

PORTRAITS OF WOMEN

by

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NOTE: A centered asterisk indicates the poem has been broken mid-stanza.

Introduction

Julie Fay is one of the younger American poets who are rescuing poetry from a too-long equation with the merely lyric, the self-referential, the autobiographical, the abstract: poets who reclaim the territory of narrative, character development, the intersection of persons, places, and historical time we too often assume now are the exclusive provinces of prose fiction.

Portraits of Women tells two long stories, both quintessentially American: that of a farm family in southern Iowa in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and that of a contemporary painter, a young mother who must leave the people and places to which she is rooted in order to trace the roots of her inner turmoil and essential strength.

The first of these stories is collective: its protagonist is not one person but a family, its antagonist not human, but the land itself, its exigencies, its gratuitous violence and stern kindness. The sequence is constructed polyphonically, built of the different timbres and perspectives in the voices of John and Eliza Graham, their daughter Birde and her twin brother Leck. The land, the life they have not so much chosen as been abandoned to, destroys Eliza, leaves her husband in a stasis of grief, deracinates Leck, and somehow enables Birde to synthesize her intellectual and sensual vivacity to its needs and rhythms.

A restless panic, an unfocused terror underlie Eliza's sections of the sequence — I want to call them arias:

Walnuts give such a fine dye
The way horses' coats shine. Today
I watch them stand in the field.
Their eyes brown puddles, fear
Inside their bodies.

Your pants will never show stains
Once this dye sets, the blood of simple acts.
It's your calm that makes me mad. Wiping
A hand on undyed pants, you bend
Over the next rock, lift it.

("Walnut, Indigo, Sumac")

The daughter's voice/music, in contrast, arranges what surrounds her in a painterly order:

Moves
the burlap curtain
In her small triangle of vision
Life seems to pool:
One corner flooded
by the elm trunk, yellow
field cutting a storm
sky behind the child.
red kerchief
in the pumpkin garden.

("Birde")

Isolated by geography and perhaps by mind-set, the Grahams have as little contact with the Eastern life they left behind as they do with the Lakota peoples whose homelands they are "settling." Eliza's imaginings of the deaths of two Sioux women prefigure her own suicide. Even in fantasy, she does not picture these women alive, adjacent to and affected by her own life. The family's dynamics are the only emotional energies moving or fueling these people, in the face of apocalyptic weather: flood, fire, a plague of locusts—grasshoppers in Iowa. Most of what passes between them, though, is silence, an incomprehension that leaves the last word to the prairies—a silence that is broken only by a subversive dialogue between the brother and sister:

Looking at the white land, I thought
If I was in your body
I could walk away from the farm
And never once look over my shoulder
To make sure you were there.

("For Her Twin Brother")

by the brother's departure, and by the larger silence of their mother's suicide.

The dominant metaphor of "Burlington Homestead" is that of a prairie fire, where trapped children burn out a small circle of ground around themselves and smother the flames: the burnt-out space saves them from the larger conflagration: image of a life at once claustral and exposed. At the end of the "Burlington" story, only Birde has achieved a kind of truce with the land, married, still farming, watching her child grow and ask

questions, determined herself to continue questioning "the way things break apart," and refusing "to accept their insignificance."

Sarah, who could be Birde born a century later, begins her own quest in a similar place, in a farmhouse in the Blue Ridge mountains she and her Vietnam-vet-turned-pacifist husband built themselves, where they live with their young daughter. In the opening poem of the sequence, she expresses, like Birde, her sense of the significance of "things" compared with the transience of human interactions: a tension reconciled for her, as for Birde, through domestic routine (which unites the object and the human act):

we're born, we die: only two perfect moments
our entire lives. The rest are softer-edged
like this: I make bread, sleeves rolled to the
elbow, knead dough in the bowl I'll give you.
We don't know yet who we'll be in each other's
past.

("Birthday Poem")

Unlike Birde's, Sarah's domestic life is not a metaphor for art: it exists alongside it, and her growing and believable perceptions of the world from a painter's perspective is one of the strengths of her story. But there is a core of violence, suppressed, by and to Sarah, in her past, which disrupts the family triad and sends the painter halfway across the world to unravel it.

The young woman abroad, the emerging artist abroad, are both familiar tropes in American literature: rarely, in the past, were the protagonists of these two kinds of *bildungsroman* one and the same (George Sand's picaresque **Consuelo** echoed several decades later by Cather's **Song of the Lark** in a very different key). It is still a risk for a writer to depict a woman leaving her marriage, not out of dissatisfaction with it, but from a need to find or solve something different, and returning to it, not in defeat or realization that "what she needed was there all along," but because her quest has been successful. In "Sarah's Story," Julie Fay takes that risk, and breaks those templates.

Sarah's catharsis is located in her discovery of the work of another woman, the 17th-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi. A group of three poems based on the painter's work and life, through the filter of Sarah's consciousness, touch on the foci of her own: a conflicted and sexually restless Madonna, a rape survivor brought to trial instead of her attacker, revenge as an art, or art as revenge. Later, in a small town in the Alpes-

Maritimes, she begins to confront what she has learned. "To work and suffer is to be at home," wrote Adrienne Rich, "All else is scenery."¹ These poems depict a woman making herself at home in a wider world through work and the acknowledgment of suffering. They never use the works of art or "foreign" landscape for exoticism or cultural clout. They are as much the loci of Sarah's story as the Carolina hills she leaves, to which she will return.

Formally, both sequences show a poet expanding her prosodic, linguistic and emotional range. "Burlington Homestead" concentrates on finding a vocabulary, cadence, and imagistic frame of reference appropriate to each of the four speakers. "Sarah's Story" ranges as its protagonist does in the attempt to locate sources and directions: there are couplets and monorhymes, a melodic sestina, loose but elegant blank-verse stanzas and urgent short-lined free-form poems; hidden and explicit references/homages to painters and paintings abound.

The poet's sense of place, and ability to evoke it, are all the more remarkable considering the range of places her book traverses: grasshoppers overwhelming a field of squash blossoms, wild azaleas blooming along a mountain streambed, the lunar landscape of a limestone col. Strongest of all, perhaps, is her more intimate range: the evocation of those gestures that define and preserve our humanity, and the linkage between them, from peeling tomatoes for preserves to the execution of a Biblical allegory in oils—and the counter-evocation, or exorcism, of the deadening silences that imperil it.

Marilyn Hacker
New York, NY
April, 1991

¹From "The Tourist and the Town" by Adrienne Rich, in *The Fact of a Doorframe*. W.W. Norton & Co., New York, NY 1984.

Part One:
Burlington Homestead

Note on "Burlington Homestead":

In the fall of 1977, My friend Brad Graham showed me a photograph of his great-great-aunt which had been taken at the turn of the century in a Burlington, Iowa, studio. I was intrigued with the photograph and Brad's stories of his ancestors, some of the first white settlers in southeastern Iowa. I decided I'd try to write about them, and soon after received from Brad's father, Herbert Graham, a package containing more photographs and the diary of John Graham. Herbert Graham had also written a ten-page chronicle of his family for me. It was these materials which provided the basis for the poems. I took names from the diary, and created a new family. Except for the death of a son by a saddlehorn wound, the events here are invented. I am extremely grateful to the Grahams for their enthusiasm and kindness throughout the project. The poems are dedicated to the memory of Herbert Graham.

Prologue: 1861

This urgency will outlive us all,
Spun by no one, cast
Over the land.

Crops inch toward the sky.
And though we've planted them
We slowly dissolve

Like leaves on the floor of an autumn wood.
Wind circles two stumps in the west field.
The seasons are the only survivors

Of a strength that grows not
Out of land, men or women, but out
Of the need to pass

Simply as wind over this land.
A boy's cry of pain or joy
Matters only that it cannot be touched:

A spider's delicate web between
The walls of the barn
Can be seen, not collected, and

We stir in our beds, rise
To see starlings cross
In front of and beyond
The full moon.

Light Change

Morning light reaches across the fields.
Softens frozen ground to mud that sucks at horses'
Hooves and the wheels of a wagon going to town.

John, holding leather reins, watches
Light-change of clouds
The fields grey, then yellow.

His sons stand near brush
Burning in the orchard. The oldest, Leck,
Sees patterns, his white breath like frost

Holds to branches before melting. The fire
Is red and hypnotizes:
A leaf curls to ash. Eliza

And the girls are in the house pushing
Cheese through cloth, gathering ashes
From the fireplace for candles.

Eliza looks past the gingham curtains
At clouds stark against a cobalt sky.
She remembers simplicity: standing at the door

Of the just-built house fifteen years ago.
Watching the horizon, her husband's figure
Cutting the skyline in a wagon with an oak bedstead:

The ox team rolled like slow deliberate clouds.
In town, John wonders will it rain by nightfall.
Watching the land for signals, he speaks

Quietly to Mr. Bilken who buys his wood. In three hours
He will be home. Perhaps his daughter Birde
Will run to the wagon when he arrives. He smiles briefly, turns
To help Bilken load wood.

Spring 1877

After the accident a spring rain kept up for a week and kept us all indoors until a wind from the NW blew the storm out.

—John's diary

Suffering can't be private.
Her son's death pierces

Spring every morning this week; the house fills
With his screams. They come through floorboards and walls.

Like the saddlehorn pushing
Into his stomach when the horse reared, fell backward.

Now she craves only unembellished silence.
Slips from the house like his death will soon.

Water drops from wheat stalks
Hold to her dress.

She picks larkspurs. White knuckles.
Tree trunks and branches appear

As rivers flowing past a transparent wall.
She walks these lines to dissolve sound.

These fields to cushion:
If only death would come as a lying down

In such a field. Like the Sioux
Who yesterday, ready to give birth.

Crawled to laurel bushes on the soft stream bank.
Dropped her baby, and died.

Counting

I've given birth to seven.
Looked at each child and wondered
How long it'd take to die. The land
Holds all of us, rises and smothers
Like the end of the world in someone's bad dream...
Dreaming! All these years John and I
We've fought this place.
According to some invisible whim...

Now watch the earth deliver its red haze!

The land never hurts John the way it does me.
Look at him sitting there now.
How can he be so quiet in the middle of all this?
This sunset and my children. that's all
I can think of anymore: the red
And how we lost the first to influenza—
two weeks old—I felt punished, deprived
Of something my body had only just learned to need.
Now another...

The sky gives into madness. I've expected
It all along and got Birde counting eggs
In the henhouse. Impatient as a jay, that girl.
Complains each time I make her check again. Leck
I've had stacking wood. I like his steady movement,
Black against the evening sky. I wonder
What he's planning in that silence.
Rachel and Trude wanted to go swimming...
Don't they understand?

Come sit with me. Matt. Snap beans with your mother
And watch the day let go its life. Your joy
Moves with the earth, not against it and so
Someday you'll live through my sadness. Snap
Some beans, rock with me
While I recall the day

Your father and I stood where our home would be.
The sky looked like it does tonight,
But softer. And I felt something like the wind
Flush against the sky
Then pass right through my skin.

Walnut, Indigo, Sumac

These colors scare me, swirl
Through water like a mad woman's hair. Sometimes
I hear voices: I go for water
And beneath the well, beneath the funnel
Voices shimmer. I swear to you
It's true.

Walnuts give such a fine dye
The way horses' coats shine. Today
I watch them stand in the field.
Their eyes brown puddles, fear
Inside their bodies.

Your pants will never show stains
Once this dye sets, the blood of simple acts.
It's your calm that makes me mad. Wiping
A hand on undyed pants, you bend
Over the next rock, lift it.

Indigo for your shirt, John. Yesterday
Gathering plants I found
A mound in the woods. Nothing was disturbed
Near it, no hole the dirt had come from
And I knew
It was the grave of an Indian woman
Who died surrounded by her screams. At night
I hear her cries. They blend
With the owls' and mourn her.

And sumac for your jacket, dear.
You will bob across the snow
Like a red prairie chicken when the air is
So cold you can hear the thuds of nails
Springing from their boards:
Sounds like shots of muffled guns.

Last Night

for David Wojahn

Her terror lies in the night like an anxious animal.
She emerges from sleep, places
Each careful worry on the night's edge.

She fears her death, not the violence
Or kindness of it, but its confidence, smooth like the
Insides of seashells. She listens to the sounds

Of a distant landscape. She has never been there, but
Knows its contours. Nightly she runs her hands
Over its shape. Perhaps death

Will come to her like this: she is awake and
It climbs over her arms. She opens her eyes in a room so dark
Nothing takes shape.

Birde

Moves
the burlap curtain.

In her small triangle of vision
Life seems to pool:

One corner flooded
by the elm trunk, yellow
field cutting a storm
sky behind the child,
red kerchief,
in the pumpkin garden.

Leck: Chores

Birde, when I was working on the graveyard today
My mind wandered to huckleberries.

You and I were the ones Ma always sent out
To the farm's edges, to growth

Long since pushed back for crops. In all that green
We'd find the berries, eat some, drop

The rest in the bucket. Our mouths all black
We'd make plans, say this was

Pretty near the last time we'd be out to pick
Huckleberries. A few berries at a time

The bucket filled, and we walked home. The work
Today was slow, hauling loads of stone

To build a fence. There's no end to what
Needs doing. Even death

Means extra chores instead of rest. It wouldn't
Be so bad if it added up to something,

But we've nothing to show except
A graveyard, a huckleberry pie.

Grasshoppers

Birde stoops to pick
Squash blossoms that begin
To spread orange with morning. She is
Thinking of the day
Her mother and she walked
To the stream and saw
Water collecting. The sunlight
On their faces...A quick

Absence of sun
Strokes her back
She stands and sees
A live cloud
Cross the sun.
Humming
Rushing like
A waterfall then
Like wet
Snowflakes they begin to
Drop and
Click as they
Get close, pelt, pile
On top of each other.
Greedy for space and
Food. Her face
Twists. They
Pluck at her cotton
Blouse. Seersucker. She raises
An arm.
On sleeves,
Rake handle, fence.
She would cry but
Is afraid
To open her mouth.
Runs
For the gate, thinks:
Seersucker. The blossoms
Close, believe
It is night.

For At Least Seeds

Eliza, at times God shows mercy:
You're not here to see the southwest field
Naked as it is. We never talked
About love, but I was always thinking
To tell you sometime when we walked
Before sunset. You'd cry to stand here now.
The fields look all burned.

Today we commenced to shovel the
Bugs away. The children are strong. Leck
Went to town for at least seeds
For your vegetable garden and came back
With reports: The trains stalled.
Hoppers a foot thick
Coming over riverbanks like a flood.

Eliza, when you died I didn't cry.
But these times could make a sane man
Crazy. Sometimes I imagine you here,
Walking with me and marking off
Each damaged acre.

Birde's Bridal Prayer

Today the horses stood on the horizon.
You have left us.
And I thought that maybe you were there,
The black bees, the black bees,
Between their shapes
Taking the form of the air between
Little bodies of energy, quiver.
You are there, though you
Never asked for eternity. Though
You never asked us.

At the barn door
I felt your presence:
The smile of a suicide
Across the field.

Mother, you snatched it,
Snapped. It
Wrapped you, licked your wounds away
So quickly. Those horses,
Conspirators, are so gentle today.

Clear Cold: Thirty Below

John writes near fire
To keep ink fluid and
Birde. in the basement
Finds apples, frozen
Like the marble ones
She wanted at the fair
That day. Ornaments!
The family won't even
Be able to eat
Them quick enough.
Thinking of spring. of
How winter's edge takes
Only a few days to melt.
She doesn't hear any wind
Or see this man she'll
Never meet. He's in a wagon
Watching sun glare on snow
And thinking of how
Sunlight passes through
A leaf. He thinks.
Pass through...pass through
And doesn't feel the white
Patches growing on his face.
His horses sense danger
In the absence of wind:

An invisible edge
That circles their legs.

For Her Twin Brother

I woke last night to see the snow.
And I felt a stirring. I want
to leave this prairie
As much as you do, but
Our conception binds us
In a house built one board,
One nail at a time.

As children we'd walk to school together.
Though the teacher could hardly tell us apart.
We learned early of separation.
Afternoons you'd be in the field,
And I'd help in the house.
Leck, the urges that carried Ma and Pa
Across the land and stopped
Them here are those we're feeling now.

Yesterday after supper
When we looked through catalogues
You told me of the man who, traveling
In last week's blizzard,
Slashed his horse's belly, climbed
In for warmth, and was found
Two days later in his frozen tomb.

I woke last night and looked
In the mirror. The image I saw was yours.
Climbing through the night.
You were whispering
Musical sounds, moving your body
To some far-off secret.
Looking at the white land, I thought
If I was in your body
I could walk away from the farm

And never once need to look over my shoulder
To make sure you were there.

Leck's Farewell

Dear Pa:

Today in the spring wheat I found a quail all broken. The river was higher after the fierce winter and I thought for a minute that I'd rather float down between the dangerous banks and bob like a bird than stay on this farm any longer. I don't love the same things you do, and hate the sounds and movements here. This land killed Ma and two of her children, but there are places I hear where they make straw into hats, and a man can spend an entire day never once having to look at the sky. Birde understands because late at night we've sat by the lamp and talked of these matters. She has a large pile of pictures she's collected from the catalogues, and one is of a man in front of a store on the main street in Green Bay, where you will find me from here on.

Tornado: Four Years After

The edge of a twister
Has divided the barn into splintered halves.
After the dark funnel skirts across the west field,
No sound even from the trees.
Like the day he found his wife
Crumpled and torn in the barn.

He lifts water to his mouth.
Shapes his anger, a squall
In his curved hands. Horses go quiet
After a scare, don't move their legs.
Necks perfectly still, their terror
Is in their eyes, those pools of storm. Wide and
Dark like Eliza's as she kneels in the straw.
Bracing the rifle against her chest. The sound
Slices through the field to her husband.

When he reaches her it seems the stall slopes.
That she lies at the end of a tunnel. He thinks:
These walls need reinforcing. The boys and I
Will work on them tomorrow. Blood splayed
On grey boards. He thinks: paint. Sharp pieces
Of straw stab her hand, cupped upward as if
To hold some small trouble off the ground. He remembers

When they started out they had to sleep
In the same building with the animals.
This building, the only one for fifty miles.
Each morning she'd pick straw from her hair.

He does the same, lifts her hand
And places it on his red handkerchief.

In Early Marriage: Birde, 1882

We swam in the stream and collected
Tadpoles that squirmed in our hands
As we ran to the bucket:
Little handfuls of quick-change.
We were half-naked and the sun browned our skin.
Last year you found
A red ear at the corn-husking bee:
And I'm the one you chose to kiss.
Today, after
I'd brought your lunch to the orchard.
I had time to walk the path by the stream.

At times your hands seem so big.
Like wounded bobolinks they flap
Their tenderness. I am afraid
Of touching your skin, leg to leg.
Under the quilt at night. But then wish
You'd come down the cowpath.
Touch the hair on the back of my neck, run
Your finger down the inside of my arm
And know, as I know, how soft it is.

Last night I dreamed of a field
Where a flock of birds swarmed
Over my breasts. Their soft bodies
Warmed my skin as they rose, scared and sure.

At breakfast we talked
Of the schoolteacher in Prairie Grove.
Tired of primers and cold mornings perhaps,
She was found with her lover. Surprised,
They rose like thrushes from the prairie grass
Startled and so alive.

Leck: Prairie Fire

for Sue, Hopper, and Cindy

Tonight a woman danced in the bar.
Black skirts and red scarves, her body
Writhed like a flame. I came to my room
Alone, sat in the dark and watched
The people step along the street below.
Bundles of energy. I thought
Of prairie fires, the awesome danger
And being able to just watch.

Orange clouds at night is what I remember
Best. Sunset long after the sun had gone down,
Snapped onto the land by lightening.
Grass dissolving into flame. You'd know
They were coming long before
The flames appeared on the horizon.
We'd watch them travel.

Wrapped up in the spectacle,
Birde and I almost forgot once.
Huge blocks of flame traveling quick as wind
Divided the night in half. Our faces were orange.

And we lit our own patch, then
Smothered it with our clothes.
Standing in it, we felt
Heat pass all around us.
We were safe in our pockets,
Hypnotized by the flames.
Terrified and delighted.
I remember thinking: It is beautiful.
I'm going to die.

When it passed we walked home
Breathing ashes. Nothing reflected any light.
There was nothing to steer by. Tonight
My loneliness climbs over my body in a dark room;
Outside the city cracks open

©

Like a seed, or like a prairie fire
Pushing in every direction.

Sitting here, I can see the farm.
How we were held to it
Like a prairie fire that can't live
Without devouring the land.

Collection: Birde 1891

All my life I have questioned
The way things break apart:
When a slanted green patch remains
After a mulberry branch, or when
Crooked twigs are all that's left
Of a bunch of grapes lying beside the road
Where we built a house.
We fill cabinets and jars of preserves.
Have a child.

For ten years our pleasure
Is never spoken of.
Days go by.
Quick clouds shoot across the sun.
We are barely aware
Of shadows that graze our backs.

Azure skies break over our heads.
Not into fragments, but into the cool
Strokes of watercolor. The child continues
To grow. Daily. Simply. Questions everything.
Nothing: Where does blood come from?
Should I bring my shoes?

All my life I have collected objects
In a lacquered pine box:
A bright blue safety pin, a button of pink shell,
A shoelace in plaid: an urge
To pull things together. No.
A refusal to let things go easily
And accept their insignificance.

Part Two:
Sarah's Story

Note on "Sarah's Story":

Like her contemporaries of the 17th century, Artemisia Gentileschi frequently chose religious subjects to paint. Her technique changed significantly, however, after she was raped by her father's apprentice and her own one-time suitor, Agostino Tassi. During Tassi's trial for the rape, Artemisia was tortured with thumbscrews to determine whether or not she was lying. Her most famous work, ***Judith and Holofernes***, hangs in the corridor that links the Pitti and Uffizi Palaces, an area closed to the public. Moved by this and other paintings by Gentileschi, I invented Sarah, a contemporary painter. Other poems in the sequence are based on specific works or artists' styles as follows: "Turpentine: Notes to Myself" after La Tour; "Red Hands" after Kathe Kollwitz's ***Hunger***; "Stone Woman of Vence" after the sculpture by Malezert; "Metonymy" after Balthus; "Citizens of Vence" after Gina Gilmore's ***Waterfall Series***.

I

Birthday Poem

for Phil White

All last night the dog paced and panted.
his fear no longer thunder but rain.
one step removed from what he knew once
so perfectly. Soon clouds could set
him off, then an air pressure drop.

To bring on sleep, I placed my palm on your chest.
paced its rise and fall and thought of gifts.
antiques mistakenly painted
like the bread-kneading bowl I bought you
and chipped with a thumbnail: walnut.

I want to give you that
and a poem for your birthday today.
a poem of things because only they last.
only they survive. what we put our hands on.
not the slow, dull pain of ideas. not us.

I thought too of how once you told me you survive
by denial. One day you saw yourself too carefully
and decided to back off. I wonder now if that's the way
to live. to replace everything like a face in a mirror
substitutes but lacks contour.

Once I thought it was simply a matter of time
before everything broke loose.
sanity shattered. I'd wake
mornings to tap nails at my mirrored face—
no sense, no nerves—until I was composed.

Since the truth is often too simple to accept,
we elaborate; this complication obscures
but also eases, the way cheesecloth on a camera lens
softens the photo into something dream-like, benign
but not real. It all comes down to

we're born, we die; only two perfect moments
our entire lives. The rest are softer edged
like this: I make bread, sleeves rolled to the elbow,
knead dough in the bowl I'll give you.
We don't know yet who we'll be in each other's past.

Perhaps you'll become someone in a photograph
this morning. The cloud cover broke.
Chips of blue. A rinsed Skullcap Mountain,
inverted bowl, at any minute could turn
to cradle the sky. My fingertips

brush away some hair, smudge my temple white,
and I look up. For a moment the window frames you, walking,
but I can't say if it's toward me or away.
You're in the field dark orange from rain, edged
with thunderheads' nervous movement.
The dog's a black spot twitching beside you.

Turpentine: Notes to Myself

I'll paint her face.
half yours.
the light source
a single candle
she offers. Bent
like an old man.
you shave wood
that curls to floorboards.
carve something out of darkness
we can't quite see.

A small key hangs
a scab of white at her neck
and your beard's yellow
worms glisten. Maybe
she'll tweak one and you'll run
it through thick fingernails
to a perfect spiral
she'll believe is magic
only you know.

What color is wonder, is trust?
White, yellow, red—flesh
I blend, stroke her face smooth
the mild incandescence which.
walking into a dimmed chamber.
we're drawn to always,
first.

Felling Trees

She wants to know if she can fly
(we watch the news, another war)
and why do people kill. So we explain
what instinct is, that even she,
at four, relies on it as does the docile
Lab who follows her. He could, provoked,
turn, tear flesh. But one-word explanations
aren't enough for anyone to wash away the TV-red
wet faces when we tuck her into bed.
She believes we're fearless when she
holds your face, a kiss good-night,
the surest thing we have.

Once, you believed in abstractions—
war and *country*—until you woke
one day, every muscle tuned toward
murder and thought *This is wrong*,
all wrong. Now you refuse to
smash even wasps that buzz and tap
the bedroom ceiling. Instead, you
stun them with a towel, throw them
outside so all night they revive,
ease back to the warm eaves, wait
for us. In early sun I watch

you sleep. Dreams explode behind lids,
crawl over limbs like enemies or like
Diane who asks us every morning
to decipher her dreams. Last night's faces
we say were bright balloons that cheered
the graying sky. I'd like to cure my own
bad dreams that way. There, dust rose,
a shelled house fell, and heads were sticky
balls that rolled and rolled away.

You go out to bring down trees the wind
could turn to enemies of the house

•

we built. The child leaves a world
confirmed by hands and eyes and enters
one where danger means *Stand back!*
There's not much time. The giant tree
explodes its weight. leaves rush,
suck air. branches each pierce
three feet deep the red clay earth.
then nothing's there.

For Something I Did Wrong

Sunset and the house sighs
sawdust, turpentine. Sitting
under pines, we watch the lake
cradle sun. Loons' cries swirl
through half-light like the sounds
of Diane out in the barn. With a small
piece of glass she has stabbed herself,
very gently, to punish me.
We cannot hear her.

As a child I used to wonder
why the sound in the pinetops
couldn't come closer to the ground.
It always danced up there,
danced with the moon some nights,
and I felt denied.

Tonight we make love, moan like the wind.
When you sleep
I'm disowned as the sounds of night:
owls, lake's captured lapping.
Face to pillow in her room above,
she tries to bring on sleep.
I can hear her and climb stairs.

Awake, curled like a young fern,
she has not forgiven me
for a crime I'll never know of.
I lift her in my arms
as though she were the boughs
collected for a celebration.
The pinetops are close to the window;
we watch, hear the swaying
face to face.

Tornado Watch

Nine at night pounds
too dark to watch, to see
a funnel. We pull down
old records, teach Diane
the twist, diversion
turn to St. Vitus' dance.
You put on Scheherazade,
cool facade. I pour her
through the air on arms
till she believes in human
flight, that lightning's
only angels' breath
and lungs are wings.
She pulls in breath
lets it out
then in
air rushes
up the stove's black flue
sucks out light, pops
ears. Is the roof
peeling? I
think. *hold*
down, press
as you pop
glass, shove us
in a closet, vice
of dark and less,
less air
pulled back, curled
we three
breathe
each other's breath
terrified,
instinctive.

And then it's over.

Next morning opens slowly.
Everywhere the contents
of our neighbors' lives:
House and Garden and a cow
in a tree's top branches.
Ten trees down, ten times
they didn't fall on us.

three times the house's height.
two- and three-feet-thick
catalpas, oaks, pines
trounced like pick-up sticks.

Our first step
into that quiet chaos
where pines bent over
backward bleed
resin: was there ever
a smell as honest
or rich as this gold air?
The eastern bluebird pair
we housed all spring
flat as silence. Sticky
palms, sticky knees, strange
beasts, we climb through
the gorge a poplar drilled

into the first acre
we ever owned
or thought we did.

Boundaries

Nights fuse into day, dreams.
It seems someone's there
when there isn't and I
can't think, can't paint, can't
shut out or feel alone,
a prisoner in a house
I helped build. Diane,
flannelled up for bed,
is ready for the nightly
game. You hug and nuzzle,
perform your bed-bug trick,
tackle with tickle
till her shrieks gash air.
Such painful pleasure tugs, tears
some tissue-over scar of mine
and there isn't air enough and I'm
back in the dream of a child
skinned and rabbit-naked
her organs glistening clouds
falling like silent screams
from her mouth. Some nights
I lie awake, afraid
of dreams like prowlers,
doze. You and our daughter,
innocent victims, stand in flames.
I click awake, sure the enemy
is here, behind our own lines.
I am a woman with a weapon,
the edge of my voice like a knife
between my teeth.

Directions

They're called wild
azaleas, little pink flirts
that line streambeds
deep in the south
woods, our furthest border.
Like stars or discontent,
at first detectable only
when you don't look,
delectable as ribbon candy.

To nurture takes attention,
then not. It's important
to remember where
they bloomed; by June
they're swallowed up
by other vegetation.
Mark them early,
then go back come fall.

Gather seeds. Keep them
out of light all winter.
The last few weeks, know
the long, indoor season
will soon be over.

In early spring, March
or so, place seeds
in a growing medium—
vermiculite does nicely—
light as breath, mica
flakes, little cups
dissolve when planted.
Spoil these with warmth
until green hairs nudge
lightly to the surface.

Mist gently.

Come true spring.
they are firm
in their decision

to move toward light.
later, ready for the land again:
place them where you will.
After that, they're on their own.

Hoping they'll have time
to root before a storm.
today I set a row
beneath my daughter's window.

Patience and belief.
invisible presents
for her tenth birthday.
years away.

She'll wake to trumpets.
I've always tried
not to make promises
I cannot keep.

Red Hands

At the kitchen window, steam.
steam to my wrists. I'm
peeling tomatoes for jars
and pull back
skins, halve the veined and
halve the veined and
tender under-flesh.
One globe to go and
Diane's need-for-me screams
slice the pulpy air as
she attacks my knees.
I snap fast
pull back
lunge
to slap slap slap
smack loudly
her name
spank her
once and not
too hard
but she sees
the same red monster I do.
Stretched in an elastic, speechless
instant, we look
at that strange animal
then
I bring her back
my body her rocking chair
and stroke
her hair
sticky with tomato
on the kitchen floor.
we rock and cry
rock and cry
the glass air
shattering
in that silent room
around us.

II

August

I'm at the mirror, braiding
my hair so he can undo it.

Florence. Words here so musical
I hum them. *morte, mia, qui.*

Italy's a country of patience.
From the train I saw a woman

moons of sweat on her sleeveless
blouse as she waved the train by.

My lover wears white shoes.
For three days he's brought

cold chianti and cheese, leaving
the room only for this. He speaks

no English nor I Italian. Language
only complicates. The dome I came to see

is right out the window.
The rooftops are all red, a city law.

The hotel matron moans in the steaming
hall, *caldo, caldo, caldo.*

Artemisia's Madonna

sweats in her sleep. The child's screams
wake breasts. She can't open her gown fast
enough. Skin's so tight it could burst.
Gums might as well be teeth. This tedious
four a.m. pacing, cold stones. The child
drains her of everything, even hair's shine.

After the news, she moved to the mirror.
Mornings, the woman she might have been
watches from the glass's other side Joseph
dressing his pale, strong arms. She'd like
to rest there, absorb dawn. Small, grey windows,
his eyes seem wounded by the conspiracy

of mother and child. He kisses foreheads,
mind already on the day's work, pulls the door
shut. She feels betrayed, a life she didn't choose.
Before, there'd been time to walk, hold hands,
watch cyprus tongues lick stars. Then this
intrusion. Of course she loves the child—

who wouldn't? He approves of everything
she does, even the silly trick where fingers
are small, naked dancers. Is it just
a mother's prejudice that sees the eyes' light?
She shifts him to the other breast, sits.
Rocker's breeze, dustballs fly like angels.

Candle flickers. Knees leave
each other, mouth drops, again the dream
that started years ago: a man's body,
hers, arm to arm, leg to leg. When he takes her
breast in his mouth, she wakes. A dark stain
blossoms her lap, milk spilled. At last

the child sleeps. She rises, passes the mirror
without reflection. The woman in there has left,
walks down the road. Dawn's red crevice. Thin
again, she climbs through that sliver
of difference between night and day.

Artemisia's Response

When you stepped into the atelier
I liked the way your face cut through
the eave's shadow, the candle half lighting
your smile. But then you turned, and the soft
lines gave way to thick shade, the kind
I make with ivory black.

All I saw then were your hands, black birds,
wings clicking madly toward my breasts and thighs
and your crying, "Misha, Misha," green thumbprint
on your chin. If at first I thought you loved me,
I learned quickly of reversal and in my mind
stepped back, fingers and thumbs locking
the scene into place. Red behind my eyes.

And so, when it came time to paint Judith
I remembered blood and speckled a red mist
on the inside of her arm, next to the lapis.

They asked me in court if I was a virgin
or a whore and all I could think of was hair
between fingers like weeds, how if my thumbs
ever get out of these screws and can still feel.
I'll use them to gouge out eyes, measure
perspective, one arm extended, one eye snapped shut.

In Vasari's Corridor

Judith knew murder etiquette. No
doubt, she sat, collected
at her vanity, selecting lapis
bracelets with ghost-lithe dancers
and matching combs, smoothed, braced
her hair. She went out, still
sore and bruised beneath her skirts,
as though for a last-minute head
of lettuce, and knew just what size
basket the maid should bring.

What brought them here so late
at night? Walking toward, away, back
forward again, breath close.
I study their faces, feel the guard's
bored stare in the corridor built
to protect the Medicis from anything
ordinary—goldsmiths, barter-
clatter, rotting vegetables'
sour breath, the Arno
out the window. Artemisia

doesn't give us anything to
distract from exquisite, right
revenge. Not the sounds—tent walls
flap, swallow desert breath
and murder goes on practically
without setting; the illumined
sin, the righteous skin. Judith's
breast flexes velvet. The heavy
jeweled sword of her arm
will ache tomorrow. Stained

thumb to brush, the artist
snapped bristles, spattered.
Tiny red planets, crust-edged;
pale centers swarm, anti-bodies
to injury. Gathered in this

dim corridor, doors and doors
away from the main gallery,
the guard, the silence, and me
with these three groomed, handsome
people who pantomime death's

rattle and gurgle, the blood-
spouting fireworks, the swish
of legs flailing under sheets.
A reflex that won't cease:

counting six wars in today's
paper made my ears pound blood.
but revenge was so liquid
beneath my skin when I saw
Holofernes' arm, its final erection
fisted at the maid's chin.

The Stone Woman of Vence

Imagine the white world my eyes know.
Hair's tight curls, muscles coil my cool forehead
though today even stone is hot. Ears'
white spirals are shadows too. white
in my imagination, if there is imagination
in such a one as me. Or breath, lungs.
I've forgotten if I ever had them.
I feel old and tired. This stone skin

is ready to die again. How long ago was it
my father sent me to herd in the moonscape above?
I slept with sheep, alone and fearless.
the stone hut's sooted walls I sometimes touched.
I couldn't see my face,
smudged, as I walked the cloudless
white-hot months, June, July, remembering
superstition: in these hills *masques*
ravish women, *pilons* mark the sites.
Passing a pile, you add a stone for protection.
And so I always carried one.

It was no evil spirit but breath
warm and human as onions, whose
black-stick stubble and dirty fingers
pushed me down to scratch thyme
pushed inside my own dark walls.
My knees, still young and firm as skulls then
pounded air, but in the end were useless
as the hand's stone. I gave in, I admit.
but said, *If it's my body he wants, he'll have it.*
I'll go somewhere else.

So as his sweat-slick belly slap-slapped mine
I left him to it, left flesh and bones
behind, drained myself into the stone in my hand;
anger spiralled, exploded, perfect symmetry.
Infinite star, I tossed myself, now a stone,
into another woman's pile and my new shape grew.

23

What was left of the other was a girl's body
more his than mine by then and which, when soft,
he nudged with his shitted boot, something
in his way, walked home. When they lay

flowers at my feet I hear them say
they found me, the Stone Woman,
and I bruised shoulders when strong men brought me down
to place me where I am today. To them
I was a miracle, though surely I was plain
as ever, eyes shallow, slightly overweight,
stone. I am an ordinary woman
but they adore me, the men in blue overalls
who bring me water, wood buckets, return
each time a flower starts to brown.
They don't know imperfection's beauty
and pull the flowers, colorful wounds
from vase, from soil, plug in new ones.

August again. Soon the winds will start,
winds I cannot see with names like *Mistral*, *Meltemi*,
while I, a woman of solid stone,
have no name. *Oh my friends, my soft
jardiniers*, I say quiet as the azure coast,
*what are your names and won't you cool me down
with buckets splashing water? Though I seem
calm, my body burns.*

What do you say to a man who thinks
everything he can touch is his forever?

III

Blue

for Walter Brantschen

Your letters are blue
paper wings. Today's asks me to
remember Blümlisalp, the day we met, the hues
deep in the day, how the sun cut through
clouds and suddenly gave us that green jewel
of Kandersteg below. Love, I owe you
patience. Few people know it as you do.
That day I thought it useless
to perfect what I'd done since age two.
Somewhat like a parent, you
taught me how to walk, to undo
instinct, insisted, "You walk too
fast and hard, your stride is far too
long. Two steps for every one will get you
there just as fast but rested. One, two,
pace your steps with mine." "One, two,"
I counted from behind. "And," you
said, "momentum is important. Smooth
your stride; don't stop with every step." But as soon
as a marmot's signal cry infused
the air, you stopped, drew
binoculars to eyes, the subject into view.
quickly handed me the glasses. *Nothing new.*
I thought, *looks like all groundhogs do*
(though to tell you would undo
a childishness of yours I knew
by then I wanted).

Further on, when air blued
with rain, we sat beneath a ledge, threw
cheese and chocolate. The crows flew
right to us, knew

✱

no fear, living far from any human.
 We continued
 up the trail, rain-slick. And though I knew
 the path could hold two of me, the view
 (a mile-deep drop began mid-air a few
 feet to my left) threw
 everything off balance. My fear grew
 until it moved
 up the path with us, a third hiker. You unlooped
 rope, said, "Ignore the view,"
 and handed me an end, "or you could
 concentrate on small ones. One foot
 before the other. One, two . . ."
 "One, two," I counted, watched you
 from behind, moved
 that way another hour till we reached Blüm-
 lialp, my lungs thin as tissue.

Love, I owe you
 patience: few people know it as you do,
 would, like you,
 hike for hours to find a flower *in situ*.
 When we finally found the *wintergrün*,
 you told me not to pick it, shook dew
 from its "protected" stem and petals. A few
 drops of water on your thick wrist. Huge
 peaks--Wildfrau, Dunden, Blümli--
 reflected in a pool
 that was a few yards wide, an oval frame, miniature view.

When we reached town you smoothed
 and kneaded my sore muscles, brought food.
 Out the window waterfalls fused
 into dusk, grew white, disappeared. I write you
 tonight: Yes, I do
 remember Blümlialp. I ask if you
 recall what Goethe wrote of blue
 deception. Distant mountains seem blue.
 And smoke. When you
 hold it up to something white, a flame's blue
 section disappears. You held a match, blue

*

flames stroked and licked the smoke all night. You've
no right to seem so close and be so
far away. All I've left of you
tonight is an imaginary blue
thumbprint on my thigh. No, that's not true:
I've something else. Love, patience is what I owe you.
With that I'm sending this blue
wing, blossom of *wintergrün*
I picked near there that day. Something you didn't see me do.

Wednesday in Vence

So you might have
a sense of my life
here. I took pictures:

oak pitchforks
 hand-carved
 stuck
 horns in a
pale haystack
 crude tools in the
 same country
 as the Concorde
a five-foot scythe
 wheel-sharpened
 leans against stone
 barn wall
 dancer at rest
 its razored half-halo
 glints when
sudden arms
 surprise
 two pale ribbons
 from olive treeshade
 begin the waltz
the sickle shaft
 has
 waist-high
 one wood rib
 she pulls toward her
aproned thighs
 in the same
 movement swings
 away from it
 not coy but surely
 sways her body over here when
the blade
 is here
 and the rhythm

*

continues
easily and flows
her body folds
and flows. her
pale skirt's
folds
flow back
and forth as
severed heads
fly
in all directions
and
papery stalks
fall
flat
as
pollen. dirt
churns
rises
forms a
cloud
into which
she all
but disappears.

When I took the film to town
the man in the *tabac*
the one who I wrote had one eye. kind
and two black teeth
said I'd have today
back in my hands
Wednesday—a little play
on words I had
to laugh at. having
spent so much of my life
trying to reverse
time like that.

Provençal Laundry

I walk to Coursegoules, a perched town few touch
completely, list new mountains and flowers
in a rice-paper book I've bought for names.
Every village has the same three-walled room where women
launder. Soap and brush stored like secrets
each has her own nook. Noon and still. This morning gossip swirls

the way soap through water sluices, swirls
through town. Someone touches
a wet finger to her lips, tells a secret
on down to another, a rare flower
everyone takes home, saves. Generations of women
have washed like this. For hundreds of years, the same names

are the region's annual blossoms, the names
of maypole dancers who swirl
long ribbons. Young men and women,
once the pole is wrapped, dance the farandole, touch
fingertips. Flutes and drums. Flowers
tossed at last like secret

attractions at Saint Barbe's feet guarantee *Aubade*, *Secret*,
perfumes that have names
the same in English as in French. Flower
juice spirals through swirled
copper, is distilled in nearby Grasse, but here, touch-
ing only soapsuds to wrists, these women

on washdays are women
who are Coursegoules' pale, ordinary flowers,
tucked into the walls. Their elbows touch
as they scrub and recite the names
of newborns who have lately swirled
from their mother's womb, secreted

like water squeezed from garments. Secrets
tucked back into their stone throats, the women
head home; the scent of soap is the scent of flowers

23

on their hands. Lavender in the hills. Swirls
of striated stone, as if someone touched
an underground woman. made her heave, named

the violent mountains after her. The name doesn't swirl
but sputters off the tongue as a woman with a secret
anger, touched, erupts: a delicate and poisonous flower.

Metonymy

Quiet. As a visitor lets himself in
without upsetting furniture.
Like a Balthus imp pulling
back the curtain's hemorrhage
of light. I had to look, to smell
its bitter breath, to touch.

I remembered the hands.
For the first time since then
set the metronome and
when the black stick ticked
it clicked back, cracked
a mirror painted over

years ago: he'd tuck me in, gentle
man, and then the lizardly
changing of color, untuck
himself, groan his luxury
over me, slitted eyes.
My disc-flat breasts horrified

I could not control their rising,
buds that pleased him, locked him out
the only way I could, invented
Saint Metronome, her odd wooden
habit and big heart stood beside
Our Lady, a mother and daughter

team that sailed off the sill
into the blue hills, all light
perfect flight, strong as wind.
I didn't have a mother then
nor a voice, no choice.

Like a metronome, the child's heart
stops dead cold when not in use.
Then begins again.
Most of the time

25

I just loved him as any daughter
loves her father. Until the other
tore through skin's surface.

all bruises and razors who sometimes fell
asleep in me, his grey penis. Pain
swelled like fruit left out
too long, burned, cooled, burned
and I cooed, my eyes by then obsidian
birds exotically clicking

clipped wings.

Why I Paint

I told you once
about the nun
who said I drew
my people wrong
because I didn't
give them hands.

I didn't give them hands
because I didn't
want to be touched.
There's no such
thing as "wrong art."
it simply creates
like a child
its own universe.

When my father came to me
I began a world
with two dimensions:
no hands, wet skin or breath.

Today I'm thinking
of your touch that
fills my woman's limbs.
Today I paint the girl
behind the window's grid,
her mouth a silent O.

We are all prisoners
of that man's sickness.
We are all prisoners
of that child's silence.

IV

Geography

for Marilyn Hacker

Ravines' black crevices
from a distance translate

land into black ideograms.
This is why I like to climb,

the view, and how geography becomes
something personal and tactile.

a way of looking over who I am, where,
of becoming my own omniscience.

From above, the vineyards' green yardage is felt.
On a topo map, dotted Swiss.

I walk down into the napped leaves barelegged
at dusk and lose the path. Darker and darker

more and more wild
blackberry branches tug at my legs. Fear

gels, a perforated line of blood
like a boundary on a map,

slicing of weeds and the *souches*'
crooked faces hiss into deformed reptiles

and I can't make a single move
until I push through to the other side,

unknown territory, there right beside me
all along.

Trees Are Trees Again

What made me leave? I'd lost
the skill to separate, to shut
things out, divide. Everything
happened at once, I'd
confuse past, future, present
and the world's wars
came into our livingroom
every night at six, blending
with the sound of you two
playing on the braided rug.
I mixed it all together,
a cacophony of warfare
and father-daughter games.

I walked out, listened
to insects, to blood
twitch in every vein
of every tree
our woods could hold.
Sweetgums scored with black ravines
teeming micro-life.
Later, moonlight turned leaves
to flashing SOS's and bloodhounds on a scent
moaned across our borders.

That night I dreamed a village
with no name, faceless people
everywhere, everyone at war
and blood sank deeply
into dust. I woke sweating
and desperate for air,
suffocating from nothing
I could isolate to see.

Now at last I know the enemy.
Like the Romans and the Templars
or soldiers in El Salvador,
my father took nothing more

6.

than what he thought he owned.
The world goes on, the wars, without me.
I've grown the necessary tough skin.
Trees are trees again,
not universes of danger.
The *avocats* I eat Israelis grow.
They cross borders daily.
Papers print maps. I peel labels
off callous green skins.
tack them on the stucco wall.
map co-ordinates. French limited,
I reduce **Le Monde** to its essentials:
nouns and verbs. I know now
I need you two, the place we live,
green hollows of land
smooth as avocados. It's the world
we've built to survive the world,
that long story of man, woman, child, earth.

Dear Father

This painting celebrates
the anniversary of your death.
I'm tired of forgetting
and forgiving
shut up in my room
trying to squeeze rage
like some essential juice.

Should I paint Kali, goddess
Gauls once offered blood,
sliced, carved someone's head
to make connection
with the mother-killer
womb and tomb combined?
Labor in reverse, she's depicted
with vagina teeth
eating newborns.
trinity of virgin-mother-crone.

You'd come home
and say you hated me.
kill the virgin, then rebuild her.
wanted me a virgin, lover, mother
protector of our secret.
I'd no sooner touch a knife to flesh
than hurt my six-year-old
but I know now
how a woman murders:

when she is raped
she kills herself
in part, numbs, turns inward
and gives birth to a creature
of surfaces that glance
the world back to itself.
It's that half-human beast
I offer up today, sever

her head to let blood
flow gloriously again
onto this white canvas, raging
tongues of blood, dark
on dark, my voice, my brush's
nerve-end bristles
only my insides out, stab
this dead in me
dead

so I am suddenly
painfully
alive.

The Citizens of Vence

Past the Stone Woman and up the dust path
past the Templars' fort whose walls hold bones
of a bloodless girl to protect, I sweat
until I stand at cliff's edge, town
a red eagle's nest below. If they'd
look up, the citizens of Vence
would see me, razor-weed, thin air.

How they once loved blood as pure ingredient
down in the ancient square, the power
it brought Cybeles smeared on skin, on robes
crude and impolite. But then the Christians
came and outlawed blood, any pleasure
of the senses: the nightingale's song
that flows each night into my dreams
steady as the smell of thyme.
And when a woman's blood flowed as mine
does today, they said the devil reigned.

I am here in hiking boots,
breasts bare, white-hot wind,
crippled with the thought of bone
layers—Gauls and Greeks blend
with sheep, simple sticks beneath my feet.
In ninety degrees
of panorama, civilizations overlap—
the turquoise sea and Cap d'Antibes,
Italy, the loping Alps. The dust
that coats my calves is everyone's
who's walked up here and had this view.
I wonder who will stand here next,
look down on me. I lie just at the edge,

hang hair, head back
like my daughter on her swing,
turn the world upon itself
so water's sky, sky water.
Somewhere above and below,
I am many women at once
offering this long, quiet history
back to blue infinity.

Looking for Corsica

Nothing's as it was
ever
twice. The coast colors
ice-blue, turquoise, white.
I sit at a distance, in spice, thyme,
ice-capped mountains to my left,
to my right red rags
of rock tear sea.

I believe from here
the world's gentle.

Even the chainsaw's soft
as a bee droning, lacing
together a chancre of white
stones Druids left.

Last night I slept
under moon
waiting for alignment.
woke, speaking another language.

I am looking for Corsica
through twin glasses
past the spray of city.
past the middle years of cobalt
sea.

Something out there
has body, shape, shadows, light.

I stand up and thyme springs
to attention, such bitter-sweet clarity
of air and breath
as peaks break clouds
real as any island's winds
carrying something this way.

Above St. Jeannet

Like a layer of skin
or another life
I leave it all behind,
climb through a town whose air
is charged with something
undefined, find the church,
light a votive-amber secret.
Dull beetle, I trudge

uphill an hour, stand above
late-day din, Dinosaur cranes
and motorbikes' brain-split cackle.
Fouled air circles St. Jeannet
breathing its brown spell legend:
from the mayor on down
to the latest baby born
every villager's a witch.

Like a layer of skin
or another life
I leave behind
evenmass.
children's brown sticks
that scratch stone houses.
An infant's cry, fried fish
rise like primordial steam
from fissured streets below.
I know, I turn a bend,
put rock between me and them.
Here, waterfalls shear air, pulverize
pool to pool without apology
and I climb through limestone throats,
till I come to the last blue eye.

Like a layer of skin
or another life
I take off everything
I want to leave behind.

Feet are pale, featureless fish.
Above the ankle line,
dusty crescent-hairs swarm.
All that's left

is the thin gold saint
who hangs at my neck
like a child begs its mother
not to go. My hair coos
an ancient lullaby down my back.
I stand at the rim of day—leap—
not dancer but wild animal.
as sun's final pulse catches my fur

like a layer of skin.
a sudden gold nimbus.
I'm a yellow crescent
one ecstatic second before my body
starts to pour from my head
and legs, two dull swords plummet
back into blue-black underwater
non-silence where everything began,

I understand: all at once I am
witch and queen, divine. Water, water, holy
Jesus, will lungs and ears ever reach . . .
I begin again the slow up-spiral
pop up to glass-shatter surface,
effervesce, pull long silk scarves
of air back into the body as arms snake
toward the cuticle of beach.

Like a layer of skin
I shed water sheets.
Feet tender, sharp stones shred
as I stand, human
again, begin the ascent,
scrape knees, hands rise to
the sky, pick up
the little excuses of my clothes.

head back, chanting, chanting
all the way home:
I am my own
mythology, like a layer of skin
or another life.
And I will leave it all behind.

Julie Fay was born in 1951 in Baltimore, Maryland. She grew up in Washington, D. C., California, Michigan, Toronto, and Connecticut. She holds degrees from Bradford College, the University of Connecticut, Arizona State University, and the University of Arizona. Since 1981, she has been on the English faculty at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, where she teaches writing and American and Women's literature. She has lived and traveled widely in France, Italy, Spain, Hungary, and Ireland. She is currently translating the work of the contemporary Belgian poet, Guy Goffette, and working on a novel about witches, wives, and Wamponoags in the 20th and 17th centuries. The novel is based on the life of her ancestor Hannah Dustin.

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