FICTIONAL TEETH
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FICTIONAL TEETH

POEMS BY LINDA DYER

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To all of the Walters

In Memoriam: Bob Snow
Ledger of Lost Receipts

Teeth, fallen out, cleaned off, kept
by her aunt in a velvet ring box;
lost hand he accommodated by anchoring
his wrist into his thigh on the barstool,
gesturing extravagantly
with the other manicured fingers.
The cymbal earring one man carried with his change
and rattled when he stood in line.

Lost verses to the melody she sang, unrecognized,
pen caps chewed into sculptures, addresses on bits of
envelope;
lost wrinkles to the face-lift, breasts to the abnormal
zealot cells, bunions carved, metatarsals straightened,
hip bone grafted into the femur where a tumor hollowed it.
Gauze, scissors.

Dropped stitch in the sweater laddering its way down the
arm,
lost sleep never recoverable from all those years of leaving,
dreams which wake her, but which required no record.
No innocence again with nudity, since she feels charred
by sex, and she sees herself as all bones and hair
when she orgasms, when she does.
Nothing will be the same.

The childhood compass which made north
always straight ahead,
nail chewed away leaving the thumb unprotected,
a crooked finger calling her inside.
Buttons, zippers, shoe heels.
Freckles she peeled from her forearms
so the skin grew back pale and prone
to other freckles. Watch stolen
from her shoe at the pool
by her own dad.

Photos gone somewhere or imagined.
Blood without implication.
Hairbrush for grooming and punishment;
food as fuel,
running not to escape,
wearing the same clothes every summer day,
uninhabited by self or other.
Her mother's listening ear expanding like an abalone
on her small head, after the rest
of the body begins its diminishment.
Recipes dead with the grandmother from Duvall Street.

Knock of disappointment,
the lists and letters kept in a bottom drawer
accessible to floodwaters
and relatives;

haircuts, shaving,

whistling in patriotism or faith.
Sleep without sex, love without it.
"I think you're marvelous," he says, with the deliberate, slow unlacing of her boot. "You don't have to feel the same about me."
Every Sunday morning I buy
*The New York Times* and rummage through
looking for something. The ink sweats into
my fingerprints. I wipe my nose,
black on my face now
and I go through the day like this
hauling the news from coffee shop to bar
to night table until
I look in the mirror
and try to remember whether people smiled
or looked away when they saw my smudged face.

The woman selling tamales in Purcell
wrapped them, steaming, in newspaper.
Later, when we found out
she had tuberculosis
we worried a little
but didn't get tested.

The presses run all night,
the delivery department hoists the bales
onto trucks, down onto a curb
for early morning pick-up by a carrier
who folds the papers
and today,
inserts the food section (it's Wednesday)
and rolls each paper
into a plastic bag (it's snowing),
hangs a canvas bag across
the chest, over one shoulder
flipping a paper in range of each front door.
It's early, and people like
their news with coffee
and the first noise of morning:
coughing into a tissue
toothbrush wet on the counter
door opening
papers unfolding
several minutes after daylight
with the moon still lurking in the sky
and one or two stars
and the streetlights.
A Cellar

Complete with rodents, mildewed board games, half-used bottles of crème de menthe and cassis, stained suitcases, an occasional shoe, a dusty lightbulb trailing knotted string.

To walk in the rooms above requires forgetfulness and grace.

So much height now with all these dizzying stories.
The Seven Anxieties of Sleep

I.

Staying up all night is the best that can be done:
hallucinogenic, cheap and adequate.

II.

She had a crush on the church deacon (both on the narrow path, unbetrothed), but when she told him of her interest (folklorious prohibition), he made her understand it was not “of God”. Despite his refusal, she continued in the choir, girl that she was: overweight, unsure, with a lovely alto voice, neck splotched with shame. Hadn’t he appeared to her in a dream? Hadn’t someone?

III.

Her mom at the movies for the first time in years, laughing, commenting on every scene, her cheeks indented by new eyeglasses on a smaller-than-average face, glasses which will still be in place when she nods off in bed holding a cigarette.

IV.

Cogitation.
V.

Best time for chemotherapy: 4 a.m. (cell production down; damage minimized). For those who go to bed reluctantly and late, it is also the essential “stage four” of sleep, without which cognitive reasoning is threatened.

VI.

Her doctor-father tells her of his famous patient, a country-singer admitted to Intensive Care under a false name. He will not reveal the identity, but gives updates on the chronic decline. The daughter sings well-known songs, hoping he will let on if she guesses. He doesn’t; she begins to wonder why he brought it up. Each night she makes lists of possible living singers while she waits in the dark to drift.

VII.

Every night I sleep and dream (discardable dross of unimportant ideas, says a new expert) in order to forget the same things: the mother, the man.
On The Use of Office Products as Beauty Aids

"I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils, Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight..."

Theodore Roethke

Free use of office supplies could be called a benefit of my profession; I'm never without remedies. Paper clip holds a teased hairdo, package tape around my waist gives me form; ledger green correction fluid makes a fine eyeshadow: smart as well as practical. Say it's true the unkind words of others actually cling to our skin until we bathe; I use file-folders under my blouse as a deflector-vest.

This is the life I live so that out of it I can create another. With an arsenal of mechanical pencils and hand-held dictaphone I go into the night and walk with the moon down urination alley
to the employee parking lot, 
skirt held with a binder clip
where a button failed.

But the policeman assumes something
disloyal about the three-hole punch
and postage meter under my arm
and invites me to the station,
where he takes my fingerprints,
one of which looks unusual to him
with its series of dots, until
he recognizes I’m wearing
one of those rubber fingers
a secretary uses to page through
deposition volumes looking for
some defendant’s name,
the very name which paused
the stenographer’s fingers
over a shorthand machine—
think of the testimony lost
while she spelled it
letter by letter.

The cop questions me: how long
have I been at my job, do I
get retirement, why a not-bad-looking
woman would stay so late
on a weekend without extra
pay? I tell him about the scientist
who suggested that our moon
influenced the tides—how he
was considered not only foolish,
but a dangerous occultist
by his scientific peers;
yes, the very moon walked upon by men,
the one consulted by lovers to predict
good fortune or impermanence,
the one which will follow me home.
The Life of the Body

1.
Snails sleep in pairs to keep warm so they’ll last the winter, though a child might give just one to her grandfather, who knows about their sleeping in pairs the way you would like us to do. These days I’m not drawn to you in the flesh, only in memory, and anger is dismantling even that until I read your letters again and think of burning them; but this is a high-pollution day and I might be arrested by the authorities who are working to reduce the brown cloud because it’s a detriment to tourism. After the volcano erupted, for a long time, people wore masks just to breathe on the street and baby carriages were covered with hard plastic shields so a sleeping infant’s lungs might be spared.

2.
When we go to hitchhike home we can’t find a ride and walk all the way to Angel Fire before a green Cadillac stops and we slide over the leather seats and I fall asleep in air conditioning for the short way to Eagle Nest. Then more walking back to the Boy Scout Ranch and kitchen duty: shining the stainless steel doors to the walk-in refrigerators, pouring hot water into the trays under pans of food. There will be plums in heavy syrup for dinner. I will smile in my hairnet and serve you 3/4 of a spoonful of potatoes and pass your tray along the line where you pay at the end. For those of us who work here, food is a necessary encouragement to the body, not designed for pleasure but to keep us moving like machinery in the bright world, so on our days off we can create a few dark places out of it.
3.
I notice, as I go to put it in my mouth, mold inside the raspberry and wonder how much I've eaten already of the gray fungus which attaches itself and grows there. Like eating mushrooms: most are delicious, some deadly. Since I don't know how to tell the difference, I avoid them all.
Irresistible deception: why we want what we want, and convince ourselves we are doing the right thing in the moment after a decision — to usher ourselves into believing it is good, it is the only way. Blessed are we who can verify our goodness by the power of our very testimony; like an echo returning, our voices sound like god answering back.

4.
When my father walked into a shoe shop in China to have a pair made the shoemaker laughed and laughed and held up his biggest last, many inches smaller than my father's foot. No Chinese shoes for him or his kind. My father's mother, all her life, jimmed her feet into stiff shoes several sizes too small so that her flesh rose out of the tops like loaves of bread. Even these smaller shoes were large for a woman, though. She had to shop in a special store in Germantown to find her size, which wasn't really her size, but what she preferred to see herself in.
Before the Drought: Flowers

Winter left its footprints
in the bright simple plot
where narcissus and red tulip
spring up tense in their cases
and might line any street.

The sky is not blue
once a heavy sun lifts out of the sand
dropping a boy's hat over his eyes
and settling a link of stars—

a stationary house or slow-moving cow
the only shade

and the calm water
stays calm.

Summer advances. The remaining flowers
lose their merit; the garden is overtaken
with zucchini and weeds.
In this climate, it will not produce many things—
a lily, for example,
trophy that a bride carries to the church
but not away.
That's the name of the place.
Les looks out from the kitchen
to figure out how long to keep the grill hot.
You leave some coins for the waitress
and pay at the register.
You can't help but notice the Virgin Mother
on the wall, eyes averted
from the nude on the calendar
and looking right at George Washington
on the framed first dollar.
You put away your wallet, unwrap a toothpick
and chew the peppermint out of it,
spitting splinters all the way back to work.
Once there were things that might fail, an echo never sent, a greenhouse flower dropping in slow motion. In my room, silver takes the edges of a mirror; beside the clawed tub and pedestal sink the mildew spreads its colonies like a starfish reproducing itself. The only other light in the room frames nothing.

How must we live without desire? A dogwood blossom breaks open and the whole scene stops mid-sentence. We know nothing of satiety, do not record local birdsongs. Many times I turned away from hearing a flood of bricks, a hammer on the ice.

We have had to say yes. There have been other lies, a body softening below the ground that opened. Those farthest from the window become quiet. Others, bright in a day of building, are ready to forget there is, ahead, disintegration. The man there, rising to his elbows, is someone I've only heard about.
We want to sleep like the dead.
We carry death around in our hair,
chnails, sloughing skin.
We feed on what will one day feed on us,
our bodies treasures
for inappropriate scientists.
We have had other deaths.
You with the dark cover of night in your hands,
save the story for someone else. Forget
my sex, my address, my unforgivable debts.
Level and Rise

A satellite determines that sea level is overtaking the coast in relation to the polar caps melting, as refrigerators surge on and cars idle at the toll. Like a craving, I want to go to Alcatraz before it is submerged.

The men in solitary confinement heard revelers’ voices on New Year’s Eve, lilting into their disbelief once a year. In the solitude of my childhood, the quiet would wake me to check the body, and then I’d think of a new category to count myself to sleep: recite the names of my 67 cousins, the make of every cigarette and car, every song using the word blue, how the shelves were arranged at Sol’s Drugstore, constellation of freckles on my mother’s body, the order of my teeth falling out and the jagged permanent replacements.

One prisoner threw a button in the air, spun himself until he fell, then groped the floor for the button, all day. Or all night, it was the same; he knew how to fall without injury, and could feel time pass by the bruises and swellings which could be felt, but not seen, in the breathing dark.
Food

1.
The cows on the roof
swam there. Water up so high
the firm shingles made a pasture.

Now the water is receding,
tops of trees visible,
the green of the leaves
a spite in their nostrils.

Oh, their meat will be moist!
The fat edges will wear the green
stamp of the government.

2.
When you get a channel cat on a trot line,
it's clear.
They're bottom dwellers
with bony plated armor
and barbels to feel the slightest move.
No playing around,
they take it all at once.
We use blood bait on a sponge,
but chicken hearts are the sure thing.
Divers won't go down to fix the cracks
in Keystone Dam.
They've seen man-size catfish there,
like goats in water
who keep things eaten.
Los Alamos Fire

The soil crusted into a kind of plastic.

Summer rains
slide off downstream,
with whatever they carry.

Homes, trees, nests eliminated
and dispersed into the air,
along the black ground.
Left standing: white bathtubs
like the sporadic teeth of God.
How could you not crawl into one
where your house might have been?
Folk Song

Black is the color
of my true love’s hair,
random dark strand
in a wiry blond cloud; soft,
it looked, until I touched it—
like a dog’s hair, he said.

Black is my true
love’s color, intention,
snake in each hand.
So many stars not yet
collapsed or catalogued
on his wall.
Belief—black, black,
my true love’s love
like an accumulation
of sins.

Black tread, color of my true
and ill-placed faith:
enfolded he was, my love,
by a truck delivering
his death, my survival
in color—black
and every other shade.
**Background Eye**

My daily losses are committed
to a notebook, the cover of which
holds the reticent face
of the Virgin Mother, lit
from within, through which
you can faintly see
the eyebrow of Christ,
His Adam's apple barely
at her chin. Shift the picture
and there He is fully—melancholic
Son of God come to the fore;
but on His bearded cheek: the
serene eye of Mary,
limp fish of her hand at his throat.
Both are calm to the margin
of empty, facing opposing directions.
Lead me, that I may not adopt
serenity as an antidote
to passion; a passion not
of Christ, but inseparable from sex,
longing, anything but indifference.
The woman's fingers sheared off by the thresher at an angle, just leaving the wedding band intact. How did the truncated hand feel when smoothing her daughter's hair, resting in her husband's hand to dance?

The man trying to bring electricity to his barn, on the ladder, electrocuted when the wire touches his wedding ring. His teeth spill out, but he recovers.

My grandfather's ring finger caught in a door, cut off finally to release him. Not a farm story, but a working man's story which carried a shadowy metaphor in our family ever since. See what trouble a ring can get you into—the drinking, the odd jobs, the food baskets left on the doorstep for the long-suffering wife and seven children.
Infrequent freight trains passed so close to my house the medicine cabinet shook its shelf of cures.

I never saw them during the day, but heard whistles at night like cows calling for hay in my dreams.

Tonight was any other night when I stopped on the tracks to see how close it might get, to see the engineer’s face, and hear the whistle close, closer than in sleep.
II.
I come from a long line of drunkards and cheats. My mother touched the oil paintings in museums explaining symbol to us, explaining style. My father pocketed artifacts from the Petrified Forest while the mounted guards surveyed the valley in another direction. My cousin draws police sketches, composites of criminals, all made to look like his father. My brother lights candles without dropping coins in the box. Me? I steal my own memories so they can't be used for profit or loss. My sister, in her diary, asks God to show her a sign, to rearrange the ashes in the fireplace. How do I know? I read the secrets in diaries, an averted gaze, a furtive reaching for something concealed in the hand.
My Mother Sends a Picture of Her New Teeth

They're in her mouth.
Flash, into the camera,
they are so beautiful they make me cry.

Her face has been altered to accommodate the teeth.
She keeps her lips pulled down so we can't tell
they're dentures, but of course they're so perfect
what else could they be—
no tobacco stains from the two packs a day,
straight and uniform as piano keys.
I try to look at her eyes or cheeks
but my vision is drawn to the teeth
like a drain everything rushes into.

She must be happy with her new look
smiling a way she rarely
did with a vacant mouth.
I remember how the last few hung on
like burned lace.

I want to call the dentist and say
put the spaces back
the one sharp canine a little lower than the rest.
No one should have teeth this fictional.

I mourn for the teeth my mother had 29 years ago
in the picture on my shelf,
she and my father at a school dance,
crinoline giving a curve to her hips,
her waist so small his big hands almost enclose it,
pincurls like a row of commas
across her forehead, and,

beautifully uneven, those identifying teeth.
The scars that divide her face,
gift of one husband out of work,
are not in the snapshot.
No sign of the booze,
the cigarette and couch,
everything lost in that fire,
the family history of letters,
some from me.

The face in the photo
is so like mine in the far mirror:
that woman, smiling,
full of teeth.
My Muse: Gravity

I was conceived between
one argument and
another drunken destruction
of property. Philadelphia, 1960,
most likely April. Dish me up,
the one with the dent in her
head, a bowl my mother could
drink from when she was drunk
and tired from the new turns:
three babies, philandering husband,
the new job, the coming home, chicken pox,
her own philandering. Who wouldn't
drink from her baby's head
and forget to nurse?

My mother now white haired,
toothless, even dentureless,
chuckles to herself over my letters,
over the dried-out geranium,
crashing empty bottles down
into the alley, her old therapy of noise
and splinter. We are each other's
subject matter: follicle, scrap,
fragment of a dish, some clamoring explanation and address.
Screen Doors of the 1960s

Of all the houses in the years
we moved so often, someone else's
family initial in script
greeted visitors, "s" or "t" or "w"
amidst the curling aluminum,
maybe so we stayed anonymous
when the lawn grew higher
than the hedges. Or, like a sermon
I heard about believers sprinkling blood
on their door frames so that
God would pass over their house
without extending one curse or another
as to the unbelievers.

And we were spared absolute
destruction, though not some
of the lesser curses (fire,
robbery, eviction),
especially under w,
but we expected some
trouble and figured with our
borrowed initial we might be
getting someone else's share—
maybe less than what we deserved.
Another barrier between us
and whatever threatened
our relative safety:
deadbolt, front door, screen door, initial;
which left us to save our own
for the next life.
"After the eighth child, you just can't get your figure back," she said, now up to 12 births and full-bellied, though not from food. So unfull, in fact, that when the family dog knocked over the butter churn, ruining the contents on the dirt floor, she took him by the collar and hung him in the live oak where he howled and died. No one spoke of it then, or until she was senile and arthritic, since the yellow dog was replaced with many other mutts, spoiled and hand-fed, sleeping with the children. Swift justice, the noose and dog cut down, but an end of rope still circling a tree in Nebraska, by way of Minnesota, the Netherlands, some old world of hunger and industry.
Being rural, we waited for the schoolbus in the dark early morning of daylight savings, then proceeded to the subdivisions. On our bus in 1972, it was unpopular to wear a “Vote McGovern” button, to carry a clarinet case, to read books on the ride. What a relief to focus on a battle outside the home, stand up for our man McGovern, believe the forces of liberal overspill would help out when Bobby Hawkins pushed you up against the graffiti wall and told you to take it back. Take back McGovern. Say you vote Nixon. All this for weeks of obsessive campaigning for something which might invade even our lone house with humankindness, bring us back to the fold, any fold—all of us too young to vote or influence our parents. Vindication was ours a few years later with I am not a crook and the guilty swaggering, a few convictions; but in the ’70s, rural Oklahoma, we were commies and queers, relegated to sitting in the library again for the lunch hour, our brown bag lunches confiscated in the name of Nixon.
It's the father relocated here that makes it melancholy, or because it's the second city least likely for sun, second most overcast. The tall twigged branches, brick-look asbestos siding stapled to woodframe houses, unused tracks, the empty mills, windows missing like teeth. Neighborhood bars remain open 365 days a year, lights blinking for the holidays. And in every row house and even the hulking mansions near the University: cockroaches behind the spaghetti boxes, weevils in the cornmeal, termites at work in the cellar on the joists. A democratic erosion, seductive melancholy of a city where you usually want to stay inside and practice your probable apologies.
I.

My older sister took the front,
and my brother and I played silent army
in the back seat
until the testing started.
My father driving.
Then the nausea
and I lean into the air from the window.

Oh God, if you care for me,
don't let him ask North Carolina.

2.

We went all over town through the sewers
jogging side to side over dark water.
You could scare people
calling through the manholes;
we were the dead relatives back to haunt them.
After a big rain, you could stand on the bridge
and watch the water rush out the cement pipes,
the rats mostly dead, but some swimming like mad.
3.

My hair is cut so crooked
my mother must have done it
but I don’t know to be embarrassed.
There’s no picture of me as an infant
in the whole box full of photos.

4.

My mother opened the pot to check it
and popcorn overflowed down the stove
to the green swirl linoleum
where I ate it while my mother
laughed until she coughed
the laugh out of her.
Weeks later I was still eating
popcorn from under the lip
of the stove.

5.

We drew on the wall from the top bunk
a mural like a church window:
several different suns shining,
grass and clouds, many-colored
trees unencumbered by any one season,
and men fishing in unlikely places—
under the ground, for example,
on one of the suns.
When she realized someone was there
she sat up and felt for her glasses.
Pinned to her long-line brassiere are medals:
St. Christopher, St. Anne de Beaupré,
Order of the Sacred Heart, and in her cleavage
a fifty-dollar bill
for emergencies.
I knew she kept valuables
under the lumpy cover:
glow-in-the-dark rosaries,
individually wrapped chocolates,
a picture of a man.

Come give me a kiss dear she says.
Thinking of the mysteries, I lean
into her frightening breath.
Red Sweater

In the blood
of my grandmother
and my lover.
I dye the wool.

The day:
a phone call, a gathering
of people in the kitchen.

The night:
a house without sound
except the clicking of bamboo
needles like steady breathing.
The Harpist,
Between the Beginning and End

An old gag in Tommy Dorsey's band: let the light swing over to the harpist during a song: they've given her some fake knitting to pretend she's amusing herself in between the beginning and the end. My Aunt Nancy got the bigger laugh when she didn't fake it and actually knitted a 20-foot scarf. In Ricky Ricardo's band on the "I Love Lucy" show, her harp was so shiny she had to be moved to the back. Funny, gorgeous Aunt Nancy, who drank at home but never failed to put dinner on the table for her husband and two sons. As musicians go, she'd made it in Hollywood, town of the martini, and died of cirrhosis at 44.

A star and signal expert on the radio says (as he discusses the certainty of intelligent life in other galaxies) that, for example, "I Love Lucy" has reached 5,000 stars already. About one new star per day can tune in to the first episode; 6,000 Lucyfied stars by 2001.

My own mother's drinking, more excessive and disorderly, has been mysteriously slower in its destruction; she's outlived her sister by nearly 20 years. Seven musical sisters, one gone, all of us descendants with sad confessions, tapping quiet feet, listening for the notes that give us ten measures to get ready for a final glissando, and the stretched silence before the musicians lower their instruments and exhale.
Growing Up Without Women

1. Self-portrait

On the first day of first grade,
we painted self-portraits
with tempera on thin white paper.
I don't know why I made the top of my head flat,
my hair an even lawn across the forehead.
For the rest of the long year,
above the green board,
above the letter L in cursive,
I had a straight-line smile,
and, hanging below my skirt,
oversized, three-fingered hands.

2. Breakfast

You go to bed sooner,
wake up after me.
In the mornings I refit the sheet
to the corner on my side,
the elastic weak from so many washings.
It is not my singing that rouses you from sleep
but the smell of bacon and coffee,
the sound of grease foaming
around the eyes of eggs.
3. Travels

A postcard would have been enough.
But the boxes come with bright stamps
of another language.
Mexican silver bleeds green,
and the ivory earrings are so large,
I wear them like charms
on a necklace. The new embroidered dress
would make a better curtain
and still no return address
in case I wanted to say thank you,
in case I wanted to say
I am sufficiently decorated,
I am heavy with gifts.
Did my mother ever set me on the sink's edge like a turkey she was stuffing? Once, she was pregnant with me. Imagine the half-melon I was on the skeleton of my mom. She is smiling; she is standing. She is sitting on the sink, waiting to be washed by her own mother, whose melanoma is a beautiful mole at her elbow. She is sitting on the edge of the tub waiting to be washed by me this one last time, collapsible as the folding bicycle I could fit in the trunk, if anyone offered a ride.
On the wall of the restaurant is a picture made up of nine small pictures entitled “How to Eat Crawfish,” and the couple I sit with because I came in alone and they didn’t mind if I shared the table talk about how disgusting it is and I write down what they say because I am lonely and have spoken to no one all day. The poster says: “Find the biggest crawfish, pinch the tail, bite the meat....” Growing up in Pennsylvania I would catch them—crayfish we called them—and fold a few in my white anklet socks to take home as pets, but from anxiety or just because it’s what they do, they would shit all over my lace-trimmed socks—bright orange spots—so I would drop them back in the creek, bury my socks along the way, and try to sneak into the house unnoticed. I did it more than once, many times in fact, each time thinking my socks would remain white and I would have some pets to whisper to at night in the small room where I wanted to be alone, but wasn’t always.
"Thank You for Allowing Me into Your Living Room..."

My neighbor on 26th Street in Oklahoma City knocked on my door with violet eyeliner arcing out past her eyelashes and lips drawn around her mouth. She invited me to a party where she would “make me over” and there would be food and prizes. Sometime after that, most of the women on my block were raped by a man who was eventually caught and locked up. I imagine all my neighbors with their eyeshadow and undereye concealer and full lips exaggerating the surprise on their faces. You could have picked the lock on my door with a pair of scissors. To hear my blind friend next door tell the story, he was almost kind and though he also robbed her, he let her know he was leaving a few dollars in her wallet for breakfast. She told me this with her TV loud, with the owner of the Chevrolet dealership (who had a speech impediment but did his commercials himself) thanking each and every viewer for the privilege of entering their homes or places of business. When I saw him in person, accidentally, and he lisped out a question, I laughed mercilessly until he turned away, and soon I left for the mountains, running out on my lease in the middle of the night, leaving my television and neighbors behind, feeling sure I’d gotten out in time and would lose my accent in a month or two.
III.
Breasts: The Empirical Data

1.

If a woman deems her breasts wacky instead of ugly, and they swell in relation to the nearness of his mouth, does this make her beautiful or a strategist, attempting to remove the stigma of these symbolic weights any way she can? (Gradient = a change in response to distance from the stimulus.) The answer travels a line close to, but not, zero, for infinity. Its specific gravity may be a measurement of weight in air; it may be a sobriety of countenance as in a time of grief.

2.

When a man's body is traveling toward the woman at a rate 20 times that of a shadow reaching
across the bed, but his reason travels at half that rate, when will the words arrive at the bed, the shower, the breakfast table; how long after?

3.

If the density of an earlobe is $x$ and the force exerted by the baby's grasp on the earring is $y$, when does $x$ yield to $y$ if $y$ is 3 times greater and the head bearing the lobe is traveling at a rate equal to the radius of $y$?

Seeing it in the mirror, the divided lobe looks to her like a split hoof, like the baby's two teeth, a set of breasts almost right in their parity and fullness. How the two parts meet and where they diverge provides a rational coefficient (all those afternoons with the tutor)
from which
she measures anything else
which tends to impede,
or tends to impel—
resistance being the
beginning of all movement.
The scientist who culled the word "stress"
out of engineering into behavioral science
observed the syndrome by accident.
Ungainly, he often dropped the laboratory rats,
necessitating a chase and eventual entrapment
under the stainless steel sink.
He began to notice, in his subjects,
ulcers, and a lack of immune response.
No need to inject them with carcinogens;
his own inept enthusiasm was experiment enough.

I think of you this way—diverted by clumsiness
when we disrobe: adjusting the music, temperature,
the light; washing hands, filling water glasses;
linked to medical history
on these few mornings-after
when I search for a shoe or earring,
and hope for immunity.
In French class, my boyfriend thought the French word for Saturday (Samedi) sounded like “suck my dick” said really fast. It was all we could do to say it straight-faced to Madame Anderson. Jeudi, Vendredi, Samedi—and then, there he is, my early love, unfurled and durable, suited up in a casket with a message on his lips, a furtive pun. And here it is, Saturday.
Waving from Shore

He gave me the words to a ballad
he didn't write, some lottery tickets,
an entire butterfly collection,
many cards, shoebox full of sand,
and he died with his face
in a windshield. So still,
his breath, the nurse who stopped
couldn't give it back
and the car, worthless, but for a father
to look at as proof—no, he couldn't
have lived through it.
No, it couldn't be fixed.
In his grandmother's house there
is coffee and neighborhood cake,
pictures, cigarettes, valium.
The doorbell: more food,
my collar already tight.

There is, in this, a lesson, says the preacher.
We are pretending to hear, waiting to be ushered
past a coffin the color of a doubleknit tuxedo.

*It is time to return to the living,*
my husband tells me with a look of interest
like a scientist on the verge
of a successful experiment.

Once I knew a loneliness so loud
the song in my head stopped—
and my breath—for the
sadness that became an accordion
in my chest every morning
with the remembering of it.
Sweat shines your face after working
the yard and you go to the basement
to cool off putting away tools
while the sprinklers are water across the grass
and into the bushes.
It's your means of being useful,
of earning your keep, of saying
"so I drink, but fault me any
other way..."
And it's true; no matter what
you turn yourself into at night,
you're up for work in the morning.
When we discuss it, you tell me to pray
for your soul, if I care so much,
but leave your goddam mortal body out of it.

I walk in the wet soil of the garden
where worms will be abundant in the morning
and the birds, opulent with song in your honor
for providing them an easy meal,
will enter my dream and become part of it
until I wake, not remembering what was dreamed,
what was heard, it now being too hot
for anything but flies
whose song is more insistent and steady.
The hands of the doctor who can and does snap the necks of cadavers for his research are on her and in her. She tries not to relate the two, or that he tracks a flesh-eating virus which enters the body through chicken pox. She hears epidemiology while he tongues her.

Through the tracheotomy, oxygen must travel the correct tube; fatal error to determine incorrectly which is which, and the head must not be disturbed. Love is ruthless, and this isn’t love; it’s medicine. A few cells from the cadaver under his thumbnail, his eyes follow her. his hands next. Why does she weep afterwards? Move slowly her neck, her head? The rest of her is sturdy and up to it. Beyond it.

Craving.

Ego of a man who is addressed with a title but may call the nurses by their familiar names, who gives orders of mortal consequence, for whom poor penmanship is an asset, who will slice the unfrecked neck of a breathing child, write and publish his conclusions, have a stake in the manufacture of biomedical equipment, a seat at the opera.

Scalpel raised, he might wonder what she meant about the phrase suspended at his incision (chill on his unresearched living scalp), and might tell her about it; but by now she is walking home, talking to herself: epidemic, manufacture. What is the incidence doctor doctor?
Then You Told Me You Owned a Gun

As if I were studying through a microscope,
your face hovered close to my imagination,
distorted by its proximity to my fear.
I recognize a pattern in the wallpaper,
and can't look again without seeing
the butterfly, a man with two mouths.
That insistent music, once in my head,
stays all day and I chew it like meat.
Phone rings, it's him; I start cutting my hair. He's needy with some vague, late-night desire and I don't have much hair left, so I cut up my mail, then the newspaper, until I see an article about 64 Elvis impersonators and their lives in and out of limelight. Oh to be like the one so famous and loved by women (never mind the thickening waist), women who waited in a hotel lobby all day for a glimpse, sure—each one tells her family—that he looked at her and his gaze lingered there.

He thinks I'm distracted, says he needs to see me, can he come over?, but I've put away the scissors, thinking of all the Elvies. They make a buck some nights—private parties, New Year's Eve on the south side—and it helps them do what they have to do (drive the rivet into metal, scrape the grease from the grill, load the washing machine), but not enough for their kids' college funds or waterside vacations. Performance preparation no doubt takes them out of the bowling league, away from the barbecue, and their families complain, but they're out in force: Mayor Elvis, Mexican Elvis, Janice K the Lady Elvis. I'm busy, I tell him. You can come over if you want.
I fumble my buttons making sure
they haven't come undone; wipe
invisible crumbs from the cleft
in my chin. Poor posture, fits
of allergy. I have defects
you never considered:
crushed arthritic finger, leaky
heart valve, deranged cells cohering
in the bone. Maybe when you
turn my hand over to the fleshy palm
you're surprised by blue and green
veins so visible through my skin,
like the human body in the encyclopedia:
a transparent page turned over
the other pages—
organs over muscles over skeleton.
This was unexpected: that my tenderest, fiercest, most defended private knot of cells would become addicted to nicotine. The man who got me so habituated exhales smoke out the far window of my room, rattan chair creaking. If the ache and pull of sex isn't enough, add chemical inducement. When I wake, urgent for nicotine (what became of those undisturbed mornings of a month ago?), he's gone to his early, muddy job.

Would ashes work? I'm looking for his makeshift ashtray. Would raw tobacco, applied vigorously, do the job? Desire is cruel in ways you never anticipate. I sigh all day; my ruffled vagina yawns and withdraws while I scan for stained fingers among men waiting for the train, or lean toward the breath of the man asleep in the seat next to mine.
I'm looking for someone I can kiss
when the balloons drop and that song starts.
I'm twirling my metal noisemaker
to see if I get anyone's attention
and then my noisemaker breaks in half,
just splits open.
I kneel down to pick up the half from the floor
and the balloons fall
and people are embracing over my head.
The place is so crowded a hand or knee could approach
a stranger without consequence.

I try to put the noisemaker back together.
Inside one half words are creased and stretched
into the curves. This party favor was made
from a recycled lantern battery.
Guaranteed—See Side Panel
says the red metal, but the side panel
is not available for verification. It has become
something else, still promising
a refund if dissatisfied
for any reason.
Before he was “ex,” my husband told me about his father making a boat for him, and as he was guiding the wood he left his hand too close to the blade of the saw: little finger gone! How the father made the boy take a cigarette out of his pocket, put it in his mouth and light it. Then they could look for the finger and someone to do something about it. The point was, my ex-husband had pestered his father about making the boat and later when he started using swear words and his father died, it was the same set-up. And wasn’t it much the same as what he and I did to each other because after all he was right to want the boat, to want his father to make it for him and for them to sail it together, if indeed it could float. The lost finger and the boat never finished, the table-saw sold at a garage sale and then the cursing, death, later the marriage which produced no children, no property, and little more than a few stories we used to tell about the other’s childhood as if we had been there but better because we could embellish or impoverish it for our guests as the feeling between us demanded—the story, for instance, of how his father stuck the stub of his finger into his nostril so it looked like a finger was emerging from his nose and how after a few times the boy was embarrassed, though his father was a good example, don’t you think, to turn his losses into humor?

When I left, I said I’d never fallen in love with him, and it was true, but didn’t say that later when the next love was over. After all, doesn’t working hard make up for absent
passion, doesn’t working long at it make up for a hasty
decision? Last night I had a dream about his forearm, the
underside of it, and thought fondly of him though not
without maternal overtones. I missed him as I might miss a
child I wanted who didn’t belong to me but who I’d take to
the zoo and the movies, so that now on an overcast Sunday
I might think of him as I make a pot of strong tea and
drink half.
The body knows when to withhold;
she can tell by the way you shut the door.

Lately, sound is an animal
dragging a trap
set for another intruder.

There was a time I went like ground
over trees to find you.
Mistrust openings, I think.
The stairs, the mailbox, the door,
just inches above black water.
It worries me to love a man smaller than me
though it worries me to love any kind of man.
When we dance, I lean over to press
my cheek to his hair. I resolve
to love the next one without so much passion,
to become perfect at striving for less.
Now, for instance, it's clouding over,
just on the edge of a storm.
Birds are taking cover under the eaves,
flowers close into themselves,
bees burrow into the efficient, intricate
accordion of cells,
as if it were night
when you hold my face to the lamp
like a map with a secret inside its paper.
Rule out dainty and its annoyances, move the likelihood toward bungling. The largesse of his feet turns him sideways to run down the stairs. His unpopular pair forever wait on the dusty upper shelf, or were never ordered to begin with. He has tried to stow his feet beneath the bus seat, but he makes a sound like the percussionist’s brush swiping a snare drum as he skiffs past. I know him without looking up, in the foreground as in a distortion mirror: feet bringing with them wrappers and ticket stubs and lonely stories—one-man streetsweeper heading home for the night.
You get dressed anyway
slowly buttoning the cuffs
unrolling each black sock.
The alarm goes off again
but the cats sleep undisturbed.
In their paws they remember
things lost:
a bird, a shimmering goldfish.
You turn away from my hands
but tell me my body is what you
always want. How quickly
the scene deserts us.
I offer up the crimp of my mouth.
You can listen for my answer
in all the traffic.
His outrageously philosophical goodbye letter—typed no less—was so generic I thought he might use it again, just insert new details to personalize it. He said he would always keep the photographs of me, and finally I figured out it was the smile he wanted, that momentary gesture before the flash. After he left, the doorbell rang, and I thought “He’s back to say he’s sorry!” but it was a child who rattled off a prepared speech: “...only five bucks to keep kids like me off the streets.” I found five dollars for the candy, and when I opened it, there were only six pieces of chocolate embedded in elaborate packaging. I made a wish on each piece and ate them all while I watched a show about polar bears terrorizing children on Halloween in a town in Nova Scotia. One woman shot a bear through her front door. No outdoor weddings in that town. And picnics? Forget it. But after Halloween, each animal claims a piece of ice and drifts into the ocean, some to bear their young in solitude.

When I think of what I would say to him if I had written the goodbye letter, I think about how once it was snowing as I was driving out of the canyon where I lived and I wrecked my Jeep on the ice. When the Jeep finally stopped rolling, I opened my eyes and could remember only that I had started up the mountainside before rolling back down and stopping just inches from the deep ravine and the park below with its fire pits and picnic tables. It looked as if a bomb had exploded—the doors, the roof were hundreds of feet from the body of the vehicle. Gasoline pooled onto the
icy pavement. The next car to come along stopped and people offered to take me to the hospital. When I tried to tell them I wasn’t hurt, I realized my mouth was full of glass.
About the Author

Linda Dyer received an MFA in Creative Writing from Warren Wilson College, and has been the recipient of fellowships from the Colorado Council on the Arts, the NeoData Endowment for the Humanities, and the Vermont Studio Center. She was a first place and second place winner in the 1995 San Francisco Bay Guardian poetry contest. She lives in San Francisco and has all her own teeth.
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