

Epitaph

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By *Annabelle Brannon Shamblin*

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Richard-Chess

Thesis Director
Dr. Richard Chess

Epitaph

Poems by

Annabelle Shamblin

20 Valley Dr.

Weaverville NC, 28787

(828)273-2681

abshamblin@charter.net

(828)258-9495

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For my mother, who
always thought I could.

Contents

Untitled#1	3
Elegy for Him	4
Together for Life	5
Her Menagerie	6
Hiking the Bald	7
Portrait	9
Woodfm at Night.....	10
Rain Vignette.....	11
Twilight	12
Sestina	13
From the Winter Garden.....	15
Hide and Seek.....	16
Untitled#2.....	17
Nightscape	18
Nightmare #1	19
Nightmare #2	20
Sabbath.....	21
Nightmare #3	23
Nightmare #4.....	24
Dreams of the Waking Night	25

Untitled#1

Today I buried my hands in the
milk crates, dug out the portrait.
Alice, crazed, one dimensional The
hatter with his shelved brim, an old
joke, an April wedding day. And
there, pasted to the corner His
photo, tiny points in shades Of gray
on stiff, soured newsprint, His eyes
smile, shy and affable.

The way he died, at 4 a.m.:
We had been drinking together
The night before.
One line of cocaine, two tablets
Of Percoset was all it took.
His heart gave up, under the strain.
There were others, before and since,
Lesley, whose smile was slow honey,
Justin, who died the same way - in forgetting.

Here in this house, the cracked plaster
Breathing cocaine, it lingers like the
Smell of mothballs, or aerosol. And
now, I pile life and death, packed Into
precisely labeled crates.

Elegy for Him

The minister read to us
About Noah and Moses,
Joseph and Abraham -
How God had chosen One Good Man.
I could not bring myself to
Kiss you goodbye, just
The thought of your cold flesh
Froze me through.

We kept pictures of you In dusty
leather albums, Cornstalks stretching
over your head The length of you
repeated in them.

A couple of grandchildren, on your lawn
Bare-backed to the last warmth of autumn
Scooping pumpkin guts onto That
morning's newspaper To roast and salt the
seeds.

In the back-yard garden You were
strength of every kind, Joseph
with his flock -Always turning
toward the sun.

That day I slid the weathered gray Slat face
of the birdhouse off its nail To steal a peak
at the speckled sky globes Of the eggs
inside. "They will never Come back now,"
you told me.

Looking down at the cold bones of
Your cheeks, between banks of lilies
I wondered if God had seen inside of you,
Seen the sticky-feathered pulse of a second soul,
Rebellious, aching to say "No" to gravity,
And given you, finally permission to rise.

Together for Life

Your unhappiness is tangible.
It settles like a fine silt
On the scant furnishings
Of your apartment.
I am afraid to find your eyes,
But know the look in them -
Sad and drained, like dying stars.
This is the way of things,
Our first day together
Always heaven, and hell.
Since your key turned in the lock
This morning, I have done nothing
But lie in bed.
We have passed into the slow comfort
Of life as breathing stones.
In the evening, your key will turn
The lock again, and you will
Join me, drawing down the curtain
Of anger - the tightness that pulls
Me into myself, seething.
Retreating into my skull I will
Breathe dust from the bones
Of a life before...
Hazy and immemorial.

Her Menagerie

She's filed each clipping away Carefully,
in her mind, organized. Yesterday's paper,
young Jim Robbins Died, heart trouble of
course.

She knows exactly which card box
Holds the scrap from forty years ago,
The photo of his son's casket,
At its arrival, decked out in red white and blue

It is buried in the pile that fills the upstairs bathtub Or
perhaps somewhere in the blue guestroom Where the
stacks reach her thin shoulders. This year's clippings
have taken the dining room table,

But Jim's, she'll slip quietly into the drawer of her escritoire
Beside the little pin that billy wore, in eagle scouts.
She folds herself gently into the divan, raising up dust, as it does, with the
Slightest touch. The dogs laze in the kitchen, waiting for their dinner, later

She'll fix them, fried chicken off the bone, and mashed potatoes, they don't mind
How her hands shake, when she sifts the flour, or a little too much pepper. She'll
Leave the dishes till morning. Since Joe's gone blind, there's no one to mind the
housekeeping.

Hiking the Bald

An ascent up the craggy path
through mountain laurel, hell
for outsiders, but I have
brought you here, to see the
end, the bright airy shafts of
lemon light spilling over the
soft moss, jewel grass of the
bald.

Behind me, your steps churn up
rocks, and stumble, you have
insisted on those polished
leather boots, and the heel gets
caught by the knot of a root,
but the thick verdant moss
waits for us, in the sun of the
bald.

under your breath, that floats up to
me, you curse that the wind is cold,
the air so sparse that your lungs are
left thin and raw. I want to stop.
to sit with you, and rest until the day
pulls us on, but the path is a thin
climb into the sky with no patch of
jeweled grass off the way, to take
our weight.

One last rock, to scramble over
and you turn your heel,
pour yourself onto my shoulders,
to hobble across the expanse
of verdant moss, of jeweled
grass, and the sun is warm water
drenching over us.
You look out into the sky,
see the mountains, that make
the little bear, and its mother,
and breathe a great gasp
as if you have forgotten the pain.

we will have to climb down again,
I whisper, eventually.

Portrait

Whirlwind gyres of fallen leaves weave
dervishes of mellow gold, flash-fire crimson,
their deathbed dance is ecstasy,
God, the silent lyre of zephyr strings, plays
an aria to apple wood smoke and that first frost,
as they drowse the air with heaviness, and sense,
the weight of all thought, a moth's powdered wing.

Morning here is the ice of that weight expelled, a
spider web of wondering, of hot breath on glass, the
low insistent hum of the clockwork minuet, and
the cold keens the sound, the rustling waltz of the
earth's wind down, and the birds dip ellipses,
winging wide, spreading out the skies of the world
inside.

Woodfm at Night

Bent double in the glow of a yellow Street light,
muscles aching with strain And an obsessive
need to scrub-Out every inch, of the old car, a
Hand-me-down, in my hands now. A necessity,
but still fraught with Images that rake the backs
of my Eyelids, can't close them now -the tarmac
is cracked, thick Wedges of gray faded asphalt,
Dry bristles of weed grasses, defining The tiny
chasms, the white orbs of light in the Black of
winter evening, almost show. Here, on the edge
of home, every knot of Filth, scraped from the
crevices of the Console, an exorcism. There is
no him Now. No hot meaty fists searching for A
lick of flesh underneath a short night Dress, his
smell on me, mixture of sour Sweat and curell,
gone, but The bile still burns the knot in my
throat, My cheeks aflame through winter's
ragged Breath, and I can still feel... The
microscopic clots of road dust, pot ash and The
lard film of a thousand hurried lunches, clods
scrape loose, but it will never be Clean, still
feeling his hands where they touched The wheel.

Rain Vignette

Damp skin
through a thin veil of
rain-jeweled wool.
Contracting, shrinking
in, the way delicate maple
limbs seem solidified
by the rain,
shrunk beneath the living
weight of an
imminent
gray sky.

Twilight

His eyes, blue and watery Cast a level
beam over the old place. He can't make
out any longer The flags that mark each
hole On the course.

But the pro-shop is cool and green as ever, like
ice on the skin after a day in the Tuscaloosa sun,
The barn still dusky with horse-dust, and he can
hear their soft nickering, in the twilight.

Here, red dirt and the Mimosa trees
Fight wars for his perception. The
cancer has eaten out his gut, But the
pain is not so much yet, He can't walk
the grounds every day

After the traffic's moved off. Edging towards the
barn, it's mostly Open space. Inside, the smell of
last fall's hay And the sweet, thick scent of
manure. Rocky's is the third stall on the left.

Opening the door, the familiar mechanism, He
grabs a hank of mane, leads him out Into the
sunset sky, and swings high, Over the beast's
massive gray withers. Rocky stands gentle,
nuzzling a denim covered Knee, with two
rubbery lips, soft as velvet.

But today, Joe's brought no apples.
He leans down, feeling the mass of muscle
In the stallions weathered neck, whispers into one
Twitching ear, "C'mon old boy, just to the lake
And back."

Sestina

A map of milky ivory shores, his freckled skin
 Like living earth, betraying only shadows of the bones
 Of some long buried temple, that some day will become
 Eroded, the sea's salt wind, its smallness stripped by time.
 But seeing now, his broad shoulders, his flesh seems made
 Of force, carved of static energy, so sweet, his weight, so solid.

For years now, he's run in the sun's cruel catechism, a solid Five miles a
 day, the body mortified, sweat singing off his skin. Spends nights in the
 stacks, hearing silence whisper, with tomes made For monk's hands, trying
 even perfect vision, whose pages guard the bones Of a faith that's lived two
 thousand years, but always dying, time Is his other lover now, but its
 esoteric caress will become

Abrasive through the long march, he will fade, will become A bit
 thinner, will not have breath to run his lungs ragged, his solid Hands
 will shake a bit, turning pages so carefully, eventually, time Will make
 a shell of him, his wet clay will crack, to papery skin And time will
 burrow deeper in, the catacombs of his bones. Reading him, I wonder
 idly if I'll see what time has made

Of him, will I be his only lover then? When time's run on, made
 To draw the blood in him, mapping his terrain through change, or become
 A relic of past fervor, a rite that time made obsolete, the moldering bones
 Of that lost temple, a saint's finger bone, bit off, less solid
 Than a midnight prayer, made of candle smoke, written on lamb skin.
 Will that be your work, your consecration, demon time?

So be it. Here, in this room, him and me, we make our own time,
 Prepare our resting place, not pristine, but the bed's made
 And waiting for the weight of us, our breath, our skin,
 A monument to the oldest church, where one and one
 Become one again. The monastery I won him from, its walls still solid
 In his mind, giving shape to need. Forget names, come bones!

Hallowed be thy body. No holier the flesh impermeable, the bones
 Of saints kept in frameless flower, impervious to time.
 I will keep what is mine, guarded by no glass case, solid
 And alive, shoulders meant for impossible choices, flesh made
 For fleecy down, fingertips, a form that will become
 More and more mortal, meant to mesh, freckle to freckle, skin to skin.

I map each mark of him, tracing with the lightest touch, the skin
That binds his shoulder blades, the topography of bones
His spine like a book's, its gentle crease, smooth as fine leather, become
Warm with living blood, and I feel I've woken a statue into time.
Give me time, and I'll memorize each muscle of his back,
Built strong to stand my wavering, its bones my church, solid

As rock. Time can't rule here, where old souls and new flesh become,
Juxtaposed, the great mystery. His skin is my map of the stars, his bones
My sanctuary, my roof, his back, made for my shelter.

From the Winter Garden

A rose blooms in the garden, Weed-
choked, behind the garage. The mud
is thick clay, left fallow. Any soil
laid down in The last effort for
order has Drained off by now.

Still, the petals push out, forward
Iridescent in the gray light of spring,
Dusk or dawn.

In march, the earth breeds muck,
More slime than loam. In the midst
of the emerald Tinged peat, the
blush of The pink meat unfolds
slowly.

The flower hides a child's face
Behind green veined fingers.

Hide and Seek

The night is clear,
Fire flies floating vertically
Past their eyes, a game of hide and seek
Under the street lights,
And all the children play.
She smooths her dress
Beneath her fingers, crouched
Behind the rhododendron,
Afraid the brick dust will stain
Her pretty poplin.

Earlier she watched him watch her
Afraid of the look in his eyes-The sly
grin, the flash of anger. Now in the
dark, at first she Can't be sure it's
him.

His face is sharp in the half dark, And his
breath comes ragged. She pulls up her
hands to walk out, Caught, but he wasn't
the searcher. Instead he pushes her hands
against The wall, tracing deep scratches
into Her white fingers, "C'mon Brenda
Leigh," He whispers, "I'll give ya a
quarter."

Untitled #2

Your hands now Are like paper
flowers, Lilies, cups with
ghostly Parchment fingers,
Curling into themselves.

So difficult to imagine Them
pounding laundry Against the
washboard, Sloshing water thick
with Lye, but the corrosive Burn
that stripped your skin Was
never so permanent.

Did your hands ache the
Days you lifted, first
One son and then the other,
From the cradle,
Into the hands of
The coroner?

Did you know
then, they would knot with time,
Like the silk of my mother's
Hair knotted up in rags
for Sunday curls?
You called me over
To fix your nails, and

I watch carefully the edge Of the
emory board, scared That I will
let it slip Splintering the nail,
Thin as parchment or, Tearing
the delicate skin Of a fingertip.

Nightscape

Lying in the soft side of the bed,
I feel your arm reached out
across my shoulder, to pull me in
to you.

Through the pane of the window
a star streaks across the sky,
and I know, whether in the dusky grave
of a star, or in a breath of the air
that souls are,
our forms met long before
this bed, this hour.

Before morning, you will trace
the thick white scars of my forearm
absently in dreaming,
drawing out the pain I kept
clutched tight to me,
for years.

I will be still, orphan
at the breast of sleep, and feel
each low soft breath of you
as they wash my neck, bathe the room
of all the fear I have whispered into
the corners.

Nightmare #1

I close my eyes, and
the door opens.
A gray absence of light,
opening to dizzying blackness.
After all, the sky has come in.
The clouds' soft shores are
washed in moonlight and shadow.
A river of changing stars
slides between them, oily and slow.
You are gone.
The stars have wrapped their
cold fingers around you.
You could not say no.
Between the sheets,
is darkness solidified.
The white meat of the lily
opening to drink the sun,
shrinks from the dark,
implodes, like a dying star.
The icy cloud-thick corners
reach out.
Searching with frozen breath.

Nightmare #2

Bound in the night's clothes -Feeling
through the drug, they are Without
texture, only a familiar Grain against
the skin,

The weight sinking in.

Waking up with the Gun barrel taste
of gauze in The throat, a thickness,
coating Of something like blood,

The ticking of the clock.

The sound of the I.V. melts in to The
drip of vase water off stems, Thick
perfume of phlox and freesia, Cotton
white flowers soak the air. Outside,
the rain falling.

Breath comes ragged, inhaling Iodine
and the rope and thread Of vines,
already coming to cover The body,
wind it back to the

Earth, and then the clock stops,

Sabbath

Dredging up the water from
the deep of the well, deep in the night -
an unsanctioned baptism.
The cool mirrored water, flecked with
sharp glints of mica against
the wet wood of the bucket.
standing there, legs half deep
in wet grass, with the crocuses,
laying her own flesh open to the cold of spring.

*Bare -white flesh in the dark waiting,
each nerve ending shocked by the
electricity of still air, for the next
blow, so soft it was a kiss.*

Every night it comes to this -
hauling up the bucket, the frayed bristles
of the pull worn loose with wear
rubbing raw the un-calloused joints of
her fingers, drawing it up high
above her, and spilling the icy
drench into her hair, to feel
only the rush and trickle, the night
noises drowned as the water fills her mouth.

*The hours upon hours spent gasping for breath
in a low white room, crushed under the air
with it's thick scent of sweat, the heat that will
not wash away.*

She stays, locked still for a moment feeling
the veil drip from her skin, the water sliding
down the way it does, to tickle the roots of the
crocuses, until the bucket must be dropped
down again, into the belly of the well and
filled, climbing stair after stair of moss
covered stone until she draws it out again.

The sweet sting of the blade

*Dragging its path along the thigh,
Watching her own hands guide the stroke
As if they were someone else's -*

As if her skin, the laid bare flesh of a too
early opened flower could be, not frozen
by the ice of March or crushed, but
somehow washed clean.

Nightmare # 3

Prostrate in the dark Sawdust
clotting her mouth -The scent of
her own sweat Mingled with
smoke. She tries to place the
smell... Death and roses.

Every nerve of her broken Body
strains to hear The drag of one
lame foot Curled like a club, as
he comes For her.

Before she slept (the pain in her
Skull, hot blood in her eyes, and The
dark finally) he took the mewling
girl he'd tied up in a corner, God
knows where.

Now on the wall near where
She lay, some sort of leather...
And in faded ink, the Girl's
tattoo, her flesh Made a
tapestry.

Nightmare #4

The empty restroom is like
A cell, all tile and mortar.
On the floor she digs
Shards of glass from tiny wounds -
Bruises like dark flowers.

In the skin of one knee Something
almost liquid shimmers. Digging into
the flesh she withdraws A carving?
Tiny thing made of infinite Detail,
brittle as sharpened stoned.

The carcass of a bottle fly:
Watching as fluid fills each
Crevice, the wings turning from
Dried parchment to glass, as they
Spread for flight.

Dreams of the Waking Night

The night's tide washes In,
drawing with it the Raw mark of
a new Seer, washing the dreamer
From the sand. The dreamer Is
taken, waking, insane In a swarm
of Indigo, The shear heat of a
red-Dimmed tide that tears The
skin, the death of a mind.
Shredded and torn. The water,
Satiated, drawing in what It has
taken, made the night's.