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Going Back, to Begin

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GOING BACK, TO BEGIN

by

Ilena Starsun Coulbrooke

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

UNIVERSITY HONORS
WITH DEPARTMENT HONORS

in

English

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

1996

Going Back, To Begin

(Poems about the Chemically Dependent in Nuclear Utah.)

This thesis project explores, in poetry, the effects of atomic testing and unrestrained pesticide use on the people who lived in or near Utah in the fifties and sixties.

Nuclear testing began in Nevada in 1951, the year I was born in south-east Idaho, where my family lived under radiation-tainted clouds for a decade along with the Utah downwinders. My father died of lung cancer caused from breathing pesticide-laden air in 1962, the year Rachel Carson wrote Silent Spring. These two dates stand out in my mind as important markers in my quest to discover why I think and act the way I do now.

I was taught to respect and never question authority. I found in my research that this unquestioning obedience to the rules of church and government has always been prevalent in Utah society. It seems that women are most oppressed because their behavior is strictly enforced by the men who dominate their lives.

I go back in my writing to the fifties, when fear of foreign powers was intense, and our trust was misplaced. I go back to the sixties, when trust and fear took on new dimensions. And I come out in the nineties, in a new world that is not so new, but is one that I understand better for having gone back and answered the questions I should have asked years ago.

I begin my poetry selections with "Cooked," which sets the scene for the atomic age of unwarranted trust. "Wild Turkeys" is next, and brings us up to date on the old pesticide story. "Examinations, Human Kind," explores the question of human survival from the standpoint of a leftover downwinder, and "Rock Chucks, Birds, and Lizards" takes a more universal view, this time of chemical effects on other creatures in the environment. "The Cellar" is a saga that goes back to what some congressmen have recently been calling "the good old days of family values," and "Caesarean" encompasses the modern view of the old issues that are still affecting our lives today.

Cooked

*They herded the chickens and goats
into holding pens, fastened the
heavy wire gates. They positioned
the soldiers around the test area,
sat them in rows, in army fatigues,
boots, dark glasses, and sun-tan oil.
The countdown started, the numbers
fell backward, one by one, down to
Ground Zero. The soldiers, all
salted with sand, watched the blast
roll over the desert, crisping the
chickens, turning the sand to glass.*

*Star Coulbrooke
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Wild Turkeys

They make love in May. My
cousin told me he and his wife
watched a gobbler court two
hens last year. Fanned his tail,
dragged his wing feathers on the
ground, strutted and pranced
until his head turned red,
gobbled loud enough to notify
the world of his affair.

Better than a lot of stuff
he sees on TV, my cousin says.
Baby turkeys soon followed their
mother around on his ranch,
where the Idaho Fish and Game
released twenty wild turkeys
three winters ago, brought them
from North Dakota and turned
them loose among the cottonwood
trees down by the river.

This April, the local newspaper
reported that a flock of wild
turkeys had feasted last Fall on
a batch of Diazanone-tainted grain
and promptly died. It seems a
well-meaning citizen scattered
the grain to feed the turkeys
all winter, unaware of the
danger of pesticide-treated feed.

It reminds my cousin of the turkey
massacre he witnessed as a young
boy, when Uncle Sam and Aunt
Minnie raised a hundred turkeys
and the coyotes attacked them on a
hill behind the house. It was a
deadly raid, the coyotes grabbing the
turkeys and killing them as fast as
they could, the turkeys flying too
low for home to clear the barbed
wire fence-- my cousin said he had to
turn his head when the wire squeaked
with the impact and feathers flew.

(Cont. stanza break)

(WILD TURKEYS pg. 2)

When the dust settled, my cousin
and our uncle gathered up the dead
and crippled turkeys, shouldered
their rifles, and took care of some
coyotes. But the new wild turkeys
have more than coyotes, foxes, and
bobcats to worry about, more than
raccoons and skunks. And my cousin
says they'd better make love
while they can.

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Examinations, Human Kind

My mother says our
time on earth is just a test, that
God gives us trials to make us
appreciate the good things in life,
and when we die, if we've been
good, we'll get our reward, our
very own kingdom.

I don't want a kingdom.

When I was in grade school
the teachers held bomb drills to
test our speed and efficiency
in duck-and-cover and single-file
orderly marches to shelter.
They said if we followed the rules,
we might survive.

Downwind from Nevada, I was
already a survivor.

Dropped out of school at
sixteen, tested equivalent
thirty years later and learned in
college that all tests favor
white upper-middle-class males
who want to excel in business and
national leadership.

Sounds like the kingdom story
all over again, where we play
follow the leader.

Reminds me of a radio voice,
a booming voice of manly authority
sent over the air waves to
quell hysteria, "This is only a test,
had this been a real emergency ..."
But we've been reassured
like this before

when federal scientists said
radiation's good for us.

And now I get yearly exams,
mammograms, pap tests, uterine
(Cont. no break)

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(EXAMINATIONS pg. 2)

probes. They palpate my ovaries,
finger my rectum, knead my
breasts ... I'm a test site at
countdown, and if I fail,

I still don't want a kingdom.

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Rock Chucks, Birds, and Lizards

I once knew a city rock chuck
who lived in the
parking lot at the heavy
equipment rental on North
Main in downtown Logan, Utah.
He played in the front loaders,
under the tractors and back hoes,
popped up out of the asphalt,
it seemed, when I'd
park in the driveway on
Sunday afternoons and
watch for him.

On our farm, we had pet rock
chucks who lived under the old
siphon, but my mother says
they were dirty things and she
was almost glad when they finally
died out. My little sister
blames it on the DDT.

In the small town where I
spent my young married life,
there was a bird, I don't
remember what kind, but it
lived in our neighborhood for
a season, and dive-bombed
my daughter every day
for a week. It flew
out of nowhere and pecked
at her head when she
walked up the street,
same place every time,
halfway between our house
and the high school.
At fifteen, my daughter
promised to quit school if
I didn't drive her there,
one block away.

Hiking once in southern Utah,
I met a lizard on the West Rim
Trail in Zion's Park. It caught a
grasshopper half its own size

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and slowly ate it, head-first,
banged its own head on a rock,
back and forth, back and forth,
to knock the grasshopper down
into its throat. I watched
the wings gradually disappear,
and when the jagged hind legs
were all that stuck out, the
lizard massaged its throat on
a rock and swallowed hard.

In a St. George oil-and-lube
shop, we watched a displaced
Whip Tail climb the cinder-block
wall while we waited for my car.
The owner said, Hey, Ralph,
bring out the lizard catcher,
and Ralph came out armed with a
can of carburetor-cleaner,
hit the lizard with a burst of
spray, and it dropped, dazed,
to the floor and stumbled out
into the parking lot.
We do it all the time, they
said. It scares the ladies
when it climbs the wall like that.

And we took the Whip Tail home
with us, built it a big wood-and-glass
aquarium with a bed of red sand
and a hot-rock, and we fed it
crickets and meal-worms, because
I remembered the time I
sprayed my trees for tent-
caterpillars and found a dozen
dead birds on the ground around my
Chinese elm the next day,
and how I used to spray my
yard for bugs and weeds
bare-armed and bare-faced, and
I thought, sometimes we're
simply afraid of the wrong things.

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The Cellar

I haven't thought of it for years, but
yesterday, as I watered my plants, the
smell of dank earth came back
with the dark, the spider-hung beams, the
plank door at the bottom of the
rock steps.

The cellar. Cool and damp as the weather
here, April in Utah. But I've just crossed
the border in my mind, gone back to
summer in south-east Idaho, the fifties,
the garden, putting up food on the
family farm.

I remember how old jars of fruit got lost
in the far recesses of the cellar.
Peaches brown with age would surface
after years of storage, black dust on the
bottles' shoulders, rust around the
metal caps.

The only pressure-cooked foods in the cellar
were bottled deer meat and green beans,
and a few rusted cans of old corn.
The corn was a one-time family project,
a full morning spent outside under the
elm tree,

husking bushels of corn, pulling silk from the
ears, cutting off long rows of kernels,
filling large mixing bowls and metal dish-
pans, throwing the husks, the silk, the
sticky bare cobs into buckets for the
cows and pigs.

We drove into town with the corn after noon,
took pans and bowls of it to the Preston
community canning center, a World War II
project geared to benefit rural economy by
putting the basement of the old school gym
to good use.

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I still hear the clang of industrial-sized
steel in that deep cement basement, the
heavy cast lids slamming down on barrel-wide
pressure cookers, the crash of colanders
in big steel sinks, the women's voices
loud above the din.

We brought the corn home in tins, stacked it
on the cellar shelves behind jars of fruit.
Peaches, pears, and apricots packed in
halves, tomatoes whole and juiced,
apricot jam garnished with chopped nuts
from the pits.

They say nowadays you can't eat the pits,
they have arsenic or some other
poison. I wonder if we were immune to the
poison then, or if the poison somehow
evolved from the chemicals that
killed my dad.

We stored grapejuice in the cellar, in
two-quart jars blue with age, to match
the blue grapes my mother picked from the
Youngmans' family vineyard. She went
by herself to pick the grapes, quit taking
the kids along.

Whether we were naughty, or the Youngmans didn't
like us, or we whined about being bored, I
don't remember. Maybe my mother liked the
time alone, the feel of the soft oval skins in her
fingers, the conversation with other women
picking grapes.

Later, when I was married in the 1970s, I bought
some blue grapes at a fruit stand in
Brigham, brought them home and bottled them
in the old two-quart blue jars. I tried to
hurry the process by using my brand-new
pressure-cooker,

a double-stacking, cast aluminum canner, its

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baked-on harvest gold enamel the latest color in kitchen appliances. Not like my mother's old water-bath canner, a blue-and-white graniteware antique, rusted from years of use.

My mother boiled her jars of grapes for thirty minutes, my canner pressured them for five. I watched the gauge reach twelve-and-a-half pounds, kept it steady for five minutes, let it fall back down to zero, loosened the lid, lifted it off,

grasped the first jar with my tongs, and it exploded. Blinded with blue grapes, I felt my way to the sink, threw cold water into my face, and could see. I stripped out of my clothes, threw water over my breasts into the creases where

the skin came off with my bra's underwire, threw water down my front where my waistband helped the scald reach the third layer, my skin red and swollen like the tightly thin transparent covering of a blue grape bursting with juice.

For three months after the grape accident, I spent my time soaking in lukewarm water baths, wrapping my skin in white gauze, like the gauzy-thin white dishtowels we used for straining blue-plum jelly.

We picked the plums from the trees that grew wild along the river. We'd cross the siphon bridge in September, buckets swinging on our arms, gather the blue plums and make our way back, our fingers and mouths stained purple.

Also across the river, we found chokecherries growing up Cave Mountain alongside the siphon. We made them into pancake syrup.

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We picked peaches from our own orchards on the hill above the ditchbank, turned them into sugary preserves.

My Uncle Lew grew watermelons in the east orchard, planted prickly pears to keep the melon-thieves away, plowed the ground with a horse-drawn cultivator, slept in a cot under an old apple tree with a shotgun at his side.

We packed Spanish prunes in thick syrup.
We picked summer apples, ripe and ready for harvest in early August, cooked them to a thick chunky sauce, as tart as their juicy green promise in early July, when we'd eat them raw with salt and soda.

Sometimes we bottled strawberries. They floated lightly to the tops of the jars, softened and compressed from cooking, faded to a light maroon color that soon would turn to brown. Somehow I don't remember any strawberry jam.

There was always raspberry jam, from our berry patch out beyond the garden.
We always used up the raspberry jam before the year was half over, never found any spoiled jam lurking in any dark corner of the cellar.

Mother planted pansies on top of the cellar.
They grew among the rocks and weeds, a spot of color against the brown dirt mound that housed our food storage.
When I was eight years old, I started tending the pansies.

Dad planted cherry trees one year between the cellar and the chicken coop, and we bottled pie cherries for years, their tart flavor tamed with sugar and cornstarch. Dad planted sweet cherries too.

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but they didn't survive.

Dad hunted, Mother bottled the meat. Bottled it in chunks, cooked it for hours, made it soft enough to go through the Universal hand-crank grinder together with onions and bread crumbs. She then pattied it out and fried it in butter.

We lived on fish and wild game: deer, pheasant, duck and grouse. Dad and the boys did the hunting, gutted and hung the deer. Mother cut the deer up on the round wood table in the kitchen, throwing the scraps to Butch, Dad's dog.

Butch was the only dog I ever knew, and I didn't know him well. I was afraid of dogs. One year Butch got bit by a rattlesnake, laid on the back step for days, too sick to move. He got better. Once, at a family get-together,

down at our home-made park by the river, Butch wanted to go swimming, so Dad threw him in, but he didn't clear the fence, and it ripped a hole in Butch's belly. I ran home for a needle and thread, and Dad sewed him up on the spot.

One year I went hunting with my dad. He loaded up the little Ford tractor with gunny sacks full of straw, my sister and I sat on the sacks, and Dad drove the tractor up the hill. It was steep, I was afraid of falling off, and I never went with him again.

The Ford tractor served my dad well for hunting, farming, and spraying. In the fifties, the days of much-touted benefits from the new organo-pesticides, my dad hooked two long spray-rods on his tractor and started spraying fields.

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Chlordane was the only thing that killed the alfalfa weevil, and Dad breathed the spray along with the weevils, the sick-sweet purgency of poison drifting in the air around the tractor. He'd come home tired and nauseous.

Thirty years later I asked my mother about his death from lung cancer in 1962. "It was the chlordane," she said, not the 2-4D or the DDT, "Thank goodness for that DDT," she told me, "It finally got us rid of the flies."

"DDT is Good for Me," the ads from the big chemical companies sang cheerily. But in 1960, when my sister was six, her teeth all rotted out. Our chickens laid soft-shelled eggs that year, and the song birds almost all disappeared.

No more rows of red-winged blackbirds sitting on fences and telephone lines for acres, quieter when the warblings diminished. No more droves of salamanders crossing the lane in the spring after a warm rain.

Chemical smells were everywhere on the farm and in the house. Fly spray drifted damply in the air on the back porch where metal cans of cloudy liquid leaked on shelves above the freezer, dripped down on the freezer lid.

I stayed in the house, my little sister played outside. She wandered the hills behind the house, went out to the pond, over to the river, played with toy cars in the dirt, using her hands to scrape roadways into the top of the cellar.

Our older brother died of a brain tumor. He was fourteen. He used to drop marbles

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onto my head from his second-story bedroom window as I walked the narrow path between the cellar and the house. I wondered why I didn't get the tumor.

The year my brother died (I was eight years old), the two-room school house closed, and I started going to school in town. The teachers all said we could use our cellars as bomb shelters when the Russians dropped the big one.

We had drills for the event, scampering all embarrassed under our desks, tucking our knees underneath our bellies, wrapping our arms around our heads, our faces pressed to the floor. They said we could stock our cellars and live

underground for a year, and when we came out, the radiation would be gone. Sleeping out at night in the back yard behind the cellar, I'd look up, imagining a missile full of glowing radiation. I'd calculate the distance,

the time it would take for me to get to the cellar door after the missile exploded in outer-space. Once my sister and a brother (not the one who died) saw a space ship. It came down in a bright pink glow of dust

out beyond the gravel pit behind the house. They told me they had just skirted the rock pile and gone around the hillside to Maple Hollow when the sky turned pink behind them, and something threw a dust screen out to blind them.

I was nervous when they told me. Aliens were as scary as the monsters that came out in the dark behind the cellar when we were playing hide-and-seek at night. They were as

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scary as the spiders that hung from the cellar ceiling.

But they were not as frightening as the Russians with their bombs. We wouldn't live long in the cellar, I realized, hating the dark and the damp, the spiders, the moldy smell. We wouldn't be able to eat the bottled meat

without cooking it first, and there wouldn't be any water. We'd get pretty tired of fruit and pickles, and where would we pee? I guessed our health teachers must not have thought about sanitary conditions in cellars.

We stored pickles in the cellar. Mother put them up without the water bath. She washed and cut the cucumbers, packed them in sterilized jars with garlic and dill, poured a vinegar-and-salt solution up to the neck.

She boiled the lids in a separate pan, lifted them out with a fork, screwed them down tight on the jars. Sterile equipment was always the rule, whatever she bottled. She took great care to keep her family from diseases.

When my dad came home from the hospital to die, Mother boiled his dishes, boiled the clear plastic glasses he drank from, boiled the linens he slept in. The cancer spread to his other lung, his resistance went down, and pneumonia set in.

The smell of fetid sputum lingered thickly in the living room where he lay in a borrowed hospital bed. The smell of sickness filled the whole house, mingled with the heavy steam from water boiling in the kitchen.

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An older married sister came to help. She smokes two packs a day. He coughed up rotten lung-phlegm, never having had a cigarette in all his life, and she is still happily smoking at sixty-two. But she wasn't happy then.

She yelled at me for getting in the way, for seeming so oblivious when our own dad was dying. His dying didn't seem as real as the Russians and their bomb. Until my sister said it, nobody had mentioned he might die.

My sister and I were sleeping out under the clothesline the night he died, June 29, 1962. A brother, sixteen, came out to tell us. We went in, Mother wouldn't let us look, but I glimpsed him sitting slumped in an easy chair, not lying in the bed.

After the morticians came and wheeled him away, I saw the stain on the seat cushion, spread out wide like the stains under the cans of chemicals on the porch, the smell of both kinds of stains were the smell of death, intolerable still.

The funeral was held at the big "stake center" in town, where they needed extra space to hold church conferences, and there still was not enough room, so they opened up the curtains that separated the chapel from the gymnasium.

They added chairs until there was standing room only. "Such a young man," they all said. To me he was old. 56. He had grandchildren older than I was. But he died long before most of his brothers did, they all lived into their eighties.

His parents were long dead before I was

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born, old before he was born, the last of eleven children. My brother was dead, aunts and cousins and others. I'd seen a lot of funerals, and cancer was cropping up everywhere.

After my dad died I started smoking.
Two years later the house burned down.
I wasn't there, but people tell me
there were explosions from ammunition
for the deer rifles and shot guns, that
the fire got so hot

it melted everything into the ground.
When they hauled away the ashes and
dug the basement for the next house,
they levelled the old cellar. It hadn't
been used since my dad died and my
mother went to work in town.

Last year, my mother moved back to the farm
after fifteen years in St. George.
She rents the house from my little sister,
who bought the farm ten years ago. She
doesn't keep cows, but she uses the barn
to store hay for a llama.

Last summer Mother planted four-o'clocks,
geraniums, and petunias out by the
old yellow rose bush behind the clothes-
line. She planted daffodils on the west
side of the house, and pansies
in the flower bed.

The pansies grace the edges of a rock path
in between two 75-year old lilacs that
used to stand directly behind the cellar.
My mother stores a gallon-sized jar of
insecticide on the back porch, complete
with a pump sprayer.

She keeps the back yard rid of bugs that
eat her flowers, bees that bother her
hummingbirds, and spiders that leave dirty

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cobwebs lining her basement walls. Her
extra cans of chemicals share space with her
bottled food storage.

I think of my mother, the fifties, the chemical
age. I water my tomato starts. Peat and
vermiculite rise then settle, the clean
soil smell drifts up, fecund, alive.
A solitary spider throws a line of silk
across the ceiling beams.

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Caesarean

"For more than a millennium, the survival of the Gypsies has depended on secrecy; on disguise and misrepresentation, on keeping customs and ambitions hidden, on burying the past."

"Among the Gypsies," Isabel Fonseca

I

All day at the hospital.
All day.

6 A.M. surgery prep:
My daughter, her husband both
vanish past the doors of
"No admittance of children under fourteen
without special permission."

Grandbaby Dee and I
wait. Her brother,
little Kip Elijah, is coming out today.

"Star," that's what she calls me,
"the peck-bird's coming to the
hospital too.
It has to peck Mom's belly-button
to get the baby out."

Dee is a Gypsy. Her mom is my daughter,
her dad is a Romichelle. Not sure how
to spell it, neither is he. Their
language is oral, not written.

They've named the baby already,
watched him on ultrasound video
dozens of times, forward and back,
scanned for the arrow that points to
his penis, "his unit," his dad says.

Kip Elijah, his dad's birth name.
Hasn't used that name for years.
Isn't Dee's birth father. But
he calls her "my girl," and she is.

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They are a travelling family,
stopping over to have a baby,
lending their Gypsy lore to
the place they're in at the moment.

Back to the peck-bird, the Labor and Delivery
doors. We wait, cartoons on TV, The
New Yorker, powdered donuts and
cranberry juice, for an hour.

But Dee doesn't follow hospital rules.
Gypsy children, adopted or not, don't
conform to No Admittance. We go in
the double doors, demand to see her mom.
They let us.

All my life, if I had only spoken,
made the demand, I could have been
admitted. Instead, I was quiet,
dreamed of running away with the Gypsies.

II

This is Utah. "In Mormon culture,"
Terry Tempest Williams writes,
"authority is respected, obedience is
revered, independent thinking is not."

For years, she sat in hospital
waiting rooms, obeyed the signs of
no admittance, watched the women in
her family die.

For her, the price of obedience
came too high, now she questions
everything, openly defies No Admittance
Beyond This Point.

Military secrets don't impress her
anymore. She travels with her friends
to take back the desert in the name
of their children.

They walk brazenly through the
contaminated town of Mercury,
commit civil disobedience at the
Nevada Test Site.

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All protestors walk along a fenced,
paved road, between signs that say
"Do Not Cross. Desert Tortoise. BLM."
At the end of the road,

another fence, a high chain-link,
signs posted by the "DOE. No
Trespassing. Violators subject to
Federal Prosecution."

They cross the cattle guard from
BLM land, are immediately arrested,
thrown into holding pens, and
trucked out on a bus.

III

My daughter said, three years ago,
"I've met a man. He's good to me.
There are some things I can't tell you."

When a Gypsy marries a gadje,
my daughter, a person outside
the tribe, there is a promise,
an allegiance to be made.

For weeks, I wouldn't hear from them.
Dee learns new words, but
not a new language. The language is fading.

Ultrasound and television,
delivery rooms and snack machines,
tax and license, health insurance,
proof of identification,

trailer courts that charge as much as
apartments, work that can't be found,
a wife whose babies don't descend,

family scattered from Kansas
to Texas, Florida to Wisconsin,
dilutes the Gypsy life.

The father of the baby,
slender, well proportioned, straight
black hair, brown almond eyes,
bends down with Dee's little brother.

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IV

In Wisconsin
in the woods
Gypsy children played,
hundreds of them,
he said.

At dinnertime
a car horn sounded
twice, kids swarmed
into the camp from
every direction.

Doesn't happen anymore
he says. Now there is
too much crime, too many
murders. Nobody dares
play there anymore.

No matter where
they travel now, there is
danger. In KFC in
Logan, they watched a
gun fall out of a
man's coat and clatter to
the floor. At a rest stop in
Colorado, a tall black man
stood between Dee and her mom and
their way out of the restroom.

Dee lives at gas stations.
She knows no woods, but
she plays at city parks in
every town.

V

They come home from the
hospital a day early,
settle in with their new baby.

she smells plastic burning,
he hears buzzing in the fuse box
in the bedroom.

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Get out, get out, he yells,
flying out the back door of
their trailer.

She lands in the snow,
bare feet, no panties,
baby in one arm, Dee in the other,

staples ripped, blood soaking
through her nightshirt.

He kicks at the electrical plug,
frees it from the hook-up post,
grabs an extinguisher.

Black and thick, the smoke rolls out
the fuse box, into the bedroom.

The what-ifs, later, are phenomenal.
Seven minutes, start to finish, in a
trailer fire.

VI

All this bravado:
I distance myself so my
children can't hurt me.

Get close, they may tell me too much.
They hurt out loud, and I
catch the pain.

The pain comes inside if I listen.
If it does, I can't help it.
I can't help them.

So I put on a brave front,
an aloofness, I don't worry.

Distance and coolness, that's
how I get through a life with
children. Otherwise,

when they're grown up and I'm
poverty stricken, and they need help,

all I will be able to do is

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sit in a chair, my
head in my hands,
and cry.

VII

Later, I hear they're
leaving again. The last fight she had with
Dee's former dad, he threatened to
burn them alive.

A Gypsy man protects
his family. His woman
stays at home. Their home is the camp.

1985, Ficowski:
"Opposition to the traveling of
the Gypsy craftsmen ...
began gradually to bring about
the disappearance of ...
traditional Gypsy skills."

Not enough work around here,
they say. In twelve more years,
the baby will be a man.

Perfectly shaped, he doesn't have
the pointed head of babies who come
through the birth canal.

Well-proportioned, straight
black hair, dark eyes, strong and
smart: a Gypsy, like his sister Dee.

VIII

They'll go to California;
his cousin wired some money,
says there's work down there.

I went to California once,
mid-sixties, fifteen,
rode with the Hell's Angels.

Yearning for the Gypsy life, I
told my daughters this, but

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really I went in a Chevrolet with
two guys; one had an original
Hell's Angels jacket. We picked up a
hitchhiker, a skinny old man who
climbed in the back seat, lit up a
smoke, thanking us for the ride,
started a conversation.
My friend in the front, the driver,
sat up tall, rolled his shoulders,
adjusted his leather jacket to show
Hell's Angels, stitched on the back.
The old man stopped mid-sentence.
Hard enough life to worry about
getting rolled, let alone ending up
murdered by two Hell's Angels
and their girlfriend.
We camped out at rest stops.
Other people avoided us when they
noticed my friend's jacket.
We came back from California when
his wife wired us money.
I never saw them again.

IX

We drive into the camp, their
trailer's gone. A gaping hole, a
pulled tooth, a space of
gravel ground in between
two curbs. An electrical
post devoid of plugs, a
block of wood kicked out
from under a tire, the tire,
the wheel, the trailer,
gone.
In the middle of
the night--that's the best
time to drive. You eat up
road as far as your

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headlights go, thousands
of miles, millions. The
cool, the radio, the
babies asleep on the seat
beside your woman, your
woman beside you, your
home behind you, that's
the way to travel.

X

In the old days parents told their
naughty children, "If you don't
be good we'll sell you to the
Gypsies and you'll never
see us again."

Folklore says the Gypsies stole
our babies, but the truth is
when a gadje brings her children
to the nomad way of life
she loses them.

Afraid, their fathers file for
custody. And get it, so the
Gypsy folklore goes, so never
marry a gadje or she'll
lose her kids.

Folklore advertises fear.
Tragic stories, oldest slander.
Private lifestyle, hidden language,
different moral boundaries, their
world view codified,

they bring on racism. The fear is
that of Hitler for the Jews, the
fear is of McCarthy's for the
communists, the fear is hate for
difference.

They are a separate people,
the lost tribe, lost, because
the time isn't right yet for them,
the lies are not the thieves' cant,
but survival.

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XI

Got a letter from my sister
yesterday. "You baby boomers,"
I'm 44, she's 63,

"seem not so much moved by
democratic ideals as
the need to assess the total

morality of our planet. You
blame us for our use of deadly
poisons and atomic energy.

You've seen the effects of
acting without sufficient
information."

My daughter, the one who
isn't a Gypsy, wrote a
research paper on the topic of

nuclear testing in Nevada.
Five years ago, at sixteen,
she gathered the information,

assessed the situation of our planet,
crossed the line at the test site,
attempted to protest.

Now, she tells me sometimes,
she wishes she could travel with
her sister, forget about all of it.

XII

In the 1950s, Gypsies didn't live in
Utah, but they were downwinders,
like the rest of us. Wherever they

traveled, they couldn't escape the
American nuclear mistake. Each test,
126 of them. Chernobyl ten times over.

Government deception, Carole Gallagher says.

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Good, gentle people victimized,
toxic secrets hidden in the landscape.

Mormon hierarchy officially silent,
politically in charge, its people
obedient, faithful, patriotic.

Babies died, mothers got breast cancer.
Clusters of leukemia deaths in 1951.
Radiation sickness diagnosed neurosis.

A thousand scientists issued a warning in
the mid-fifties about health effects,
small demonstrations began, but when

Darlene Phillips wanted to join, and
asked her bishop what was the proper
role for a good Mormon woman to take,

he said, "No, you stay away from it,
those people are communists," so she
didn't go. And Ground Zero kept up its

nuclear numbing, "a natural by-product of
trauma," tangling our wasted, bloodless
bodies in shock waves of betrayal.

XIII

Poems of the Gypsies,
1950s, weighted with
fatalism:

The long road, the
rootlessness, no
turning back,

the poverty, illiteracy,
lost dreams and
impossible love,

the no place of home,
nostalgia of doom:
Let it come,
It doesn't matter.

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XIV

Evening News, January 15:

In Topeka, Kansas, they're
creatively recycling
missile silos, remnants of
the cold war.

One sold, forty thousand dollars,
to a bookish couple, a
two-story library, modern
kitchen, greenhouse,

the old control panel
decorates one wall, the other,
a bricked-in round missile exit
adapted to an entry door.

One silo, a high school art lab,
the new school built on top,
saved the taxpayers
six hundred thousand
construction dollars.

It cost 4 million dollars to
build the silos, the school
gets, for one dollar, their own
18-inch thick concrete walls and
a drive-in bus garage.

XV

They called from Kansas last
year, tornado warnings on TV
in every MacDonalds, every gas
station. They took
pictures;

black funnels taller than
outer space, able to pick up
trailers like pieces of paper.
Came back through town on their
way to Florida,

checked in to the clinic with an
ectopic pregnancy, lost one
fallopian tube. Just as well,

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it was hurricane season
by then.

Earthquakes in California,
but that's nothing next to
tornados in Kansas. Missile
silos won't save Gypsies who
don't live there,

like bomb shelters wouldn't have
saved us baby boomers, but we
didn't know it. Gypsies at least
know their own fate.

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