

Gently Bent

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By Leigh-Anne Hunnicutt

Gently Bent

Poems by

Leigh-Anne Hunnicutt

415 Chunn's Cove Rd, Apt.
1500-D, Asheville, NC 28805
(910)818-1673
theSchmuckleigh@hotmail.com

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Hunnicutt 1

For Mina

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I. Petalbert Devils

Daddy Fly

When I was just zero A blank
egg Daddy gave to me yucky
string bean toes A nose like a
broken statue After Rome
tripped and fell.

At four, Daddy sent me twelve
big Roses, blooms fat and red
as tender cheeks on winter
days.

When I threw my Jellies
off the dock Daddy walked through oil
colored water over
bits of broken shell
and Daddy brought them back.

Jack and Jim have turned Daddy grey and mean, old
clock took all his days away, drew color from his
cheeks like a hypodermic needle.

At sixteen, my father backhanded me
like he was hitting a baseball.
For him, the hit must've knocked one over the fence I guess.
He won the game for once.

Father crumbled half cooked burger
sweaty with grease
over mother's head.
Tears came so fast
for her. She was red, fat,
soggy as a sponge or soft fruit
ready to be squeezed.
He shuts his hand
on her like a vault.
My father's fist dilates
then contracts, and she
gets a little death.

She gave it up to him so easy.
Daddy Fly sucked the sugar of his
violence from our hearts. He had a
regular feast. We three were his
party plates, his birthday cake. A
slap, a curse, a tear Boy, we lit his
candles up and he exhaled them
out.

But before that Daddy Long Legs smiled
gave me rides up the stairs
resting on the bier of his arms
and Daddy Sang
Boom Diddy Boom Diddy
Boom Diddy Boom
as he bounced in time to his music in time before
Daddy yelled
Daddy hit
Daddy swallowed his slow poison
Before Daddy poisoned me

Drink me, Eat me

Sometimes I want to shock my father into awareness.
I want to crouch in front of him like an animal,
to knock his wine glass away into a split heart
red stain, a proof of his silly soggy ways on my mother's egg white walls.
For a long time home was Mom's house
her dollhouse, as if keeping her grip on the peach floor and the eggshell walls would keep Dad
home, keep Dad whole.
I too understand the deep drug of distraction.
While Dad drinks wine, mom takes the trivial in concentrated dosage,
drinks herself blind on opiate details to blur the greatest pains to running colors.

The Red String

I, Ariadne, brought the red string for my Theseus

My wrist I tied with one end
to him I gave the other in a
blood colored knot

The red string will guide him from the heart of the Labyrinth,
the terrible corridors, the walls that shimmer like blood blackened coins.
Theseus departs.

I wait, I wait
three days, three days.
Our hearts are tied
our hands are tied
with the heart string, with the marriage knot.

One night I feel the Red String pull, oh
god, not to reassure, but to sting.

It was done to bring forth the riches of my body
diamonds from my eyes,
rubies from my skin,
poor wrist of pearl torn by the red string
To what have I bound myself with this red cable
if beloved Theseus be dead?

It can only be King Minos' Shame,
that thing of rage
he that pounds his breast so,
the hungry mouth,
the beast in his maze,
in the palace of walls,
kingdom of the Lost
It can only be My father's
Shadow.

Church-Talk

Teenagers! Teenagers!
Quiet Now! Pastor Ed
behind the pulpit says.

We gossip anyway hiding
our mouths behind our
bibles.

I heard stuff from Sharla who
heard it from her mother, that
afflicted mound of flesh with
her coke bottle lenses and that
hair cut like she did it herself.

First, she said, Pastor Ed's wife
used to be his mistress.

Once upon a time
they'd done it in a hot tub.
Later they got married
without love
managing to get in the way.

The next thing, she says, is
about Sonya. A pretty woman
in our congregation with two
little girls and a dead husband.
Cancer ate him up inside and
he has gone away, maybe
flown off the earth, just a piece
of blue sky or blue paper, just a
letter to his daughters.

Too bad that afterwards old Ed
wanted to give Sonya a little
more than the Love of the
Lord, show her a little more
than the Glory of His Name.

Weird Sister

Collard Collard greens and corn We
say the Son of God was born

He bars the Most, he loves the Least
He'll bind you, cook you for our feast

Some may eat him as he's bread
You lie, deny. Eat you instead.

Mother father, daughter son All
will come before with sin

And be judged
And be judged

Black fingernails and wine and Lust
will grind your body down to Dust

You will be judged
You will be judged.

Southern Heathen

I don't need a Sybil to see my Momma's not pleased. No oracle to huff her smoke and pronounce on me.

Earth is where the tomatoes sprout,
the Dogwoods drop their roots like hands
searching for home.

Water, why the swamp behind our house
is filled with it.

There are plenty of places, she'd say,
to find it in this state.

Jordan Lake

James' Lake

White Lake

Air is what Dad flies through in his tiny plane
and becomes just a white quarter note in all the blue sky.
The clouds are where the angels live
to look over our shoulders like kindergarten teachers.

Fire will get you if you don't be careful.

You will fall and you will die,

she says without saying,

and it won't be mercifully

that He will cast you down to be broken

on the sea of rocks

down to Hades, down to Hell.

Pray, please pray.

Every thing is part of Momma's cartography: soul,
heart, space above, green land, white air, red fire,
blue sea. And though I don't believe in her maps
and the monsters she sketches in the deep,
sometimes I wonder what music she must hear, what
graceful tunes the planets dance to in her
cosmology.

Ayahuasca

The old woman made my bed softly.
She breathed smoke from a pipe
and whispered a cloud around my face,
sang her benediction.
In the underworld, I lay, dizzy from the heart-blood of the vine,
that drink brown as river mud.

"Good. It does its work."

My life receded to a distant night's shore, every deed
every moment of flower or filth popping like stars
above a black mirror.

My dreaming eyes, opened wide as the sky,
gave birth to the limitless gaze of the jungle.
Red clouds of pain rose and burned and bled.
Water flowed, as time moved on, then fire fell.
The world fell.
In the space of a moment,
I was born, and lived, and died.

Snake-Bit

Sugar, you done been snake bit
is the way my granddaddy might say it.
My body's aching with a slow poison
because in my heart
my flesh has been as bare as a snake
just shed its skin,
has been as clean of clothes
as that saucer of dust
the devil stood upon.
That spot wore no flora, no scrub
where they say *he walked, he walked.*

When I watched that woman, Mina's party friend,
my body was remade in her image.
I sat in her lap,
her black jacket kept me warm;
both of us wondered what sounds
the other made in motion.

In the warm breath of her and me alone
in that little room together
breathless to know, she and I
we shared the bed together,
both of us wondering
what keenly sheltered fire,
what heat of summer
we might steal from one another.

First the Petals, Then the Thorn

I carried a bottle of wine away with you,
walked through the wet night grass with you.
We drank, we kissed with words, or so I thought.
My best high heels were left, those curving black orchids,
one tipped on a stone like a wounded bird,
the other dangling like a pendant from a branch.

You smiled but didn't pull my hand;
I pulled my dress up.
Laughing, you slunk away.
"You've had a little too much," you said.

I fell sidelong, dizzy with bitter wine. The
dark swallowed you up but your voice
remained, speaking to another girl. I'll bet
you touched her hand.

I crawled beneath a rose bush and made my shelter in the thorns.
Beneath the clasping branches I slept; in my dreams I nursed
my poison like a gift for you, grew black roses for you.
Humiliation was my seed.

Fearscape

Fears multiply easily,
a thousand white moths
mouths red with your blood
swirl their winter around a lonely light.

Disease. This fear is familiar.
Like any good organism,
it reproduces from the tiny bead of the cell
dividing,
conquering the body.

Fear wears many faces:
Meningitis can make limbs blacken and curl like rotting leaves;
Rabies, hydrophobia and animal madness;

Fear of being alone is a disease too. a
spirit sickness, mind sickness.

Some people do Awful, selfish things. Look at
Vera Renzy and her zinc coffins; she put the
poison of her heart into food, made men sick
with her terrible brand of 'love.' Clearly an
extreme case, it is agonizing to see
so many sad, sad stories meeting in one house, so
many threads devoured by one hungry heart.

Bye Bye

At seventeen years old I shaved all my hair
away, my changing leaves tumbling
to the floor. At that age
I wanted to be a double, a mirror to the Joan
of Arc I had seen on film embracing
her wooden post like I hug mom
dad, brother sister.
She let them tie her up, trusting.
From where she stood maybe
the fire looked better. At least
she'd be warm, no more long winters
no more hard bread.

I kiss the glass, she kisses back I touch
the glass, she touches back both of us
round faces beneath cropped hair. For
As long as I wear her, we are two.

What I didn't know then was
What I do know now is Not a
saint or a pilgrim, I split
down to one again. Now I
look in the glass to see one
red stranger reflected back at
me. No fire, no snow, just the
hiss of the phone line while
to nobody special I say:
"I hate it here. I want to
come home."

Night Song

Outside the sky hangs, a
sheet of blue paper, spark
bright and empty. One hard
star rises slow,

One moment swells blue, then
black, slow and cold and dies,
then one more,
then one more.
Time patters down in drops,
falls still.

Time is still.

I try to raise my hand,
now heavy as stone and useless
for labor, for tenderness.
My meanness becomes my poison,
my strangeness a wax shell ocean thick.

I'm tongueless,
my eyes are weighed
planet-heavy to the ending of hard red day,
the birth of blue night glow.

The moon blooms in a paper circle
hovering ghostlike on the edge of night,
on one balance of this cycled song.
The sun broods heavy as a bloated fruit on the other.
They hang their together
almost until the end of the world.

Somewhere, a heart strays sick and dying.
It's a death without smell and sound, a
scentless, winter death scene done in
white marble. My wind pricked fingers
feel smooth, hard as glass, cold as nature's
glass.

Day blinks out like someone switched off the lights,
like God blew out a match. Stars become sharper
and prick the night open. I squeeze my eyes nearly
closed,

until they leak,
until the stars open, hazy flowers,
until the sky tonight becomes a
box of haloes.

Mary

I only met her twice but she told me a whole life full.
She had been an army nurse once, had enlisted in San Francisco
in 1967. I think she helped out in Vietnam, treating war
wounds and writing letters to her husband about the things
she had seen. What did they say? How did they feel?
Like a phantom limb, this spot in the story went missing,
stayed gone, but even still the pain persisted.

She lived in San Francisco for almost fifteen years,
traveled to Paris, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, Athens,
Rome. Mary's life seemed like a room alive with dusty
souvenirs and pictures, filled with color and contrast. My life seemed
stunted in comparison, a hall lined with doors that didn't lead anywhere,
the corridors of choice, of vice, success trimmed away in falling flowers.

We worked together in my mother's office. I asked about the silver
coin she wore, an icon, a medal, not Christopher for travel but Mary just like her.
"After my husband died-" The words died on her lips too; she became an unfinished
story. Maybe she wore her little Mary for company, her traveling days long
over.

Season Song

There's something fierce in the air
 Stravinsky knew it when he wrote his own rite in 1913,
 when he grew a dark growing season in music.
 Maybe he felt, as I feel, in nature
 sacrifice is regular.

Birds and Bees don't live full time in my philosophy.
 In winter, this city turns numb,
 locked up in death for four months
 five months, in a pattern of grey, brown, and white repeating.

Persephone must've had a greater hunger for Pomegranate seeds
 for the shade of Hades, for dark Pluto, than Greeks,
 than Romans knew. With no light, time inside the earth
 became a sticky thing to sort out. In the end maybe she even liked it.
 I can relate.

My first winter in the hollow of these mountains, years ago,
 it seemed possible to keep off despair with a little effort, some elbow grease.
 Ignoring the pinching dread that accompanied
 every small deed—eating, bathing, dressing— was just a matter of distraction:
 TV, cigarettes, vodka after dinner.
 I tried to fight this sickness of spirit, heart, of mind
 but it crept into my spaces and tied my limbs with poison swollen vines.

This happened gradually and with the inevitability of the leaves passing
 through their slow cycle of mutating colors. Whatever made me shine peeled
 away like birch bark, golden paper, and I went as grey inside as wind licked
 stone.

Like Persephone, my smiling part, the round girlhood of my hopes
 diminished. I waned but my voice got lost; I pined but no kind spirit
 transformed me to foam on the ocean's wet gown. I got stuck instead, like
 mud, like old wood petrified dumb and hard as iron. The strangest thing, most
 frightening thing, the feeling that some part of me had detached and was
 sinking away from my begging hands.

The smiling part, of me, *of me*, ran off like it was being led, through night wilderness,
 then underground as if I were tied around the wrist with a string and someone were pulling it.
 Then came the sensation of running, some part of me ran until it fell to all fours,
 until it began to crawl away deep inside.
 It was terrible.
 It was irresistible.

And which god authored all this? Regression, repression, depression.
Darkness, sickness, death.
One name to be a badge and a bright pinpoint at the gates of the abyss,
howling brightly into the dark I am here, I am here.

In spring the trees stuck up along the road like wire,
half dressed in blooms of snow and pink fury
The unhappy wind, that wild card, had torn petals from the branches,
strewn them on the grass in brutal offering.
Loss and death are natural, darkness, pain are natural
Gain and life are natural, light and ease are natural
Look at Persephone. She learned to embrace cold Pluto and loving Demeter
dark Hades *and* the jewel of all the flowering fields
So can I.

Writer's Life

It starts as one long night in this room wrapped in the light of 40 watt bulbs, a womb built of words, of desire of a hundred acts of faith.

"I think you have some stories to tell," says Dad I'm forced to bite my tongue. I refuse to say I lay every night on a bed of prickly uncertainty and eat the dry bread of my mediocrity for break fast. If I were a real poet, I'd show him sure as the day will open and close. I'd be a true student of subversion:

I'd write a dark crack of doubt into him. He'd burst apart like a hair-lined tea cup, only to be re-glued together momentarily; but he'd come together at an odd enough angle to know about life, about me, from his own life as pieces in the sink.

Maybe it's better this way,
Better to speak with my mouth,
hear with my ears,
live by my guts,
and love for all I'm worth.

For judge and filter, lens to focus interpreter
of heart rhythms and rhymes, mouth piece
and spokesperson, weigher and schemer, of
these, I am none.

I am not a bard, fire bearer
wordsmith or lovely liar.
I am not the magician,
I am not life's cryptographer
In short, father, I am not a writer.

Mouth

Soon to be leaving
returning to that old
town, the city with her limbs
sprawled out in the heat and the wet.
She sleeps naked on the moist
tongue of humid nights.

Nasty, they say, that place is
nasty. I tell them the city
had the massage parlor near
the pediatrician's office knocked
down. They chased the hookers
out to 301 and made a neat
motto for all the signs. In the old
part of town, the brick
shell of pride, their antebellum
architectural feature
the sharpest tooth
they call a market.
"A place where people went
to buy fresh fruit and meat"
they write, in
True junior high
civics style.
Which mouth reminds
some flesh they bought
was human,
was living.
Farmers market and
Slave auction house.
Once this
city wore a cannibal mouth,
ate people regular.

Now the city is a Port in the flood of soldiers
steadily swallowed down; some come back,
some don't.

Every city hides stories
as many sides as mouths can speak
Goddamned Nest of Vipers
my own Sultry Den of Iniquity and
Fine Place for Clean Living.

Chronic Student Blues

I've got a real bad problem, you know.
I'm down, I'm sad, oh I'm low and I'm
most definitely, certainly blue.

The trouble is,
I've become institutionalized.
Seven years ago,
I became a college student.
Eight years later,
I've just now kicked the habit.

I've tried support groups,
industrial strength therapy.
I've aligned my Chakras,
diversified my portfolio.
I fortified my life with vitamins and nutrients,
paid my debts,
subdued my raging Id.

I bought a whiskey for my overdeveloped
Super-ego,
renewed my interests,
transferred schools,
discovered hidden streets,
found new friends.

For seven of eight years
I've lived with my heart to the grindstone.

Now, they're handing me my walking papers,
a fine goodbye.
I enjoyed being a 25 year old teenager,
just another stone in the wall
that bears the sign University.

The Reading

I knew a girl once who knew how to read tarot cards.
One summer night she read for me.
She lived on the tallest floor of the oldest building on campus.
I rode the elevator alone to her
floor, reading the graffiti scratched and inked into its blue walls like paintings of fire on the rock
walls of a cave somewhere.
Here were messages too. Some crude, maybe some profound.
How do you decode someone else's mystery?

When the doors divided, I stepped out and read the skyline through the broad giant's eye of the
window. The light died in rosy degrees over mountains in the distance.

We sat on the cracked linoleum floor. It had been yellowed by dirt of bare feet and shoes with
clay and dust, trod in from the mountain.
Many seasons of youth had passed here, risen and fallen like the sun, swelled and decreased like
the moon; this room had housed a hundred cycles
of teenagers turning slowly, slowly into women, men.

She laid the cards out one by one with a thick, colorless hand.
"See, this one is death." On the card I read a crypt scene. A room of livid marble with light
descanting over a stone relief, a knight in deep and final repose.
"Well that's unnerving," I said, "to say the least."

"Well, 'death' doesn't mean just that," she professed.
"It stands for other things too."
When I think of repose, the word calls up a cluster of upright stones, marble fingers pointing
toward the sky in the loose skirt of the tall grass.
"Like?" I asked.

She looked at me with pale eyes, snowy eyes.
She had a rabbit's face, her snub nose scattered over with freckles.
I read the landscape of her face, her body, with its skin so white the blue tendrils of her veins
were visible. Even the shape of her fleshy white legs seemed rabbit like somehow.
Weren't rabbits connected with wisdom somehow? On the Chinese zodiac they were, I knew.
Of course that didn't answer any questions.

She sat with her legs tucked beneath her, resting her arm
against the side of one ample thigh. Suddenly I read a new
energy in the way she looked at me, the rare blue voltage
of discovery as she said "Mutatio. Transformation."

II. Girl Stories

Storybook Departure

She'd always wanted to make a Grand Exit.
In her mind, it sometimes went like this:

For two days the phone rang to an empty room.

On the third day, the neighbors saw them force the door,
watched from their porches, their houses. Coffee turned cold
on window sills as her mother and father gently clipped the
chain in two, neat as cutting a rose stem.

The neighbors wondered where she'd gone, their whispers, their questions like
match strikes, a brief fire, then the cold.

They all knew something had changed.

First of all, her books were all still there: the copy of *Hamlet* with big sister's name spelled out
on the spine. So many books; the rows of shelves were snug with them and the boards smiled
beneath their weight. She left no spaces.

"She left town," her friend says. "For Oregon, Washington."
They'd talked about Arizona life, red days and nights blue and cool as a river stone.

Her shoes were gone, her keys were gone.
Mom and Dad found her bedroom window blown open to vines and grass below, a horizon
like an opened book beyond. The curtains swayed open and closed like an eyelid.

Her pictures, her rings, she'd spread out on the dresser like a loose constellation. Her mother
touches each in turn, tries to read them with her fingers like a map.

The Metamorphosis

No one called it a failure and somehow that was worse.
Her mother sighed like she'd been asked to run an errand,
and was too tired to do it. She called on a Friday, on her birthday
to say she'd missed classes for a week. Her parents had driven up that weekend
and hauled her dresser away in the back of Dad's truck.
The bed they left there, skeletal somehow without her patterned sheets.
"I'll use it for a guest room," her roommate said with a shrug.

When she got home, she spent a week on the couch upstairs.
She became the guest in the guest room, the couch her sedan chair
resting on a carpet of acrylic fiber, not fragrant grass.
When she slept it bore her up, her boat on scentless empty seas
with white skies hanging above like paper, white paper birds flying
soundless and invisible. The world seemed constructed of Styrofoam and paper. For her,
it had become tasteless and without texture.

When she woke she ate, when she ate she stole, stole bits of sweets from the cupboard like a
scavenger mouse. She hushed the dawn and the dusk with curtains; she changed, she adapted.
She cocooned inside the afghan her grandmother made, corrupted the sweet fruit of her labor,
infected the labor of her hands. It was true, she infested that room.

Into this amputated labyrinth, the end of all possibility, mother shuffled and gaped at her like she
was some new breed of insect. This time, though, mother did say it, what they all thought, what
they never said, mother leaking water and mucous as sick and soggy proof of daughter's big
failure: "But all week! All week! She hasn't done anything!"

Work to Live

After she dropped out of college for the first time, she went home to work. She tried to help her mother out at the office; but every day ended in disappointment and argument. She fought her mom on everything. Why did those copies have to be made just then? she asked. When was lunch and why must the office always be so cold? But underneath the belly of those questions, other questions unfolded like wings dark and silent. Why me, why now?

The next year she left and went back to school full time; her second university sat in a bigger city in the Western part of the state. Foothills spread out around the campus like a fan, melting together in overlapping hazy blue when it rained. There had been no shortage of beauty but still, still the fatal disconnect.

Something seemed not to fit for days before she realized night had fallen at noon again.

It had been early September, still warm outside. Summer was losing its hold on the year and would soon withdraw the warmth of its slackening hands entirely. She'd been dreaming on the quad in the freckled shade beneath a tree. Two girls walked by her on their way to class or to coffee, just talking.

One smiled radiantly and a gold bracelet flashed, like a proof of psychic purity, a brief star on her ankle. There was such an air of wholeness about the way they walked and talked and smiled so easily. They were two people tied together in the glow of conversation and community, entirely unaware of it.

A knot had looped and tightened beneath her ribs and she felt dizzy, ill. She took her things and left, then sat hunched in the dim bubble, the hothouse of her car. Tears and mucous trailed down over her lips, her chin.

She needed distraction so she found distraction. She spent a few months working in a little store on the edge of town. Dad drank too much but still told her over the phone that he wanted her to come home someday and work with him. "I'll teach you to build houses," he said. "You'll love it."

The little store sat almost too far from the heart of the city to pull in people from the constant flow of tourist traffic. She'd worked the cash register. She liked the assistant manager Terry; Soft spoken heavy smoker, a middle aged lesbian, Terry seemed like she was always ducking out the rear stockroom door for a cigarette; she'd follow the path of the sidewalk as it twisted and turned between the back of the building and wall of roots, the red clay that sloped sharply to the woods behind.

Terry would turn around two corners and stop to lean against the wall opposite the trash compactor; it was like she wanted to escape the goose chatter, the knots of greed, the people swarming ant-like around the really sweet items. There had almost been a fight once, two rich old ladies ready to scratch each other's eyes out over luxury bath towels.

Terry was kind to her, telling her she would make a good manager. They could work outside, these two, without a word

with the air carrying the scent of Terry's cigarettes past her. The work was easy. She could start a task and locate the sum of it, could sun in the brief satisfaction of problem solved, task accomplished. People bought things, paid, were given change. That was it. She was in love with the simplicity.

After the Fall

She was alone again when she climbed the hill to her car. By some secret miracle, everyone else had found parking closer to civilization. She leaned under a low branch, cut across the grass at the crown. When she started down the slope, her foot slipped. The sky turned, she hit the ground with a deadened sound. A hardened clot of dirt just the size of an apple, collided with the spot between her shoulder blades, where wings would spread their root if women wore wings.

Rain ticked against her face, ran down her cheek. She blinked against the rain and had a sudden feeling of vertigo, like stepping off the still swinging merry-go round at age three. Her mom had picked her up then.

Old, old disappointment, and Fear a stubborn stain of blood that won't age, a spot where sick red wine has spilt and clung greedily, rolls over her again and again like nausea.

There was no reason to be afraid. She looked around as if someone else were hiding just behind the screen of the slick leaves. It was only herself, a young woman.

But if nothing was wrong, if nothing should be wrong, then why this sense of asphyxia, this agony of loss? She tried to unravel the dark threads of that feeling. In the end, she just wanted someone else to be there with her, an Adam for her Eve in a lonely garden.

Morning Song

Behind the curtains, past the glass,
the sky turned restlessly, blue-grey, clouds rolling like the sea. Tree
branches waved back and forth like rocking boats, creaking their last
lullabies before dawn.

Inside the room, she cocooned in white sheets and blue dark.
She lay in the shadow of a mountain, waves of fear rising.
If she really considered her life, what was she and where?
It seemed so simple to lose her hold on that knowledge,
as if it had never been at all, no matter how she hung on to the bed sheets
in the morning.

Fear at the prospect of rising from her bed could be black and viscous.
Staying would mean worse. The shore was sharp but the water beneath
her poison, a sea of salt and cyanide dressed in blue and grey Under the
surface, life became a vault, only a murky, sick light squeezed through.

As above, so below; fear lived in the sky and in the floor.
What might be under the skin of the water,
beneath the membrane of her own consciousness terrified her.
Fear and love, Mom and Dad
all the sick, sad, petty interactions of a lifetime,
these must populate her depths like the pale bellied fish
awash in the diseased light they generate.

At the bottom, her own possible future written in the rock and sand
of the genetic inheritance, her father's own pains,
his faults like hissing fissures a pre-cognition of her own life.

Clockwork Animals

Sometimes a person can't help the way they see things. Some people see the world as the world wants to be seen, pulled together and energetic like the single mom with two kids, a full-time job and a part time boyfriend. Things are hectic, flushed with life; Things are opaque, things are good.

Others look at the world and see a stage equipped with the best props and the most talented actors anyone has ever seen. If a person's really careful, maybe a studious, cynical type, they will look and see a landscape stripped bare as a mattress for spring cleaning.

For them, life must be a little like walking into a forest only to find none of the trees had bark or the animals skin; they see only oily factories for breath, for shit, for birth, hearts gleaming as they pulse in the moonlight.

Though they try to shade their eyes, they fail. Some people can only see raw motivation, ambition, frustration, the awful clockwork behind the motion, the world creaking and sobbing as it turns on its stand.

River

The truth was, she had been avoiding the front way all semester.
When she entered the English building, she entered through the basement door.
The building itself sat on a hill, its broad back accessed by a winding
half loop of concrete stair-cases.
Shade flourished down here like tall grass bubbling up.
Things were safe down here. Any time she came in through
the front entrance, it felt like running the gauntlet.

First, there were the people.
They smoked and talked and looked, these teenaged intellectuals;
they made her feel transparent, as if they could see through skin like thin paper
could read the tiny failures written on her inside walls in blood, in fire.

Then there was the art installation, a positively
glorious configuration of blue and silver glass, of gleaming black
granite polished to mirror the sky and hanging above it.
Typed out on a small blue card, the one word read "River."
The creative power beneath such a thing and such a name frightened, shamed her.
She hadn't written in so long, not a drop of a story or poem to cool her fevered skin.

Avoidance had become her bread lately. She still seriously
considered the possibility of being a hermit or a mystic.
It sounded pretty good, living in a cave on a mountaintop,
poor hygiene and listening white birds her only company.
Just what a well adjusted person would do, she thought.
Sit in the dark and hope to become insightful
by some magic message, a voice wearing the sound of tapping rain.

Milestone (This is the Day that-)

Today was graduation day but she didn't feel it in her belly or anywhere else, for that matter

There had always been a sort of electricity flowing around the big events: Birthdays, Christmas, big sister's high school commencement.

As a child, she'd felt sure that on such occasions whatever energy existed behind the blue-green mask of the world moved its hand in your direction, touching the point of some great cold spear to your forehead. For a brief time you felt plugged into things, as if you were in the middle of a whirlpool but around it too, above it.

People said all kinds of things about watershed moments or rites of passage, but she herself could not recall that sensation of electrical readiness anymore.

The only time it returned was in the narrow strip of space between sleep and full consciousness. The feeling emerged as a kind of dream, crouching and shuffling panther-like, trickster-like, in a plasmatic darkness; its only sound was a faint and distant fluting, the hum of un-netted wind through a wooden pipe.

She would recall a visit to the planetarium at six and the night sky projected on to the ceiling. Her family had made their home just outside of Chicago then, in the blue, blue space before her father's anger.

Graduation Day

It didn't matter today that ambition burned
 like a hot wire within each of them, but not in her.
 Their lives were spread out on maps with so many silver pins.
 They held the future in their hands like it was Christmas day or sixteenth birthday,
 plans to travel to Tibet, India, Pakistan, Spain, these were their gifts.
 If she was feeling poetic, she could claim they made a glow,
 a light fired by the many roads before them,
 the choices laid before them.

To her the past semester had fled by in a series of moments
 bright as match flares.
 The hunger, the greyness, the clouds of shame that stained the light she wrote by, she read by,
 she lived by, ate by had been scattered by the storm of spring,
 the loosening of binds.

The grass welled up on the sides of the street like a swollen river leaping its banks, sick
 of the straight laces of culverts, the bodices of concrete and mud and metal. For her,
 spring had reached its peak, the vegetation in full scale riot, coating cars and roofs and
 streets with their own gold dust.

She had become sick with school,
 with lectures from teenagers on how it was mean spirited to laugh at *Good Country People*.
 No more moralizing and demoralizing,
 no more big mouth know it all redhead from the front row, who seemed like a nice girl
 otherwise; you can never really know a person, she had forgotten this truth-She felt like a
 sailor whose boat rests at last on calmed water,
 who sees the stars at last puncture a film of clouds like needles, like ice and is grateful. Life
 had coalesced into a womb a place knit of light which before had gone undetected to her
 grey eyes.

She looked at her hands, clasped in fear or praise, or anticipation,
 breathed in deep as the well she flowed from, we flowed from. She
 prepared to dive off the stark edge of the fixed and familiar world. She
 leapt off the map.