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OF CERTAIN RIVERS

by

Stephani Nola Walton

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English)

The Honors College

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i.

cleaving sorrys in the timber

In these, our other bodies,
I'm stationed on the sagging tailgate
bowing
and gesturing
to you
my arms filled with firewood,
transference into cradle of muscle
bicep and bone
then thrown through the basement window,
split logs to stack.

Our limbs are cogs
laboring in a factory
not unlike
the one where we met:
assembly line
where we stitched together leather shoes,
two cobblers—
I thought you cocky until the date.

Hotdogs with wine, then cinematic sickness,
and all these years followed fast:
stray Huckleberry Hound,
fishtail on the town line
where the plows and salts switchover hands,
neck bent through back glass
of the old Chevy Love;
the miscarried son.
Daughter, firstborn,
death of little sister;
another daughter after—
even she is grown now
but last night I dreamed of her infancy,
watched while she choked purple on batteries

*wake one morning
scared we were never young*

6:36 a.m. Sunday,
Dad's turn to drive
and drop me at the bus station:
winter road all fault line eruptions,
a gray and salt-worn
February ghost of
the last summer pave.
3 miles and
half a song from home,
he's drumming along on
the steering wheel,
I'm tapping my purple-coated lap.
Pushaw Lake is frozen
outside his eastern window,
and passing an old friend's house
we realize
the sun rising
over limb and brush—
a blurry bullet
rushing the sky.
Speedometer at 10 and sinking,
our car laughs
down the empty pass
so slowly, coasting—
father and daughter
still clinging to pane,
cheeks warmed
by sky's pink palette
of sun shades, embers
smote by black lake water.
We, in radio silence, watch
the high moon tuck
behind the timber
and blushing hues
give birth to day,
deliver us all.

How May Ends

It seemed your Dad's last stay
on the sterile seventh floor
of Eastern Maine Medical Center
patched his cracked and clogging heart,

So you spent Memorial Day weekend
knee-deep in brook water
up north, on the Penobscot River,
just as he urged—
idly luring rainbow trout
with dull pink night-crawlers
shoveled from the black backyard soil,
your catch in excess of
the warden's daily bag limit.

All afternoon after the phone rang
the rest of us sat hushed
in nervous couples
in May-lit corners of the house,
our ears craving the sound of
spun gravel beneath your homing tires.
A flimsy-hinged screen door
fanned against its frame
in the creeping midday breeze.

Sara and Mom
sewed the same stitches
over and over, thread clumps gathering;
Me, I ran
to the edge where mowed grass met
browning cornstalk bones
and collapsed, weeping emptily
until realizing my palsied limbs
somehow still moving.
I remember
carving my apologies to him with rocks
in the ripe thin skin of birch trees—
bruised bark and cold stone clutched,
dirt bleeding my palm, my lifeline,
trying to recall our last conversation.

You rolled up in your red pickup truck
sometime at dusk,
all smiles and heavy-vested
with your river fare.

Before you could begin to unload
wicker creels and tackle boxes
bobbers and bug dope
or waterlogged Goodwill Nikes,
Mom told you—

*Remember how you told her
about her little sister?*

*It was her turn to cleave sorrys
in the timber—*

“Your dad died in his sleep...”

My memory in the aftermath
forever clings to
Amazing Grace on bagpipes,
stars and stripes folded slowly,
the syrupy voices of coworkers
trailing off on our answering machine,
saying it was “better off” that way,
“no suffering”, et cetera—
My typical twelve-year old flux
in cartwheeling oblivion at the wake,
selling the house in Dixmont
unpacking the keepers:
rusted wind chimes,
lawn ornaments, power tools;

You, finally sobbing
with a daughter
under each arm,
four years later
on his grave.

Passing Purple Van on Avenue A

Side doors open, speakers facing outward
a Yankees game play-by-play blaring
over Saturday street noise
reminds me of early afternoons
for some great fraction of
my high school years
spent at my father's side
in his 1988 Jeep Comanche—

The velvety fabric
despite mismatching thumbtacks,
sagged from the roof
making static our hair,
as we tuned into Stephen King's
sports radio station- WZON, The Zone.

Each day the sportscaster's rollercoaster voice,
fly balls, rookies, and base hits
all framed our daily talks
as if we warmed up with
the a.m. radio until our
own words gathered.

Always his strong right arm
fending in front of my chest
for the tight steep turn
onto Pushaw Road— "I gotcha kid,"
he laughed in the lurch;

Always cars passing us
while he patiently steered homeward
examining the scene he already knew:
bus depot, cemetery bones, gas pump hose;

Always calculating our arrival time,
predicting that mom was watching Star Trek—
"What do you think, little Stevi?"
I think our chocolate lab
is already resting her chin
on the windowsill
in anticipation
as we putt-putt over potholes
and he *yeehaws*
always
down the hill I learned
to coast bicycles on.

The final stretch,
three more mailboxes
and the Red Sox lefty
rounds home plate...

Passing purple van on Avenue A
my spit-damp index finger
carves into the side door dust
“Go Sox”—just for dad,
before walking a block back
to the place I called “home”
yesterday, by mistake.

Forgive Me, Father

In first grade I said, My Dad works at The High School
Mrs. Pinkham asked, *what does he teach?*
I said, *history*
because that's what John Halloran's Dad teached
because I couldn't think of
the right subject/predicate to correct her
no, he works the late shift
and kisses my face after midnight,
he waxes the ramps
and lets me and my sister try out
Christmas rollerblades there,
cartwheel across Red Barry Gymnasium,
and feed heads of lettuce to Buster the Iguana.
His key ring jingles with his walk
and he has enough quarters to choke the vending machine.
Daily he regulates that droning boiler room
and taught me to jump
over its concrete moats,
sometimes it calls him out of sleep—

but don't those floors shine?

After Training Wheels

black non–deadbeat, non–absent father
in stocking cap and overstuffed jacket
trails daughter on bike,
hand bracing her small of back;
pushing, then lifting, then letting go

at the bottom of the hill
she collapses,
a wreck of brakes and spun rubber—
a wind–up toy, unwound

later when i'm leaving the park
their family is homing, too:
father, up ahead
hugging the pink and purple bike
with its gay betraying streamers;
little girl scowling,
skinned palms,
jeans still buckled into kneepads;
and mother
calling out from behind,
insisting to those shut ears,

*listen
that's how you learn!*

ii.

times we splurged on skin,

on spine

The Untold

The first time was after
the high school tennis banquet
four Mays ago,
in your father's then-new Saab,
parked
in your crooked driveway.
You, on your knees crouched,
bare skin on tar,
scrubbing the floorboard mat
until the awful stain and stench
faded
so you could drive me home,
and then, after the bar last night,
you reclaimed your role
when again the wrath
passed over our pillow and sheets
and me—
my messy brown-blonde strands
clinging to the contour
and angles of my face
like a sedated crown of snakes,
rocking, knobby-knees hugged
while the slow draining tub
whirled with shower water—
 so careful to keep
 b r e a t h i n g.
Fell asleep sobbing sorrys,
heaving from an untapped core,
tucked doggedly in
spare sheets yellow
and half the size of our bed.
Woke up swimming in your blue-green
plaid fleece pajamas,
lips pressed against the bend of your neck,
open mouth breathing into you
the same old secrets.

I Couldn't Sleep

because of
late chai tea and also
her late night phone call and
your listing of her admirable traits
and especially because when I asked,
after making love or falling short,
what you were thinking of, you said
something about porn, and
when I gave you your redemption
and restated the question, you said
something about job possibilities,
and also because
you don't even read my poems,
I am wrapped up in this
licorice-colored lawn towel,
awake, in your overstuffed red chair.
the night so quiet,
tears fell in stereo sound and
deepened the fabric
until it looked like bloodshed;
it felt oddly appropriate. (I was always
thinking of us, in the aftermath.)
then the puddle clotted and
I rocked my trembling frame,
like mom would have,
or the wooden horse.
you got up from slumber and
I heard your body lift off the bed
but you only bumped up
the old window a crack and didn't notice
my backward heaving, or care,
and I can tell out on the streets
it is raining by the wet rustle of
distant leaves and the slick sound of
tires on tar—and the clock is ticking past
1, 1:15, I miss the days
when your watch kept me up, or sirens,
but now I'm numb to their threats.
Maybe I'll get my heart checked out,
confirm our worst fears, and I really think
you would have liked how that poem ended.

Fenced-in Gladiolas

The sun is burning holes through my navy blue hoodless sweatshirt. I'm parked on a once-green (now chipped) wooden bench, facing the fenced-in gladiolas—protected picture perfect flowerbed. I'm surrounded on both sides by dog runs for the 'big' and 'small' canines. Golden Retrievers and golden frou-frou dogs band together in some elitist segregation. Lilly, the toddler next to me, has a full spread in this month's *Baby Talk* magazine but her mom just had a miscarriage. Every five minutes, a cyclist whizzes past, tightly cutting corners and his training wheels touch down for an instant, sparking the asphalt. In her bathing suit, a three-foot-tall brunette walks an oversized German Shepard and I think I'm in love with a paisley-skirted girl with chandelier earrings, chewing gum and reading something— perhaps Ginsberg— on a bench by some more gladiolas, and I think she knows it. The sun is caught and lingers in the finite glitter of lotion I smothered on both dishpan hands before this escape walk and after the second. Every now and then a dog makes some low guttural or high siren sort of noise or the city park truck slowly beeps its way down a crowded bike path or a distant basketball rim is rocked and resounds for seconds— and I keep looking up, expecting him to join me— or the girl next to me sneezes three times, or a dog is bathed and shakes out porcupine fur, or a smiling Dalmatian is muzzled.

Tuesdays we rode the rush-
hour 6 train
down the upper east side's
arterial vein
Lexington Avenue
eventually I sat
on the cramped backcar bench
you hung over me
leant me an old song
through half of your headphones
I dug through my shoulder bag
spilt goldfish cracker crumbs
swimming 'round lipsticks,
pens, and the pages
of your autographed Vonnegut
from the afternoon you found him next-door
sitting on the famous sculpture:

LO
VE

I read every word
of that paperback
they smelled like
stale weed and cat—
there,
I give it back and
you get off at 14th Street
walk square to your therapist
I stay underground until Astor Place
meet a familiar face at stairtop
let him buy me tea,
it steeps slow between my palms
while north of me you sink
deep in the cold leather couch
let your mother's worry
drive you downward
spill some secrets I won't ask to hear
pronounce your father's name
speak his exit, stage right.

The Rain Owes Me Joan Didion's Cursive

Summerstage
the muddy middle of Central Park
nowhere near an exit
bare skin caught in cold June rain
we readers without umbrellas
ducked under oak cover
surprised it even worked
then as rain slowed
all resettled on metal bleachers
until the lightning broke
and scattered the crowd
hunching and clutching their way
to the obvious east side escape.
I scuffed along, too
sliding out of high heels
my shorts and white shirt
clinging like second skin
as the rest of Manhattan
tucked into cabs,
or smoked under eaves.
A homeless man
in his ancient underwear
read the newspaper
against the hospital's backdoor
dry as bone.
I rounded Lexington
when you finally rang,
so took the train
only one stop
to your place.
I was dripping
you wrung me out
gave me a towel, tea, arms.
I said for you a poem I just learned
you strummed Lennon songs
I sucked the salt and seeds
from the edamame—
why do I always end up here?
fifth floor
apartment F
Central Park South—
the doormen are starting to know me.

Remember spring
on Park Avenue
and on Madison
skipping workshop,
when you called out
to our fellow upper east side pedestrians,

“Does anyone know the name of Betty White’s character on Golden Girls?”

But nobody knew or said

and New York suddenly held less promise

to be, perhaps, regained
another day
sunning in the park
my short black dress
sucking solar energy
the man collecting donations
who tore off half a dozen Lifestyles
after you dropped dollars
into his AIDS jar
or the last night
before we were caught
kissing you tall
from the third step in Jerry’s stairwell,
then sitting on the standpipe,
over freezing February water
unable to leave until
the trains only ran local

That little black dress wasn't for you.

Earlier another already asked,
methodically,
if it pulled off over my head or
slid down my hips, to the hardwood
and these new earrings you like
I bought because
I broke one of my own
on what would have been the 13th floor—
if not for superstition

reckless in the bed of a stranger
who, in the name of his father,
collected rosaries after September 11th—
I was lost again, in the limbs of another
and turned off my telephone
so I wouldn't hear you

When it was over
I met you downtown,
you and that wall street guy
armed with binoculars
leaning out windows
waving me across the street,
watching every step
on the pavement of Broadway,
each sharp heel click
so carefully, so magnified,
but still
not seeing

House-sitting

who knows
you broke it off
on Wednesday?
nobody
not your parents,
paying me to sleep
in your old box frame,
squeaky bedsprings
that sent us to the floor
a New Year
tumbledrunk
rugburned knee scrapes,
winter scabs under jeans—
secret stain
fumbling mouths unfastened
no hushes thrust from throat,
times we splurged on skin, on spine,
on hip
on rib
fingertips entwined
slept *close*

who?
nobody
knows
this night of storm
and early dark
of my singular slumber
in the hollowed out
room of your youth,
your unaware terrier
warming my shoulder
under cover of quilt

November's Lament

Even eating apple
freshly reaped from harvest
wrapped in spare backseat blanket
numbed fingers under gloves
on a vacant curve of beach
goodbye is slow in coming.

All these afternoon hours
spent fingering oil paintings
set in our summer town
but the splintered tiller
and hands that guide
are fixed in distance.

I know your geography
the axis lists

Driving north
night in the rearview
unfurling over waves
I crack the window
for one last pulsating lull
of water rushing damp sand.

It's cold enough to snow
chimneys choke the air
leaves get lost in seaweed
I grieve each passing
in a strange town
in a late month.

Things I Stole

In our apartment
with only our stray cat for comfort
I ripped up four pictures
you didn't deserve to remember;
took the negatives, too.
You shouldn't have left me
alone here
You shouldn't have left her
wavy black hairs on the bathroom floor—
but you did
and this torn Polaroid mosaic
is a masterpiece of
your two cheeks touching
eyes squint from smiling
and her,
all curve where I am bone.

I left the blurry stills behind—
your arms weren't long enough.
You guys should have used the self-timer,
I know the wall-mounted surround sound speaker
is just the right height.

Letting Go

hot mug of cocoa in my fist
cat I had missed on my lap
watching, peripherally,
the last Christmas lights:
glittering faces of skyscrapers
flaming across the Upper Bay

[I have visiting privileges
since our estrangement]

then
I knew the idea foolish
climbing two flights of fire escape
one rusty runged ladder
the last day of December
to see the lights
but the blue sky begged
and brightened in contrast, versus
how many strung lights? still glowing

I blinked tight
saw a canary fall from flight, from sky
landing in the uneven pond of water
over the backyard pool cover

I should know by now
if that one odd tree
the backyard misfit
is fir or spruce or hemlock
by the way the cones hang—

do you shout down bears or stay still?

do stars really fall from firmament?
or birds?

only if shot down

Returnables

I'm beginning to think it's not
my brass earring or
brand new belt
but the lost story
of our slumber
of my wet corduroy jacket
 bruised body
 scratched chest
 cigarette breath
that you are interested in getting back
from the upper east side dyke I woke with New Year's Day

iii.

he who would disappear her

Manhattan, Day 20

persistent hacking cough
sick, a little homesick
something floating in my
last sip of water
busy jazz in my right ear
your slow strumming in my left,
mouth dry and drugged
leg sleeping,
nerves shot
from hours propped up
against the chairback,
two-day-old stolen
New York Times on the table,
recyclables,
weathered deck of cards,
unopened bills and bank
statements, that article
about the murder down
the block, about a girl who
never made it home

this morning at breakfast
we sat by the window
drinking candied apple tea
and people-watching:
a balding round man
dragged his bare fingers
through the snowy flower-boxes
as he passed,
then examined his digits
as if he had just performed
some sidewalk miracle

[the wilted flowers hung
their heads like victims
of snow and palm, exposed
by a fraudulent thaw]

Passing Through

Wrapped up in age eighteen
I slumbered in your dorm room
on my way south
You showed me your new friends' fun:
the soda of our youth
chasing vodka shots

In the stumbling of early hours
I landed in your leather chair
and you didn't stop dancing
but flung open your desktop drawer,
slim wrists thrashing through papers
until you uncovered something hidden

And when your palm unfolded
everything zoomed into focus,
the bass still fooling my ears
but eyes trained on the Polaroids
that shocked my breathing

Stills like those can only confuse:
your wrists dented purple
your ankles nicked and
bruises that saw their browning
with the last of the last season

Shut up on the inside
of that locked door,
your friends waited in earshot
tracing footsteps to fistfalls—
screams real or imagined

Your bones between his bones and bed frame
make our younger fears blush:
when your dad caught us inhaling,
or nights we'd wake alone
in the looming house of your childhood—
no fix for *this*, a lonelier alone

Eighty Degrees, Rising

Black man in black suit,
black bowler hat,
clutching in left palm
a chewing weed,
in right, black briefcase,
and golden statue—
stands over my blanket
on this,
of all hills here,
inspecting my bare body
and the broken sidewalk.

Chef to Waitress

I hate cigarettes, but
this late hour
this slow season
breaks down my senses 'til
I'm craving the smoke
exhausted from your
heavy leather jacket
when my eyes are level
to your chest

once after work
on borrowed tickets
in strange clothes of color,
unstained by kitchen grease
we waited outside the arena
between periods
you patted down coat pockets—
but forgot your pack
in the parking lot,
so we went after it

you sparked the lighter
and by then the striped pep band
was standing again,
fans filing back into bleachers
as the streetlamp lit up the rain ,
bent shadows down our frames—
you kept sucking, said,
without my asking
“you look really good
wet”

Downtown surveillance shows her
caught in step with him—
he who would disappear her
sometime in the long night
between Friday and Monday.
Hope diminishes in proportion
to the mounting evidence
and the scene is understood:
fists bound by rope restraints
the sound of shovel versus slate
tires tracking fresh mud
blood in trunk, car rug
hands around soft throat
snug chokehold
a last gasp
Vermont air—
another of my sisters is gone.
Hours east,
I know
she isn't roadside, in my ditch,
or shaded under thick pine
but I was still looking
with eyes of no consequence
when the curtain puckered shut.
They found her
west in weed tangle
after the road's slow corner curve
above waves breaking on granite—
body gone limp.

The Act of Backward Confession

you were emptying the end of our omelet
into the waste bin under the sink
with your back bent toward me

it was over the sound of the knife
scraping down microwave-safe plates
you told me about waiting for her
in chairs worn from communal mourning,
without speaking *that word*

premature exit
of the products
of conception, the act
of

terminating.

[by definition, it does not offer whys,
which are implied]

and in the lapse between
cursory eye contact
I felt
flushed away like fetus
I felt
as the forgettable libido

iv.

if not for your gesture

When One of Two Dogs Dies

Like how she shook out her thick fur
After rain—
Slow
Deliberate
Over time, slower—
I shook and shed the first selfish bits:
Black dress pants free of white fur tufts
And sleeping through sunrise
Without the light on, burning
For her to meander home mid-night,
No more spills and scabs to tidy
Or skidding barefoot across a dewy lawn
Coaxing her up the shorter stairs
Frantic in my bathrobe,
And I flung my car into the driveway
Without checking
For the lump of her body
Straddling the road.

I stood on her porch spot
The hour she went
And felt her nodding over
The acreage she best loved.
An Indian summer breeze shook
Chimes in mourning tones.
The brown dog in the shade
Pawed at punctured tennis balls
Smiling, panting, and
Wondering why her people are sad so suddenly.

I heard heavy fumbling on
The steps and didn't know, yet,
Not to look for her.
I watched the rugs
Still damp
Airing out
Draped over splintered railings,
And saw the last of her white hairs
Scatter in the sky
Like seeds, soft and milky.

What Dying Does Not Do
In Memory of Chris

Passed away
makes modest death:
depicts a gentle slip down
one rung
from concrete
into ether—
 But
 you, so afraid,
stayed away sleep
stayed awake
for three days straight
pacing halls,
making calls to your sister, your friends
'til sleep embellished
to a black hole hell
at which you winced
because beyond explanation, reason, all sense,
beyond the English language
you felt the will of what you were up against.

Late third night
senses waning
your lids drooped
mousy brown eyes lolled, uninfluenced
all over, at last.
 Sleep
 Surrender

By Tuesday your tiger-striped Camaro
was parked in front of
Brookings-Smith funeral home—
last mixed tape blaring in oblivion,
your cousin in the drivers seat,
palming the gear shift,
a vacant smile on her familiar face.
I penned some card, verbiage failing.
When you died,
I let our friend smoke the stress in my Jeep.

I didn't recognize that haircut
or those tinted round sunglasses
in section B of the Bangor Daily.
I think I was searching for
the chubby face you wore
ringing around the rosy,

hazarding the playground
but even still
the ambulance chased after you,
your blood always leaving your body in rushing rivers

“Kit,” your middle school nickname
that never stuck with me,
your fingernails always curled like claws
oily rat-tail hair
the class runt
a purple tint to your pocked skin
what death chooses July?
betrayal of body

I'm sorry for the first hours
when I thought
it must have been drugs, the holiday—
it was that blood again,
that sick blood.

Bad News Comes in Threes;
iii. Jon

*so sorry
'beeen off radar,
so sorry
for telling you this in a mass email—*

*got real seak/got leuhkimia or
however you you spell iti...
andt's tifficult for me to type n0ow..*

mind gropes to when
you came back to Manhattan one weekend, smiling
the girl came, too,
I could not forgive, but
could not sleep in the hot summer sheets, so
took the train in from Brooklyn that night
to meet Greg after his evening shift
share drinks with you, and the ride home
in the air-conditioned underground—
I paced around Washington Square's perimeter
at midnight
in the darkest places I'm not supposed to go
as a pretty girl in a pretty dress
not daring to make eye contact
with bushes or benches
edging toward the light

you changed the plans away from bars
and into seedy alphabet city apartments.
I urged Greg to visit you
but that was all I could do,
I wasn't coming, I assured him,
I still couldn't forgive you
your blunt slant, your habits
so he walked me to the train,
just to take me home again,
but in those days I so loved him
and our schedules so clashed
that wasted hours alone in a subway car
were nothing
and he had reunion drinks with you
and your perfect match
girl you so deserved
I heard she was a wreck, kind of weird,
so right for you

you were finally *there*
he reported back
and I sighed relief for you
on my way to sleep

I'm trying not to regret that
stubborn summer snub
it's not by my mistake I was born
under a steadfast spring moon

now, bypassing
the time you told
my 19-year-old psyche
that my long-distance boyfriend
flirted with anything at NYU
with blonde hair and legs,
thanks, Jon,
and forgetting the time
I moved in with him, and the boys:

an emotional homesick friendless mess,

and we invited you to breakfast
one morning after one night
when we all drank too much,
and over eggs you easily said
 I
 ruined
 the vibe
of that apartment,
and also ignoring the fact that
your relationship with Greg
was fueled by father-funded pot
and its spiral bound musical epiphanies
and he always came home late on the L train
and smelled like the donut shop
below your little apartment,
and dammit,
you really messed him up for me to fix
to wean him off the weed, et cetera,
when you were a cold-sweat in the stairwell

but we lasted
a couple years after that, anyway,
and your drugs made him so eager
that one late night back in bed, he said
I want to read your favorite book,
not knowing it's 7 hundred and eleven pages,
and that was January 2005,
and this is January 2007,

and he has not even reached the pageant scene
and the characters are mostly alive,
each hand has five fingers,
and we've since parted ways,
but he still carries John Irving
in his shoulder bag,
everyday since June,
so thanks for that

and suddenly beyond anger I remember
bouts of sunshine
stumbling into a summer sunset,
just me with you,
beyond the wrought-iron fence
at Central Park's Reservoir,
and a playground with giant hippo statues
and our trip to the Guggenheim,
after which you drew your interpretation
of a piece involving crushed aspirin
and titled it "cone de crack,"
wrote a caption saying it was
innovative! abstract! groundbreaking!—
(I still have this scrap of paper);
our lunch at Jackson Hole
where you changed your contacts at the table
saline solution and finger to retina
and we tried and failed
to eat 14 ounces of hamburger between us,
and the Christian music you sent to me
when I was back home in Maine
and the emails from Germany:
your latest poems, busy brain doing better
and the shaky songs
you played me in Williamsburg:

*"my heart is a war zone,
just desert and broken bones,"*

and the abstract expression
you left in my journal,
yours, the only other pen
to ever touch down there
and all it said was,
it was good and productive, or not at all.
sometimes those words still stick
but I forged your name for you
so no one would think I drew that mess
of pitchforked peach, and power outlet

I'm filling an empty Fresh Direct delivery box
sending it to your hospital room in Cleveland
it has your pencil-marked Dostoevsky
and all of the worst pictures of us
at bars, bloodshot and all teeth,
you boys, with your guitars and greasy hair,
that one snowstorm on Orchard Street
in that ugly brown hat you used to wear,
my long lilac coat of a tourist,
and a photograph of the backdrop sunset
I would have missed,
if not for your gesture

v.

casual atlantic influence

August 31

not quite alone on the bow-
i'm looking up at cumulus clouds
wondering which of us moves faster
and ignoring the sporadic interruption
of the shifting sails-
it's as if the gold hues of dusk
are being absorbed by the canvas
clanging against the mast; the stem
to these breathless calla lilies,
open flowers nodding their heads at us.
we squint against the sun, the breeze.
we're homing,
racing against turbulent currents-
a moor bell cuts through the salty atlantic air
and clashes with the windsong.
we sail through latitudes eastward
past those dueling triangles in the harbor-
we're all formless shapes from so far away,
tacking in opposite directions
like ships fleeing an impressive regatta.
the shoreline is a two dimensional smudge
on the horizon, from this degree.
thick swells rise and lurch
the crew to new life as
the static sunset undresses our vessel
unfolding her
sail by sail.
we catch the pier on approach,
not hazarding to tie the routine knots
rough hands, left over right
securing the boat with splintering line.
we leave the docks on foot
shaking out our weary sea legs
looking back at her
wondering whose decision it was, anyway,
to come home so soon.
we walk to the tune of
the church bell striking,
our bodies still rocking with
the nautical lullaby,
as august ebbs with the tide.

He Loves Me Not

the sun sojourns
over my body,
 the lake,
 this dock

and below,

 between waves

I read the veins

 of a birch leaf

rocking on the murky brown lake's lap
stained with *autumn's telling yellow tints*,
 mirroring that raw naked sun
 and the dock's plastic water slide
 and discarded daisy pits
 whose petals have been plucked

Snow in Another State

you'd think we'd never seen snow before,
never like that slow sunday spit-
something about the soft flakes falling
against a row of brownstones so mercurial;
at once harsh and towering over rivington
and then so still and postcard perfect,
la view you'd mail to another zip code.
something about the falling and the staying;
the white never lingers long in manhattan
where there's no time for vernal detours.
that day we walked fearless
down the street's dead center,
marveling in a moment free
from persistent taxicab clutter,
from the buzz of sidewalk traffic.
so new york silent,
you could nearly hear the
six sided prisms drift downward,
and listen to those old buildings sigh heavily
beneath a shock of gray january cumulus
as the city yields to the sky.

Jazz Club Scan

Perched upon a rickety stool, swaying
to every nervous bass string triggered,
eyes floating upward as if scanning
the record sleeves lining the club walls
but merely struggling, unsober,
to cope with the measures he's consuming.
Blonde half-stranger entangled in
off-duty barboy's loose limbs—
with every corner-booth kiss she's cheating
and it's weighing heavy on my conscience.
Crash ride solo on a
canary yellow drum-kit;
sax-player all plaid-shirted and
bird-like, I want to see him dance—
reminds me of the man playing underground
for spare bills and change in a worn velvet case.
Bassist's ring glistening on the wrong hand—
not married, hugging his shaft
stroking strings patiently, aware;
next table over, some strawberry drink,
college-ruled binder propped on
legs, crossed casually—
Now he's jotting about me or some notes
and I get it:

no one can tap along.

My drink is ice-water rum and
one by one the boys seep back into Brooklyn.
I think I hear laughter
mingling with midnight's song—
it smells like burnt toast I crave
pressure on my inmost thigh—
is it your hand or his eyes?
Tipped over candle flicker
wavers and melts
with the hour.

Global Warming

if she tilts her head
the feeling of a color rush
makes ordinary trees oblique

at least the view will be lovely.

naked offshore oak
juts a hip toward her—
inviting crux of bark flesh

our meaning is stranded
between tree curvature
and soil creep

one day it will be driftwood,
spat by the undertow,
and the universe might
collapse upon itself.

I just thought you should know.

she stood on the shoreline
bare toes tide-lapped
for about 5 minutes:

casual Atlantic influence.

those waters emerged once on earth
washing the cells in ice-cold
and now a swollen surge

this year
spring starts January third.
I can wait
but she seems impatient.

Solstice sings spring
from every bough,
an invocation
to all sleeping things.

Newly rising sun scorches
a stark canvas
purged of star and ray,
naked, weightless as wind,
slowly donning its early frock.

Wake the tideless still of
the Penobscot's partial thaw,
its icy swollen skin
stained by tilted greening treeline
and this last winter's sky
of mottled blue hues,
and errant cloud flocks.

Autumn's hand-me-down fare
of stiff golden wheat staffs
reappears riverside
sloping up crag and ditch—
bent, estranged
from the springborn
green landscape.

A rusted railroad bed
winds along the freeze—
from a train that never comes,
nobody watches
out the foggy window
as each day
more tiny ripples cause
crack and fissure
to jar the waters.

Each edge of ice
confronts the warming
of longer days
and holds on at arms length
before switching dance partners,
slipping apparition
into the flow.

Stranger pressed against left window
stills my crooked mind,
breathing wisps that float
between nostril and pane
and I am lulled by the mechanical
hum of our bus—
it grinds and blares and lapses,
and sings of its failings.

Overheard Triangulation

i. love triangle

like, those girls,
the ones I overheard at the coffee bar
laughing about
like, converting to Judaism by osmosis
he had Angelique forever
then he had Justine forever
wait, he had Laura in between Angelique and Justine
right, but not, like, *forever*.
she visited him at camp

ii. isosceles triangle

I'm describing to you a shape with
four equal lines
four right angles
what shape am I describing?

I am describing to you a shape with
three sides of three different lengths
three different angles
what shape am I describing?

I am describing to you a gray woman
quizzing elementary granddaughter on F-train
calculating the educational opportunities
between Jay Street-Borough Hall and West Fourth
whose story am I telling?

Cocoa Bar Paintings

i.
horizontal carrots
flies in formation
three telephone poles

ii.
reeds
reflecting
early morning

iii.
view from lying with back on ground
sky spirals overhead in cloud
maybe a unicorn
or arrowhead
UFOs streaking red light
dropped care packages spiraling,
beelining down to war zone, earthward
and
two more telephone poles

iv.
heaven: a sea of cocoa
land jettisons out
and a pier,
it's broken, color of wasp

v.
memory of storks
and acupuncture
and baby names
from greek origins

vi.
radio receiver reception buzzing
dead air static
the only cloud in the sky, behind factory
the only living mill, breathing gray
twenty-first century loner

Coffee Shop Eavesdrop, Brooklyn

New high school couple horizontal on the couch
up / abruptly
after my entrance takes effect

He's trying to meet a deadline
essay about slavery

She's open shirt
all breast
not helping
asking for passwords
squeal
stretching her long limber legs in the air
just to tie her Converse laces
running nails down his back
We missed 11:11
We forgot to make a wish

God-
damn

"I want hot chocolate,"
toddler Bruno breathes through croissant crumb
sister Nina: *"I love money,"*
and then,
"I want to crawl under a rock!"
when brother confuses *shoot* with *shit*
and everyone giggles.

Later Mommy's boyfriend tries to explain to Nina
the meaning of the idiom,
"Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater."

i.
the way sundown is woven
between winter tree branches
intermittent (angles, with negative spaces)
is how I love
you

ii.
singers on the lunch hour f-train
strumming a 5 string guitar
folding and unfolding yellowing accordion
singing to us between stops—
the only word i recognize is
"siempre,"— always.

iii.
sky warms over palm and Spanish scraper
Toyota crests hill
with headlights on, still—
how long has he been driving?

iv.
him in the doorframe
fixes any afternoon,
back from wherever

v.
boy on the f-train:
i watched you scribble
5 lines on the back of your receipt
it looked important
and then i watched you
cross them all out—
a string of e's
like a seven-year old
discovering cursive

vi.
man pushing trash barrel down subway platform
and up the stairs, like a mother pushing a stroller:
gingerly stealing from step to step
hugging can so close to chest

vii.
from under the covers
I hear you shut tightly the door
and never know
which side you're on

viii.
orchids in waning moonlight
eighth world wonder collapsing

ix.
wondering, can he tell just by looking
I don't believe in the statue of liberty
and why am I scared
when planes enter the skyline?
I wasn't even here.

x.
at my house with roses
he wore sunglasses after dark
because he was crying

xi.
the braided cords
of her lavender dress
choked the flesh of her back

xii.
our ticket out:
New York Mega Millions
one year later
I still can't check February's winning numbers

xiii.
In your backyard
you tore the petioles
and I learned the froth of the
invasive
Norway maple.

xiv.
Blessed green
the hue of free
water below the bridge.

I try to read the pull and never know
whether it is coming or going
from this place.

xv.
Gears grinding, early sirens
over cable cars churning,
the endless dinging
as if a far-off Salvation Army cauldron collects
and waits to collect—
I hear the shifting tags jingle
around the black dog's neck

xvi.
Funeral procession whispers by
the fresh sun and flowers
clash with the black hearse
and Death,
reclining in its back seat.

xvii.
You are drifting off
the coast of my body,
the only landscape
you've ever sketched.

xviii.
God is dead and gone
and lying in the church grounds.

xix.
Warning Signs:

On a crowded Sunday sidewalk
I pitched the rest of my hot chocolate at your chest
then walked east instead of south.

xx.
synapses are jumping
I feel lazy eyed
Halle Bopp is pingponging in front of me
where is the sect
where is the suicide

xxi.

there they stood
an ugly asymmetrical image
I had to stand in the negative space
between
their contours
don't let the meat touch the vegetables
it was a celebration expose of my sideshow
a dizzy collapse of the balancing act
centrifugal force broke its own rules
and no one was more or less surprised
than the juggler
when my lover invited my love to play Frisbee in the park
and the pair exchanged phone numbers on 63rd street—
you know what they say about April.

xxii.

the train rumbles past your house
as I pull out of your driveway at ten p.m.
and when I approach the tracks near my house
seven minutes later, I get to wait while my tongue
ticks off twenty-one boxcars sneaking through the night—
I watch the conductor, he's fast asleep,
and it feels like our biggest secret

xxiii.

nothing tangible:

give me a spot in the foreground
only hints of permanence
your heart on a leap year
your last words on your last morning—

I will not promise to write them down
or remember.

**Artistic Intent Statement:
Definitions, Context, Characters, Influences**

“Whatever the artist says about it is like an apology, it is not necessary.”
-Louise Bourgeois

On Art

“What is art?” In my pursuit of a liberal arts degree, this ambitious inquiry has proven inescapable. I apply the same definition to the literary arts as I do to the visual arts. Marcel Duchamp is best known for his ‘ready-mades,’ such as the famous urinal that he displayed under the guise of a fountain, and then signed, and labeled ‘art,’ challenged traditional notions. People argued, “That’s not art, anyone could do it, and you see that everywhere.” An appropriate response from Duchamp’s side would be, “but nobody else *did it*, and you don’t see it like *this!*” It was art because he framed it that specific way, and asked people to look at it under those terms. Before Duchamp, no one would have thought to assess the porcelain curvature or patterned drain holes of a urinal for their formal interest. He transformed the functional into the aesthetic.

The urinal readymade explicitly identifies a symbol of waste disposal as a piece of art. Turning an ugly receptacle into something people can appreciate challenges the audience to reconsider how they think specifically of wastes, and more generally of a system of aesthetics. My poetic process often relies on Duchamp’s philosophy that you create art simply through the act of choosing a subject or moment to render artistically. The poem “Witness” captures just an ordinary moment that might look to the average onlooker to be a simple act:

a balding round man
dragged his bare fingers
through the snowy flower-boxes
as he passed,

then examined his digits
as if some sidewalk miracle
had just been performed

By writing it down in a poem, I turn that moment into an aesthetic event and deepen its profundity. It is not an epic tale, nor is it about love, or death, or things typically thought worthy of an ode. Instead, it is an easily passed over moment on the street that I recorded and labeled as a poem. These observations are similar to those of my poems that were based on eavesdropping. I feel that there is great poetry to be found in the ordinary, unplanned event.

Impressionism

“The Impressionists relaxed the boundary between subject and background so that the effect of an Impressionist painting often resembles a snapshot, a part of a larger reality captured as if by chance.”

-Robert Rosenblum

Photography became increasingly popular during the Impressionist movement, encouraging painters to capture precise moments, whether it was a change in daylight or an everyday act. Often my poems often aim to blur subject and background in a similar way—the poem “Jazz Club Scan” is as much about the physicality of the club as it is about the patrons. I try to capture one evening in that location—an experience that, in all its complexity and specificity, can never be replicated. can never be exactly replicated.

Art as Catharsis

Sculptress Louise Bourgeois had a troubled childhood and later stated, “You have to tell your story, and you have to forget your story.” She used her artwork to sort

through the feelings of rage and betrayal she held against her parents, and claimed that once she worked it out, it would not return. She also refers to this process as the deconstruction and then reconstruction of her painful memories.

This use of art for psychological healing and survival reminds me of the “Girl Orchestra of Auschwitz”. The women played their music under conditions like nothing they were used to—not for their own joy or for the joy of loved ones, but for the inhumane overseers of the concentration camp. This must have been an overwhelming prospect, but the women knew that it would save their lives—so they played. I learned about the level of solace women were able to find by having music as a constant presence and a reminder of life outside the gates. This idea of art as catharsis is one that applies not only to sculpture or music, but also the literary arts. In this collection, I work through more than one death, the end of a relationship, and the tragedy of violence against women—all in ways that allowed me to sort through my feelings quite deliberately and even, at times come to resolution, at times, to attain a resolution.

Context

Some of my poetic tendencies borrow from the basic guidelines of the Japanese haiku, as summarized here by Tom Gilroy:

1. Seasonal references to establish time and place
2. The moment seized and rendered purely, captured in an instant of enlightenment
3. Reflections of the particular consciousness, or point of view of the author, his or her loneliness, or comedy, or anger.

I rely on contextual references when writing as a daily journal exercise to chart some sort of progression in time and self. Much of my work is about capturing a moment and

finding a way to describe it so that it satisfies my memory of its reality and could potentially be experienced anew by a reader. I rely on geographical and social specificity and make the reader work with other clues to find meaning in the proper nouns. As for the different authorial points of view, this collection certainly moves through many stages of consciousness, including guilt, loss, calm, and triumph.

Time

Time plays an important role in marking the moment these poems are set in. Time of day and time of year are often explicit. In this collection, I mention ten of the twelve calendar months by name. “Leap Year;” “How May Ends;” and “August 31” are all poems set on the last day of the month. “November’s Lament;” “Letting Go”; and “River Melt” focus on the changing of seasons. I believe that these temporal transition points often mark a change in life, whether they signify that it is time to move again, or mark a new year full of prospect.

Geography

The poetry in this collection was written during a period in my life when I moved between apartments in Maine and New York four times. The city changed my poetry. The resultant shift in subject matter is most obvious. My earlier poems were largely pastoral: scenes of sailboats on the Penobscot Bay, reflections from the tops of mountains, commentary on the changing seasons. These earlier poems are often more metaphorical, as well. “August 31” is a poem from Maine about the last sail of the summer:

it's as if the gold hues of dusk
are being absorbed by the canvas
clanging against the mast; the stem
to these breathless calla lilies,
open flowers nodding their heads at us.

This poem, the earliest in this collection, compares sails to artistic canvasses painted gold by the sunset, and to windblown flowers—all in one stanza. It represents the starting point as I began my college writing experience.

Almost immediately after moving to Manhattan, the focus of my work moved from the environment to the people in the environment, or how the two relate. Instead of describing a harbor scene, I scanned jazz clubs and coffee shops for the people thriving in them. Eventually this transition took me even further away from the simple natural poems into poems about things I only heard of on the news, and filled in the blanks with my imagination. The most recent step in the continuing evolution has been returning to Maine and thus returning to the experiences of Maine with a different eye. My landscapes have changed from the Atlantic Ocean to the Manhattan skyline, and my characters moved from subway strangers back to the people closest to me. Living in New York also meant living with my partner and three other men, so I ended up writing about drug use, claustrophobia, and petty issues of jealousy. I was interning and in school full time while my roommates were all musicians with light course loads, making it hard to accommodate everyone's needs, in terms of living space. Moving back and forth between Maine and New York created a wide range in subject matter, significantly altering my approach.

Characters

Strangers

Much of my poetry comes from the overheard and observed, so strangers are always walking their way into scenes for a song or a meal, then disappearing. I relish this because strangers are unpredictable. I never would have dreamed up the man who hovers over my bikini-clad body in “Eighty Degrees, Rising, Brooklyn,” wearing a suit and hat on the hottest day of the year, holding a briefcase and a trophy. I am interested in the way people behave when they do not realize they have an audience. In the city, privacy is so limited that people blur what they will do in public—putting makeup on during the subway ride, singing scales on the sidewalk, changing shoes in the elevator. “Overheard Triangulation” is an excellent example of the way that the blurring of public and private can be poetic. In it a woman quizzes her granddaughter for a math test on the F train with bizarre riddles. I found this fascinating because she turned simple questions into longer word problems and had no concerns about quizzing the child in public. I know my parents stopped helping me with math at a very young age and would probably be too self-conscious to start declaring the answers to math problems aloud, in case they might make a silly mistake.

Father

When I read “How May Ends” to Jim Paul, my poetry professor at the time, he declared that I had “daddy issues;” it looked like our whole class had daddy issues, and by God, we must compile an anthology of our daddy issue poems! I felt immediately defensive. I knew he must have misunderstood the poem entirely, and I would make swift

edits to clarify my meaning. Was this just an overzealous—even jocular—response in the wake of a dramatic reading of Sylvia Plath’s poem, “Daddy?” I went within myself to ask: is he right? *I* felt like my father was a tragic figure in the poem, standing there in his fishing vest beside his silly little truck, not knowing what we knew, and he would soon know: suddenly, he was without parents. So—what did my professor see?

This poem and the experience of examining my poem defensively made me realize something about interpretation and authority. There were things I did not intend to convey in “How May Ends,” a poem I believed to be ‘about my grandfather’s death.’ The poem’s italicized section is telling.

Mom told you-
*Remember how you told her
about her little sister?
It was her turn to cleave sorrys
in the timber-*
“Your dad died this morning...”

I refer back to the way a younger version of my father had the task of telling a younger version of my mother that a drunk driver killed her sister in order to add a layer of complexity to the poem. It is hard to come out of that *the good guy*. Did I consciously connect these two events? No, not until I wrote the words, “Mom told you.” To me, this was a fairly minor detail in the poem, but it is one example of the way details can carry unforeseen weight, and influence the reader’s perception.

Lovers

Unstable physical relationships are a central theme in these works, conveying a sense of restlessness that leads eventually into the poems about accepting endings. There are two poems I would categorize as love poems, though the love they describe is, I hope, neither simple nor clichéd. “The Rain Owes Me Joan Didion’s Cursive” and “After English” both delve into issues of a third-party disrupting a relationship. The former is the realization of a pattern:

you gave me a towel, tea, arms
I said for you a poem I just learned
you played Lennon songs
I sucked the salt and seeds
from the edamame
why do I always end up here

Here the narrator recounts a tender moment with the “the other man,” and shares part of herself in response. There is immediately tension when the poem mixes romance with infidelity, rather than mere physicality—though it is followed by some rather sexual food imagery. Finally, the unanswerable question is posed: why is this happening? Though outwardly spoiled by assessments of infidelity, these moments are more intimate than those from whatever relationship’s end they might be hastening. “I Couldn’t Sleep” contrasts the newness of the previous poem with the unconcerned nature of a relationship that is too comfortable:

when I asked, after
making love or falling short, what
you were thinking of you said
something about porn, and
when I gave you your redemption and
restated the question, you said something
about job possibilities, and ...
you don’t even read my poems

This push and pull between the old and new and the known versus the unknown drives much of the section on sex and love.

Influences

James Schuyler is an artist I find several ways to connect with. His poems are often concerned with the dichotomy of rural and urban, specifically Maine and New York. He is just as fluent in naming Manhattan landmarks as he is in identifying the Latin name of a tree. I often work with similar specificity. He is admirably frank with his emotions, as in this passage from “This Dark Apartment:”

How I wish you would come
back! I could tell
you how, when I lived
on East 49th, first
with Frank and then with John,
we had a lovely view of
the UN building and the
Beekman Towers. They
were not my lovers, though.
You were. You said so.

This poem goes beyond the mere physical description of their shared apartment to shape real meaning and provide insight into the dissolved affair. This poem about how the physical space changes after a lover leaves prompted me to write about my experience cat-sitting for my estranged partner while he was away for the holiday. It set the scene for “Things I Stole,” in which I react to finding my vacancy already filled—

you shouldn't have left me
alone here
you shouldn't have left her
wavy black hairs on the bathroom floor

but you did
and this torn Polaroid mosaic
is a masterpiece of
your two cheeks touching

as well as for “Letting Go,” in which I remember the landscape surrounding the apartment, and make new meaning, alone:

hot mug of cocoa in my fist
cat I had missed on my lap
watching, peripherally,
the last Christmas lights:
glittering faces of skyscrapers
flaming across the Upper Bay

The second poem, written later, makes no direct reference to my former lover and thus shows the progression from betrayal to victory, with the image of a woman standing on a Brooklyn roof looking out over all of the city—all on the eve of a New Year.

Frank O’Hara

There are two important artistic lessons I learned from reading Frank O’Hara. One is the premise behind his book, *Lunch Poems*. It is a series of poems written during his lunch hour at work, which relies on observation, people watching, and an explicit time of day. This serves as a type of daily journal and a reminder to me that poetry has so much to do with framing the ordinary as art. I also take pleasure in his occasional run-on style of writing, which controls how the reader approaches the poem. In “Having a Coke With You,” he writes,

...I look
at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world
except possibly for the Polish Rider occasionally and anyway it's in the Frick
which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can go together the first time
and...

This rambling, conversational style of writing is how my own prose pieces take form, and some of my poetry. I especially like the repeated use of “ands” because it gives this poem a breathless, childlike feel—as if you just can’t stop talking because you have so much to say. I go after the same feel in a prose poem, “Fenced-in Gladiolas:”

...a dog makes some low guttural or high siren sort of noise or the city park truck slowly beeps its way down a crowded bike path or a distant basketball rim is rocked and resounds for seconds and I keep looking up, expecting him to join me...

O’Hara often works with long lines that spread out on the page or turn into paragraphs. This is the form my writing occasionally takes for a character sketch or the live recording of an experience. Some lines lose meaning when broken down into little pieces and pauses, and work better in the streaming narrative that represents how fast the mind works.

Experiments in Form

Though I like the aesthetics of one long column on the left margin, some poems turn away from that model. The poem “Cocoa Bar Paintings” owes its formatting to poet Wallace Stevens. In high school I read his poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” which is composed of thirteen stanzas that approach the subject of a blackbird from a different angle. He demonstrated an effective way separate a poem into

sections using roman numerals without disrupting cohesion. Stevens maintained the thread throughout by using the word “blackbird” in every stanza. “Cocoa Bar Paintings” explores a new piece of art in each stanza, maintaining unity.

When I felt a certain poem begged for exaggerated spacing as emphasis, I often turned to John Allman’s poetry collection, *Curve Away From Stillness: Science Poems*. Though I cannot always appreciate the generous spacing he gives his words, I can bring it to a level appropriate for me. Here is a relatively conservative excerpt from “Biology:”

we sang our road
songs
spilled the last coffee
from a broken thermos
felt the air
moving against us
twisting through the vents
sliding along the outer
surface of our
human
volume

This had a direct influence on “Growth Rings,” a poem that was initially written using stream of consciousness in paragraph form, but evolved after revisiting Allman:

and
falling
out of
chem-free clubs
to tug on joints
fumble with zippers and clasps,
branches against backbone,
always strangers:
the dark woods, dug-outs, bathrooms, locker rooms, one night a bed

Here spacing achieves a sense of movement, as the text stylistically mimics the stumbling of the narrator and general sense of chaos felt throughout the work.

The Personal

Sharon Olds, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton are women who impress me with their boldly intimate poetry on sex, family, and suicide. Their poems do not read as though constructed purely for shock value—these are rife with emotion, and likely catharsis. Olds, in “You Kindly,” writes,

And I couldn't
lift my head, and you swiveled, and came down
close to me, delicate blunt
touch of your hard penis in long
caresses down my face, species
happiness

This poem details a sexual experience with her lover, while contrasting him with her father. This association is especially provocative in a poem written in erotic language. Even if the person is dead or estranged from the writer, I still find it remarkably brave to publish such revealing poems about family. The act prioritizes the art. Plath's poem, “Daddy,” ends with a memorable tirade against her father, in which she implies his death was cause for celebration and says finally, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.” In her poem, “Wanting to Die,” Sexton refers to occasional considerations of suicide as an “almost unnamable lust.” This is not pleasant—in fact, it is rather jarring—but it is an authentic sensation, and warrants reflection. Reading the intimacies published by these women inspires me to be true and uncensored, even if it makes readers uncomfortable. Bourgeois said, “All the work of an artist is the realization of a self-portrait... This is

simply revealing... you feel embarrassed!” Whether sharing family secrets or admitting to weakness, these women get over the embarrassment and let us in.

Conclusions

I find that Bourgeois has thoughts on revision and conclusion that can easily be applied to the art of writing. She felt the ‘impulse to improve’ an artwork deemed the artist dangerous. Since it is a tremendous task to call a piece of art ‘finished’, there is always a hesitation, a new angle or shadow or cut to be made. The process of drafting and moving an artwork from concept to sketch to concrete can be long. “The finished work is often a stranger to, and sometimes very much at odds with what the artist felt or wished to express when he began.” For this reason, Bourgeois feels the artist should not be responsible for explaining or reexamining a work. “The artist should be mistrusted... sometimes the improvement might reach the point of destruction.” Her thoughts on the artist bring up the issue of intention and impulse. She says that despite the changes and dissatisfaction with aspects of the finished product, “The core of his original impulse is to be found, if at all, in the work itself.” It is possible to lose intended meaning or present no obvious, singular meaning, but if it truly is a work of art, the driving impulse should permeate the piece.

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Author's Biography

Stephani Nola Walton grew up on a potato farm in Glenburn, Maine and graduated from Bangor High School in 2003. Majoring in English, with a concentration in Creative Writing, Stephani has a minor in Women's Studies. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and a freelance writer for Scholastic, Inc. She spent two semesters studying at Hunter College in New York City through the National Student Exchange program.

Upon graduation, Stephani plans to hike Maine's 100 Mile Wilderness before returning to New York to work in publishing. She will continue mixing words with art, as long as she is never landlocked and always has a Labrador retriever by her side.