'oeuvres and scotches
and I'll come home to you, Mama,
and you'll fix me another drink
to calm me down and you'll say:
All right young lady, time for bed.
You know we never cared for them,
and Daddy and I were wrong
to send you there, we should have
listened to you, how you cried.

Story

Once there was this girl and her Mama sent her away to Alaska, told her climb this mountain and be the first to get there and you can come home again. But she didn't know how to climb mountains and didn't want to come home so she stayed in the permafrost and watched the wildflowers open in summer and in winter she went north with the caribou and when they had their babies she would pull them out of the mothers and in a minute the babies would be able to eat grass and run away from the white following wolves. And she watched the Northern Lights oh she did and they made her think of the ones she made at school scratching the black crayon off colors and how she used to get her fingernails so black with wax that even Mama couldn't scrub them clean.

And the Mama of this girl there was once used to read the newspapers every day for news, how her daughter climbed the mountain, how she was the first, but the news never got printed and finally her Mama gave up and got another daughter to take the place of the Alaska one and she kept that daughter home and when the daughter grew up she bought her a nice husband and a close house and at night she would go over and look in the windows to be sure she was still there and she was and the Mama was so happy.

What I Did Last Summer

We went to the beach to a rented house
all glass and wood it had been in some magazine
and you couldn't eat inside or touch
the furniture except the deck chairs
Mama brought in from outside and the bed
that rolled away that we brought from home.
There was only one store in the town
and groceries there were so dear. Mama said,
but she bought them anyway: pate, bread, and cheese.
Weekends a lot of people came and there were
barbeques on the beach and all the teenagers
sat together their faces like masks
in the flicker of the fires. And I'd stand
by the seawall and watch the waves
beating the shore away. Every year
there's less beach, less space for the mothers
with their oiled skins, less space
for the children with their surfboards
or their sandbuckets. The world keeps
on getting smaller. By the end
of the summer Mama didn't speak to me
it had gotten so small and I was so
ungrateful for all the evening parties
at Pete's and Kathy's, for all the things
she'd given me, bought for me, for the
glass and wood house that was in some magazine.

The Game

Do you remember
when I was a baby?
You would play hide
and seek but I knew you.
I knew you pretended
not to see me but really
you saw me all the time.
Like when I try to get past you
and you always say: What's
in your other hand. I used
to hide under your bed
and you'd call me
and I wouldn't
laugh at all
because I wouldn't want
to be found but even then
I knew it was no use.

November 13, 1957

I'm fourteen today and it hasn't happened.
I put Kotex in my locker
so they won't know
and I keep on feeling but nothing comes.
I mark my days on the calendar
and once a month I go to the nurse
and say these cramps are killing me,
give me something.
And these cramps are killing me,
Mama, like the hair on my legs
you won't let me shave and in English
I look round the circle at all

the smooth girls and I'm the only one
hairy and blessed and I don't want it.
Some day I'll get a razor and that day,
Mama, the blood will come.

August 13, 1957

At the pool today the heat eats
my skin. In a minute
my hair dries. In two my cheeks
begin to shrivel and lines start
around my eyes and I can see me
shopping, picking children up,
playing bridge with Florence
and never talking across the table.
Maybe I'll even be as clever as you,
play duplicate with a flair.
But now it's school and school
and school. Learn how to read
and write and undercut my fellow man.
In first grade it was reading groups,
by third it's who wins that counts.
I remember the cross that glowed
in the dark that I won for reciting
Up the Airy Mountain with more feeling
than Lustre Robinson. And my top
drawer's a glut of holy medals,
mementos of secular success.
And when the nuns get through with me
they'll pass me on to high school
like a stitched leather ball.
And maybe they'll even score
with me someday. But I won't score.
At best I'll get kicked
through the uprights a few times.

Jesus it's hot. The droplets
of water dry on my diary as fast
as they fall from my hair. I'll
have to go in swimming again before
I bake and it's dinner time already
and I've never known you to make
dessert, Mama, just the three lonely foods:
meat and greens and starch on a flowered
china plate. Oh it's so cool,
doing dead man's float and I may never
get out. This is better than food
or sleep or poetry, my hair weedy,
my feet rooting in the water, my body
will rot of chlorine and flowers
will grow in me will bloom
in my eyes like twin stars
I am so far away

The Discussion

Tonight you stuck my eyes with your fork.
I am writing this in the dark by feel
the way I used to draw pigs
with my eyes closed and their tails
always split from their bodies.
Dinner in this house begins
with stomachache and ends
with slamming doors and I know
you've always wanted to do that
and now you've done it. Congratulations.

Doctor, dinner started slowly
with a roast being carved by Daddy
and the roast just lay there
and slices started to pile up

on plates and potatoes got put on
and Mother started so I could eat.
But then she wanted to know about
school and I told her.
But nothing is enough for Mother.
She wanted to draw each moment
out of me with a syringe, and hold
that syringe up to the light
and squeeze it empty and start again
til I had no blood left but was just
bones in a bag. I told her all
I knew but she'd begin again
and again. So then I said that
she couldn't have me and she said
it was her right, the right of family
to own and love and I said no,
not own, and she started screaming
and I screamed too and then I said
it's always like this, can't you see
why I hate to come home and she said
we weren't fighting it was a discussion
a discussion a discussion and then
she took her fork and pierced my eyes
and I can't see any more Doctor,
I can't see, and Daddy just sat there

August 14, 1956

This is for you from the top of the hill.
This is to tell you that I'm off our land,
I'm in the meadow by the orange smear
of poppies we can see from our window.
Now I'm looking at the town and a car
is going down the twisty road below me.
It could be you Mama. Are you

going to the store? Is there something
you forgot? While you're there pick yourself
out a child, the kind you always wanted,
fat and laughing and friendly, ready
to make her debut. I'm not ready for you,
I've years to go, I may abort. Take advantage
of the sales Mama, while you can,
don't resort to chance — the pig-in-a-poke baby
from some truck's mouth. Examine
the merchandise carefully this time,
squeeze it and poke it, make sure
it doesn't cry. I can see you now
on the patio calling. Your mouth
is wide open and I know what you're saying:
My name, my name, calling your baby,
calling your dog. I'll break your leash
some day. Lunchtime you say? Here I come.

My Most Unforgettable Character

She's so strong she could kill me with a twitch of her
hand. I'm like Jack up the beanstalk in her country:
Hiding in her oven while she eats, sliding down the table leg
as she says, brandishing a fly-swatter, now where did he go.
The water from her tap can flood the whole world. Though
I'm no relation she calls me hers and she keeps trying to
find me so she can bake me til I'm done but I'm crafty and
I stay away.

I'm older now so I'm a match for her. Everyone says
we look alike and every day I get stronger. When the time
comes I'll walk down the aisle all veiled and white and I'll
take over. And it's dark in here and her clothes keep
brushing my face and I fall over lumps of her shoes and I
bang on the door and I cry and I yell but no one can hear
me but her and she won't open it and let me out not ever.

My Bird

My bird died.
When I came home
he was on his back
and his little stiff
feet stuck up in the air.
You said I don't
take care of him,
he died because
of me. But Daddy said
he had a disease birds get,
that was before
he talked to you,
after that he said
my bird died and I
should have taken care.
I buried him
in a box
down the hill
where he could sing
to the morning grass
but I didn't mark the place.

Time For Church

Christmas morning and I have a present for you.
I made it at school embroidered with your name to lay
across your dresser for you to put your perfumes on.
You bought me ten presents, every one wrapped in its own
paper, every one tied up beautifully with bows.
And I have a feeling in my stomach, maybe it's excitement,
and I open each present, and they're all beautiful, and
I know they cost a lot: dresses, paints, books. And

I love them, they're just what I wanted.

I go get your present and you open it and put it with
the others and because it's the last you pick up the pile
and carry everything away and it's time for church.

Sunday Walk on the Mountain

Will we go to the top of the hill today?
Can we go to the meadow?
Can we hike around all the curves today
and rest in the mountain's shadow?
But Daddy's tired and Mommy too
so I think I'll go, just me,
with all the poppies under my feet
and a springtime wind beside me.

If I Were a Nun

If I were a nun
I'd wear cool white
and walk in the garden.
If I were a nun
I wouldn't think
about Jesus much.
I'd kneel at chapel
with the others.
And I'd say
the stations of
the cross, and
I'd pray, too,
to my body

my pale shaved
white body
that no one
would ever see
if I were a nun.

Retreat

At Dominican convents twice a year students from kindergarten on are given a two day period during which they are not allowed to talk but are enjoined to meditate on God and on their own place in the world. This period is called "Retreat."

We little girls
like silent flowers
walk to lunch
and hear
for the first time
the mockingbird
singing in
the elms.
We eat to the sound
of our own
chewing.
We get up and
our chairs scrape
the floor.
At night
there is only
breathing.
No one cries out
from this sleep.

The Paper I Handed in

Written in new cursive
letters from a list
I kept in my lap
was so hard:
“What I believe.”
But because it was
(mostly) printed
she said:
this won't do.
And when I copied it
making all the loops
and swirls just right
she said: This is fine
Lola and put it
with the others.

The Problem

I couldn't do them all,
there was one I didn't know
though I could see
the page in the book
that held the answer.
So I didn't write
anything and when
the teacher called,
you said: I'll talk
to her but you never
did. I don't think
you knew what to say.
And when I failed
you said you just

couldn't understand it,
after all you'd done,
and took my books away.
So I'm writing a new one.
And it will have
all true things in it.
And this is how it starts.

Daddy

Oh it's been so long since I talked to you
our heads bent in the dark together
when she was away.
And the weather's turned cold and wet
and it's dark by six
and when you get home I
don't see you, all those meetings
that own you keep you gone.

So Sunday lets walk to the top
of Mount Tam and stop
at Mountain Home on the way
and call her to say
we'll come..later.
And then, Daddy, we can stay
all night, we can take the tent
and camp. And you can tell me
that she doesn't mean it,
all those things she says,
while we're sleeping
on the ridge on the back
of the Indian maiden
who jumped from these cliffs
for love and whose hair
streams down the valley.

The Long Walk

Hiking in a wind
we bend our backs against
the cold and pick the burs
out of our socks
every few steps.
Ahead of us the dogs
dash across the trail
back and forth, in
and out of the woods.
You stride along.
We children follow.
Mother walks more slowly
but stays in sight.
Which way? You're stopped,
studying the sign
where trails cross
the words long since
claimed by the rain
and wind. You choose
a way and as night falls
we're still walking
along a ridge. We want
to go home. Peter starts
to cry. You trudge
cheerfully ahead.
Don't worry, you say.
I have a build-in compass.
We want to go home,
we want to go home
we wail. Well, if you're
that tired, you say,
heading cross-country down.
The bushes scratch
our legs and Mother

and Peter fall behind.
It's full dark
by the time we get off
the mountain and
we're on the wrong side.
We have to take a bus home
and buy tickets for the dogs.

On the Roof

You said I can't come out here
but I'm here anyway. I climbed
out my window and right now
I could spit on you.
If you looked up
I could spit in your eye.
The shingles are hot
and slopy and my book
catches the glare
so the words slide off
the page into my lap.
I can barely see the poetry.
Now I've put it down
and I'm taking off
my clothes: my top,
my shorts, and last
my underpants. And I shove
them all in the window
so I'll get a tan all over
like you have. My beestings
will turn dark
and tropical, and when
he lies on my stomach
it will be warm
with rooftop sun

to his hair, as warm
as it is between
my legs, the legs
that you clamp shut
but I open for him,
for your precious brother
who comes into my room
when you're gone
and tears into me
as if I were fruit
with his teeth and
his lips and
his stiff parts
and in the end
we're as sticky
as a smashed orange
and we lie there and
laugh at you til
we hurt so much
from laughing
that we have to stop.
So here's to you from
the rooftop and when you
go through my drawers
and find this
here's to you,
lying awake at night,
listening, wondering
what's true
and what's not.

Lola Haskins