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Run

After the speech, alone in the family den—
October, 1962, I was fourteen—
I lay on my back against the cold linoleum
and closed my eyes, imagining
how it might be to kiss the President—
our prince, so elegant and serious, so sure
of himself. I loved the way he said

*Even the fruits of victory
will be ashes in our mouth.*

Later my father
led us to his basement, until that day
a place off limits to the girls.
Beyond his workshop, deep in the dark,
his flashlight lit the shelter, that little bunker
of our innocence, complete with cans of soup,
water jugs, blankets, Scrabble and Monopoly.
Remember what Kennedy had said?

We must transform the history of man.

Next day my mother took me for the test.
Run, she said, *You'll have half an hour
to make it home.* And run I did, all the way
from the high school to the shopping center,
through neighborhoods of split-levels, spindly
pines, streets like kinfolk who never spoke
to each other: Twisted Laurel, Laurel Lake,
and finally my own Laurel Spring
where with the taste of blood in my mouth
I opened the door three minutes
too late to save myself.

Zack

You remember Zack,
whose mother danced naked
in their living room? She'd turn
the lights down low, play
classical stuff on the stereo.
We'd watch her at night,
through slits in the drapes.
At first we almost choked
on our giggling—she was so
cool and quiet when she drove
carpool. Later
we fell in love with her,
that black hair flying loose,
those long arms spinning.
One by one the rest of you
stopped coming
until it was just me
out there in the dark, kneeling
in the bushes.

You remember Zack.
Nobody else had a mother like that.
He went off to New York
and never came back.

The Garden

Now that the teenagers
have taken the house—
long legs, loud shoes, sarcastic
tongues, their paraphernalia
winding from chair
to floor to stair
like some perverse
unstoppable vine—I retire
to the garden.

Nothing here
talks back. I learn
a language the children
don't speak: *lantana*,
hosta, *portulaca*. I have gloves
but seldom use them.
I like the dirt
under my fingernails,
the roughness that comes
from pulling weeds,
churning the soil for new beds.

It's time
to pitch the rusty swing set,
to rid the shed of punctured
volleyballs, old bicycles,
a decade of water guns,
time to fill it with peat moss
and new tools:

spade, trowel, rake,
all shiny, all mine.

Work

The girl who knelt in that suburban sea of grass, the girl who combed St. Augustine for weeds, a penny apiece, what did she learn? That the hues of green are as many as the million grassy fingers tickling her palm, that it takes a hundred weeds to make a dollar.

The girl who worked at the branch library, the girl who shelved books at the library all summer after seventh grade, what did she learn? That books are very heavy, even the slim ones. They smell of sex and death. That there is never enough time to read.

The sophomore who served breakfast in the college dining hall, who stood like a good soldier before the field of bacon and eggs, what did she learn? That six in the morning comes too soon and disappears always too soon, that the faces of strangers are full of grace.

The senior in the nighttime cleaning crew at the Farmers' and Merchants' National Bank, Boston, 1969, punching the clock in her blue uniform, what did she learn? That the restrooms of men are messier than the restrooms of women, that wastebaskets overflow with secrets.

The graduate teaching English in the middle school, whose grammar screeched like a frightened animal pinned against the blackboard, the graduate at 21 before her class of 35, what lessons did she learn? That nothing is black and white, that Black and White is everything.

The lawyer just out of law school, tending to the indigent, the indicted, the three-time housebreaker, the ungrand larcener, to the man who denies he put his cock inside his daughter, what did she learn? That guilt is what we breathe, as plentiful as air. That innocence is rare and far more frightening.

The lawyer in her middle age, in her little cage of suit and stockings, her arms filled with the files of the deserted, the divorcing, the unsupported and the unsupporting, what did she learn? That no story is the same as any other, that love is ever ingenious, always uniquely disappointing.

And the woman who sits at the kitchen window, the woman who is finished with offices, who sits at the table, whose window is the world and whose work is this poem, what does she know? That this is her fortune—this poem, made word by word, beginning with the girl who kneels in the grass, beginning with the girl on her knees in the grass.

The Rules of Evidence

What you want to say most
is inadmissible.
Say it anyway.
Say it again.
What they tell you is irrelevant
can't be denied and will
eventually be heard.
Every question
is a leading question.
Ask it anyway, then expect
what you won't get.
There is no such thing
as the original
so you'll have to make do
with a reasonable facsimile.
The history of the world
is hearsay. Hear it.
The whole truth
is unspeakable
and nothing but the truth
is a lie.
I swear this.
My oath is a kiss.
I swear
by everything
incredible.

Grounds for Divorce

These are our grounds,
says the lawyer, as if
they could share this grief.
The client's eyes find the window
behind his bobbing head.

First, adultery:
Out there, a garden of delights,
everything green, about
to flower. Primitive, Rousseau.
Eve sings to the snake and neither
cares about Adam,
who is this fellow in the three-piece suit,
this lawyer lecturing.

Physical cruelty, he says,
is difficult to prove.
A sudden tempest blows the window shut.
Rain beats the glass.
We'll need to show repeated abuse, or short
of that, a life-threatening attack.
Outside, in what was once
the garden, wind rips the grass from its roots,
sucks whole trees into the sky. Afterwards,
the bruised earth sleeps and for mile after mile
there is nothing but loss, like the eerie streets
of de Chirico.

Habitual drunkenness, he continues,
hissing the last syllable,
includes drug abuse. His eyebrows
rise into question marks. *Are you hot?*
I'll open the window.
Below, on the bench in the littered
park, a wino drains the last of his wine,
throws the bottle into the street.
At the sound of glass splintering
she is her schoolgirl self again,
the smallest one
in the group at the museum, faint
at the sight of the absinthe drinker's face.

*Now, he says, I've saved the easiest
for last. It's what we call 'no fault'—
a year without cohabitation.*
He checks his notes, the form
she filled out in the waiting room.
Looks like we're almost there!
Through the window she can see
the sign blinking from the restaurant:
Open. Inside, she is the only customer,
a figure more alone
than even Hopper could imagine.
There she will wait for the year to be over.
The waiter looks oddly like her lawyer.
He fills her coffee cup and takes her money.
She knows without asking
he doesn't want to hear her story.

**Finding the *New York Times* Book Review
at the Bowman Truck Stop**

The business here is fuel: diesel,
sweet tea, meat and three vegetables,
choice of cornbread or dinner roll.
Not much time for talk, and if there is
it's how are the kids and the bad wreck
up the road. Then what is Stephen Spender
doing here, John Irving imagining
Bombay circuses; Gail Godwin, Yitzhak
Shamir, perverse desire and the politics of art,
all here at my table, Exit 165 off I-26,
halfway from Charleston to Columbia
and about as near to nowhere
as you can get?

Once my half hour here was a respite
from the fast lane, a greasy way-station
in my low-fat life. With my plate of chicken,
rice and beans and turnip greens
I could be as sloppy and happy
as the pot-bellied truckers
licking real butter off their fingers.

So tell me
who left *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*
exposed at my table, *Midnight
in the Garden of Good and Evil*
spotted with grease,
down this week from Number 2
to Number 4?

Deliverance

There's no such thing
as the necessary poem;
that's what saves poetry
from a life like ours,
from desire and striving.
That is not to say a poem
can't yearn for something
it isn't yet, can't crave
a meal of only apricots
or want a one-way ticket
to another country.
It can. We know
how a poem can need so much
it turns to mush, and how
sometimes even out of mud
and mildew rise the most
fantastic flowers. No,
what I mean is different.
That the poem is redeemed
by indifference, that before
it's written, the world
does very well without it.
Therefore it is free
to be what it wants to be
or not to be at all.
That's its deliverance,
its saving grace, and why
when it decides to speak
we listen to a language
that is ours, but so unlike us.

Rehearsal at Bread Loaf

Behind you in the blue parlor
voices without faces
rehearse a madrigal.
They sing and stop—
sopranos off—and sing again.
Sometimes the tenors fly
like angels, sometimes
fall flat. This goes on for days.

How long
have you been looking for your life
as if it belonged to someone else?

Suppose this is all there is:
Vermont,
the porch of an inn,
green wooden chair, your feet
and beyond your feet
the road,
the hayfield folding itself
into the river, the hill
and her family of trees,
and over and over,
the madrigal?

The Heaven of Hats

Now that the self has been shed, he knows
who he really is, this sweet oblivion
as familiar as the black suit they buried him in.
At ease at last with his forgetfulness,
he remembers and is remembered.
The hats come, each one floating up
to greet him, these old friends
left in airport lounges, in moldy closets
of cheap apartments, in hotel rooms
he borrowed for lust and left for love.
Each one finds his bald head and hugs it:
the red knit, the Irish cap, the battered
panama. He thinks *Why hats?* And then,
remembering he's dead, he lets the question
go where all unanswered questions go.
Alone again, he is oddly comforted.
All the lost hats have been found.
All the lost hats have come home.

Moving

She can't wait for it to be over:
the boxes, the bending,
the goddam tape splitting
as she pulls it from the roll,
the decisions—what to keep?
what to throw away? —
the garbage
too heavy for her to haul alone
though she does it anyway
as a sort of penance
before the movers come.

This is what she dreaded,
but when she's done,
her debris on the street
a mountain of broken promises,
it's the emptiness of the house
that catches her off guard,
each room a testament
to her vanishing, each echoing
how fast a woman can disappear.

Black Swallowtail

She hovered
over the thistle's
furry globe, her wings
trembling from the engine
of her appetite, her costume
of black velveteen and sequined
blue almost too elegant
for work. I thought,

I would like to be like that,
this butterfly for whom delight
and duty are no different.
Being
would be my only business.
Neither pride nor despair
would weigh me down.

I wouldn't dread
the shadow darkening
the grass, the stranger
stalking me,
and when the time came
I'd turn into the wind
and let it do
the work it wants to do.

A Dream of Horses

In the dark they left the barn
together, the old gelding
following the younger
to the far pasture.
The moon was full,
the field like snow.
They stood for a long time
looking into the sky,
lifting their heads
as if listening to the stars.
A shiver
ran the length of the young one's
nose, along his ivory blaze,
then rippled down his back,
and because
they were so close, traveled
to the other.

Deep in the cedar
the waxwings felt it,
awoke to see the flash of light,
the waves of muscles rolling
like a silvered sea, a pounding
of hooves in air, then the silent
pas des deux of flesh and fur,
bone and sinew, reach and curve,
one leading the other
(now the younger, now the older)
until the sky
could hold them no longer
and they were gone.

