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Legend: The Song of the Family, The Voice of a Woman

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Legend

The Song of the Family: The Voice of a Woman

Poetry by
Kimberly Shumway

LEGEND:
The Song Of The Family, The Voice Of A Woman

by
Kimberly Roth Shumway

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DEPARTMENT HONORS

in the Department of English,
College of Humanities Arts and Social Sciences

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

1994

I dedicate this volume to the families
I came from,
married into,
and hope to raise.

I do not pretend to represent you,
only to present you,
without apology or remorse,
the way you appear when I am looking. . .

KRS

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Preface

The Song of the Family

I do not believe that lives are lived in isolation, but rather are connected by ties of humanity and of family. For me because of this intimate human connection, every life experience, trivial or tremendous, is a poem. The poems blend into one--a great symphony of the human condition. An experience, even if left unverbalized, shapes the minds of both the one experiencing it and those connected to him or her by either close or distant ties.

In this collection I combine the poetic experiences most relevant in shaping me. They are the songs of my family. Some of these have never been told before, others passed to me through several generations of oral and written history. I began this collection years ago--recording the songs sung in my head and the poems of my childhood memories. I became interested in the way my experiences connected to the experiences of those around me. I began exploring my past--doing verbal sketches of my parents and grandparents--studying the history of my ancestors. I record these experiences so they will not be lost. I record these experiences for the future--to give my children a heritage to look back on as they begin to define themselves and sing their own songs.

The Voice of a Woman

As I began researching my family history, I began to see that most of the information I have used was recorded by women. The personal journals I found (excluding one journal of poetry written by my father's uncle) were kept by women. The biographies and personal histories were often, though not always, compiled by women. The letters I received on the subject were written by women. The stories I heard as a child, whether of men or women, were told to me by my Mother, Grandmothers and Aunts. I have also noticed

that the lines of family history I know the most about, the photographs that have been saved, the stories that have been remembered are maternal--representing the lines of my mother and my mother's mother as well as my father's mother. Perhaps this shows a natural feminine tendency toward storytelling and history. Or perhaps it suggests a feminine concern for the future such as that which compels me to suggest my unborn children as the final audience for this collection.

Feminine sources, in addition to my own perspective as a woman, have given this volume of poetry a strong feminine voice. Most poems are written in my own voice or the augmented voice of my childhood. When I did assume another voice--even when recording a man's experience--it is the voice of a woman.

Songs of the Past

This volume of poetry is divided into three overlapping sections. The first section, *The Songs of the Past* represent stories as they were told to me (often second or even third hand) concerning the lives of parents, grandparents and a few more distant ancestors. Some of the men and women introduced in this section died long before I was born. The poetic experiences I share may be the only knowledge I have of them.

In this section, I explore the idea of family in two senses. I look both at the family relationships which shaped these individuals as well as my feelings for and relationships with them. This is not meant to be a comprehensive family history, but rather a collection of isolated moments in the lives of strangers who are no longer strangers because of an experience I enjoyed vicariously through them. I have included a few biographical notes and some photographs of these people to help bring them to life.

Songs of the Present

The poems in this section consider the issue of family as it directly concerns my life. *The Songs of the Present* record some of my earliest childhood memories, the evolution of relationships with family members, and the creation of new, often difficult family ties through marriage. These songs reflect the many facets of life for me--the pain and pleasure of existence.

Songs of the Future

The poems in this section explore my personal feelings as I look toward the future. *The Songs of the Future* anticipate and explore pregnancy and parenthood. Though I will soon stop working on this collection, poems belonging to this section will continually be under revision. With time, songs will evolve and new songs will be added. The songs of my babies will become the songs of grandparenthood. I accept and look forward to this.

Questions of Craft

I read *Leaves of Grass* during a critical time in my writing development. Exposure to Whitman led me to concentrate less on craftsmanship than on spontaneity in my poetry. I abandoned rhyme and meter in favor of a rambling free verse style similar to what I saw in Whitman. This writing style better captured my thoughts and emotions. I now see the foolishness of abandoning poetic craftsmanship, but feel that this was a useful experiment.

As a junior at USU, I asked Professor Amil Quayle if I could write a collection of poems for honors credit in Advanced Writing. It was wonderful to be writing seriously again for the first time since leaving behind my high school mentor, Michael Johnson, who helped me develop a love for words and writing. I took Poetry Writing from Professor Quayle the next quarter for the simple pleasure I had found again in writing.

This collection began to take shape during these two classes and with

the encouragement of Departmental Honor's Director, Dr. Keith Grant-Davie. Since taking on this collection, I have begun to feel stale in my current writing style. I want to take control of my writing--to reconcile the conflict between freedom and structure in my poetry.

Professor Quayle, my thesis advisor on this project, has been encouraging and honest in discussing questions of style and voice in my work. The suggestion I hear most commonly from him is "tighten." Clip the poem down to its essentials. Cut words that do not make a unique contribution. I continue to capture my thoughts in the lazy, rambling style I have grown comfortable with, but now try to prune my thoughts into shorter less Whitmanesque sentences.

Work with Professor Ken Brewer in Advanced Poetry Writing has helped me see poetry a little differently. Through discussion of line breaks, verse paragraphs and quantitative verse, I realized that the decisions I make in every poem are not random, but governed by an instinctual knowledge of my native language. I would like to learn to experiment more with the sounds and rhythms of language.

This perspective makes it much easier to question and consider the craftsmanship of my poems. As I look now at this collection, I would like to try to define my poetic style. Structurally, I write in a free verse rhythm given by the natural length of syllables rather than the traditional metric foot. I often divide my lines into logical or grammatical phrases and cluster them in paragraphs of uneven length. Unlike Whitman, I have always preferred to see entire poems at once. I feel that the distraction of a page turn can ruin a poem's effect.

I have mixed feelings about punctuation in my poems, while the marks offer benefits to readers in interpretation of sound and sense, they seem occasionally to rob poems of some valuable ambiguity. In some poems I try to control the break of the lines so that capitalization, line or

paragraph breaks carry all semantic information necessary for readers. In others I use all the punctuation of prose within lines but little or none at the line ends, or I may structure my lines to end with their natural markings.

It is difficult for me to pick out poetic devices in my poetry, but apostrophe is common in *The Songs of the Past* and of *The Songs of the Future.* This is because, in these sections, I attempt a form of communication with my dead ancestors and unborn children.

Legacy

Catholic.
Lutheran.
Calvinist.
Mormon.
I am an Orphan.
I am a Plural Wife.
I am a Widow with three small children.
I came to America on the Mayflower
with my father and brother.
I came as a frightened Irish child
with a number around my neck.
Irish.
German.
Scotch.
Danish.
I loved to play the violin.
I am the only one left.
I don't remember my mother or father.
I am a child of the Depression
who dug beets and had red hair.
I died on the plane home
from WWII.

Storytelling

Grandma read to us from a book
with no cover
and told us from her memory about
The fairies at the bottom of her garden
and the goblins who get you if you don't watch out.

On memorial day every year,
we took the peonies and lilacs
from Grandma's yard,
and She took us to visit the relatives
in Richfield and Venice;
in Sigurd and Vermillion and Annabella.

She told us their stories. . .
Of Grandpa B. who loved lilacs,
Of Great-Grandma's stillborn sister
whose grave is marked
with a flat stone and says only Baby Gledhill,
Of the girl who had my mother's name
and died so very young,
Of a Great, Great Grandfather who died of influenza
and was followed within days by his wife
who is said to have died
of a broken heart.

My mother also told stories.
She and Aunt Laurel told
Winnie the Pooh and the Heffalump
and the Pale Green Pants.
They shared all the voices and made us laugh.
We wanted to hear the stories over and over
until we knew them by heart.

Today,
My mother has a black diary
in which she writes her nightmares and her awful memories
and her Pain.
Few know the stories she writes, but
she has told them to me.

I have learned by rote
the stories told by two generations of women.
I retell their stories to make them my own.
I remember the generations which have gone
telling the stories to keep them alive in me,
and for me,
and to keep myself alive.

Raw Notes for Verse

John Ward, my father's uncle, wrote a poetry journal called Raw Notes For Verse while in an insane asylum. To my knowledge it is the only diary left by anyone in my father's family.

He that made the ear, shall He not hear?
And He that formed the eye shall He not see
Where are you, then, who I should love and Fear
Be you despised as you're despising me.

I do not know you
but I will call you Uncle John
as I sit here turning the pages
of your private thoughts
written some ten years
before my birth.

Only you
of all my father's dead
speak to me and your words
bring the asylum
into focus.

What ignorance does here to cure insanity
Gets done to me. I'm on the way to knowing
What evil is; Not self-sufficient vanity,
but quiet fear and anger keep me going.

They bring back
the long dead anger
of your conflicts
and your private pain.
I see you more intimately
than a lover.

Conjuring you with formal solemn praying
Or crying out with broken hearted screams
Brings nothing. But you'll hear what I am saying
Now. I challenge you. Your truths are dreams.

I don't know why
you were locked
away,

For these words to me
are not the words
of a madman. . .but the teeth
of a lucid, angry mind
fighting the chains forged
by an angry god.

Who are you?

This portrait came from a family photo album kept by my father's mother.

I have only this
grainy, xeroxed portrait
and an Irish name
Francis Joseph Ward
to know you by
My grandmother's grandfather

High stiff collar
under vaguely dimpled chin
Stiff hair parted slightly to the left
The faintest hint of a smile
under a bushy mustache
Your overlarge eyes
look out at me
perhaps past me
to the future
Who are these women beside you
One young and serious
hair drawn softly up behind her head
Your wife?

The other, older
with a longer wider face
and smaller eyes
Your mother?
Sister?

Why are they left nameless?

Kathryn and Arthur

This story of my grandparents courtship was told to me by Kathryn Ward Roth, my father's mother.

Grandma told
me the story over and over when I was young--
Too young to see.

She was fourteen.
She saw him in the door of a Spanish class.
Smooth black hair, shirt sleeves unbuttoned
and turned up once at the cuffs.
One night he drove her to the beach
to watch the phosphorescence
of the seaweed roll in on the waves
by moonlight.

They married
after she finished her nursing degree at the convent.
He was Lutheran--She, Catholic
It didn't matter if you loved someone.
The war came. . .
The children came. . .
The moments faded together into a patchwork.

I listened to Grandma tell the story again.
Hand in hand with my new husband
I noticed her eyes--
Eyes more alive in the moonlight
and phosphorescence
of the memory.

Apples and Butterflies

1.
There are deer
in the backyard looking for last summer's
apples in the snow
They are quiet and still.

2.
I remember the
apple blossoms of last spring
and the hum of the insects
wallowing in their sweetness
pollinating indiscriminately
leaving behind a rosy swelling
where the petals once were
I remember my father telling me
why he left.

3.
It was about a butterfly
who fell in love with a flower and pollinated her
She could not fly away with him
The seeds inside her began to germinate
Her petals fell off leaving her miserable and ugly
To prove his love
he asked a grasshopper to chew off his wings
and pushed his feet into the mud next to her
trying to grow roots.
He finally thought he could feel himself sprouting
When he saw another butterfly inviting him to fly away with her
but he could only hobble away
a cripple.

Blackhawk

My mother's people
carved a home for themselves of western rock.
They were strong
but afraid of the raids, the mutilations;
afraid of the marauding heathen barbarians.

They fought to defend their homes
in the seven years of the Blackhawk War.
The Indians fought to defend their homes
from the Invaders.

It was morning,
A cavalry company in search of stolen stock
came upon an Indian brave--too sick to follow the others
He was smoking his pipe under a tree.

Grandfather held back the rifles
"No, We will not shed blood
unless it is necessary."

Years later--the war over
an Indian found Grandfather;
and told him of a day, long-forgotten
when five Indians waited--rifles poised
ready to shoot the three men walking through a field

Grandfather spoke
One Indian recognized the voice. . .
Three saved for the mercy once shown an enemy

John Lehi Ivie (1833-1909) was my mother's great, great grandfather, Veterans of the Blackhawk War erected a monument to him which stands in the Richfield, Utah Cemetery.

The Day He Died

Randall Christensen's death on March 12, 1928 of pneumonia is recorded in the personal history of his wife Ida.

We met at a dance in 1915 and he was mine from that night on.
We were married October 11 one year later--
a clear moonlit night, an owl hooted across the street
. . .I was so comfortable in his arms.

He liked swimming in the canal on crisp mornings
and trying to catch wild horses
He often brought me Lilies or Indian Paintbrush and
taught me to hunt and watch the rabbits play by the spring.
He taught me to see the stars with my heart.
He worked hard, singing at the top of his voice,
while building the sleigh we drove to church
. . .winter morning sleigh bells ringing in the air.

It was seven years before the children came.
A girl first, Mary, how happy we were
He looked her over from top to toe then rocked her
and sang her to sleep. Two years later, a boy, Tom.
We had been married nearly twelve years and were still so young
. . .so much in love.

He had been working in another town and was found
unconscious on the floor--his lungs irritated by chemicals.
I came as soon as I heard. It was nearly morning by then and snowing.
We put him in the back of the wagon and drove toward home
through the dark
. . .through the deep snow.

He wanted to see the children again;
They wanted to roughhouse with their daddy.
I could see he was suffering.
His strength
. . .was slowly ebbing away

I sat behind him on the bed holding him upright to ease his breathing.
I'm pregnant, I told him.
"Don't feel bad, a child will bring happiness as the others did"
Quietly, he prayed to die. I begged him not to go
Never to leave me alone, but his suffering broke my heart.
I could see he was getting worse. I told him he could go
. . .I told him it was all right.

"I'll be here always"
A few gasps later the black of the illness
went out of his face and I saw the pain lines go.
I woke my children;
. . .they were all of him I had left.

Dear Kimberly,

I am trying to remember
the things you wanted to know
about grandpa and me.

My childhood. . .

My father died
when I was four and a half.
My mother taught school
while I, the oldest, kept the house, cut the lawn,
gathered the eggs, and brought in the coal
for the stove each day.

I had a lot of time for play--hiking in the hills
west of town--pretending a lot.
When mother remarried, we moved.
That year I fell under the school bus
and the back wheel rolled onto my feet.
The driver drove off my feet
and carried me to the doctor's office.

Grandpa. . .

Your grandpa began to work
on the family farm at five years old
after school every day and on Saturdays.
He thinned onions and sugar beets
and fed the turkeys.

He slept out summer nights with the animals
and did the usual pranks boys do.

He liked to sing, but not
where anyone could see him.
He would stand behind the kitchen door
and sing his heart out.
He played the clarinet.

How we met. . .

Grandpa and I met at the county fair.
He had such striking, expressive eyes
I looked at him every chance I got
not even noticing what he wore.
He got lost and stuck in the mud looking for my house
the evening of our first date.
My folks noticed the mud splashes
on his pants and shoes

We went to movies and dances.
Dated two years
He had come to see me at school
in Salt Lake when
the Japanese Bombed Pearl Harbor.

At the shock we felt our future
had been shot down too.

This poem originated with a letter from my grandmother, Mary Hooper.

Mixed Background

When I was very young
my parents followed no religion.

One grandmother took me to Mass
and taught me to say, "Our Father
which art in Heaven" and
the Apostle's Creed.

The other took me to sacrament
meeting and taught me to pray
with my heart.
At eight I choose baptism in her church
A washing away of my past life
to embrace the new.

One church over the other--
one grandmother over the other.
I asked Grandma Kathryn not to tell me
about her prayers to the Virgin in my behalf.

When I was very young
I washed away of half my past.

Initiation

The night before
I married
Mother and Grandmother
called me into the back room.

They told me
of the sacred things
of our religion
passed orally
for so many generations--
secrets they believe began
with Mother Eve.

Grandmother spoke quietly. . .solemnly
preparing me for what lay ahead--
for the rituals
for the path to and from the altar.

I will share the secrets
with daughters of my own
continuing this oral tradition--
until then,
out of respect
and love
for those who went before me,
I remain silent.

Moving

I am packing.

Things saved forever
in the cracks and crevices of my childhood
Things hidden in the dust
behind the bookshelf or under the bed
come out into the light
and go in the stiff, brown
identical boxes.

They come out to be claimed my own.

How can I have collected
so much junk--so much spare baggage?
Why did I save this?
Where did it come from?
Remember when?
Look at this--at that.
The lost shoe,
the used blue wrapping paper,
the scraps and fragments.

Where can I move this to forget it again?

Dad's Wood

Mom, is the man going to take Dad's wood?

The wood smells nice
oak pine cedar--he knows them all
walnut cherry teak--he tells them to me
His wood, his shop, his big machines
the noise of the machines goes to the tall roof
the dust piles up under the machines

Remember when Dad cut his finger off in the saw?

Dad lets me sweep the dust
and the shavings from his plane
I like to twirl the wood curls around my fingers
He lets me try to make curls too if I be careful
holding the cold round part
pushing hard on the back

Now maybe dad won't be dirty all the time.

I think he likes worn out clothes
and sawdust in his hair and beard
varnish on his clothes and fingers
The varnish sits on the shelf
Ribbons from the fair hang on the shop walls

Where is Dad going to hang his ribbons now?

Red ribbons and blue
purple ribbons with ruffles and gold words
Dad keeps a book of pictures of things he made
their ribbons hanging on them
The curvy-legged chair
the bar with the forest deer and trees
chiseled into the front--small and careful

Mom, why does dad have to sell the shop?

Inflation? Bank-ripping? What? Goodbye wood
Goodbye machines and dust and curly shavings
My dad is crying

Elm Tree

I live in a red-painted house my dad built.
He let me put my hand in the cement,
my whole family's hands are printed together
in the cement under the house.

In the summer the backyard weeds go up to my armpits;
we sometimes mow them down when we mow
the square of grass in the middle.
Fun is playing with Dad before dark
the red plastic bat and a tennis ball in the backyard.

The tree in the backyard's a hundred times bigger'n
the house--sometimes I wonder
if the top of it tickles God's feet--I think it must.
At the bottom of my tree I dug a hole;
someday it will go clear to CHINA
and I'll go there.

Mom says the other side of the earth is out
in the middle of the ocean so I guess I'll have to take a boat.
She says they probably wouldn't want me anyway.
I wonder if I threw a rock in the hole
would it would float away into outerspace
or would it fall back up to me?

I climb my tree every day and I only got stuck once.
Now whenever mom sees me she makes me get down.
Girls don't know how to have fun.
I know 'cause I am one and my mom's one
and the boys won't play with me
and the girls I know are boring.
They just want to play house or post-office.

I keep my collection up in my tree.
It's a collection of rocks and things I found.
I have a whole drawer full of rocks in my room,
but I like the ones in the tree better.
Mom says I should get rid of my rocks
and put the clothes from my closet floor in the drawer instead.

I wish I could live in the tree.
I like being taller than everyone else and watching them
when they don't know I'm there.

Two branches are so close together that
I can lie on them without falling
they are better than bed 'cause they swing and
I like to rock on them with my eyes closed.

A Place for Everything

I spent summers with My father's mother
playing Barbie in a hot, fly-filled
trailer playhouse named Pinky.

Grandma, a Rich Polite White Catholic Irish Gentlewoman,
gave me my first Barbie when I was four.
It sat in a suitcase full of clothes
until summer every year.

Grandma taught me
Pronunciation, spelling, and posture;
Thank you letters are a life and death matter;
and don't use that street talk.

She taught me her motto. . .
A place for everything, and everything in its place:
Shoulders Toothbrush Scraps
Dust Wrinkles People--Everything.

Wrinkles for instance belong on an old woman's face
not in the bedsheets.
Shoulders belong back, Dust belongs in the road
People, like silverware
belong with their own kind
No one mixes knives and spoons with forks
Woman belongs in the kitchen
to serve man graciously hand and foot.

Grandma told me about an "Old Fishwife"
who corrupted her white innocence by Being
dirty, poor, discourteous.
Somehow my mother was the Fishwife over again
Messy, ill bred, lower class--Too low born
to have married my father
It was a shame he was chained to such a burden
so fat, so uneducated.

After all,
My mother didn't serve her man
or write her thousand thankyous
and she kept on having poor children and
showed no respect for her mother-in-law.

Grandma taught me to be afraid of the fishwife
in myself and said
I should have been her little girl
I had her shape and color of eyes
and My Hair was spun-Gold
and she called me by her maiden name
to make me more her own.

And if I were hers, she would have named me Julie.
I have fierce anger in my bones. . .I rebel.
But I still write lovely thankyous and
make the bed without wrinkles
and keep everything in its place

The Baton

To me Papa has never been old
and never been young.

He is the man with the laughing eyes
the deep chuckle and the brown,
infinitely wrinkled face.
He is an artist in many ways.

He hiked mountain trails in summer
and deserts in winter
with camera and lenses looking
for the wildflowers and cactus blossoms
the birds and the insects.

The houses went up around him
while he watched over every detail.
I knew even then he worked for pleasure;
dust in the smooth black hair--smears of paint
and "gootenpucky" on his hands and clothes.

He sat evenings in his armchair
reading The Brothers Karamazov
or with eyes closed listening
to the "Nacht Musik"
An ivory baton in his hand.
He conducts the great orchestra
eyes closed--wrist flicking with each crescendo.
An intimate part of the music.
A creator.
A god.

Wretched

After his shop failed
my father went back to college
in order to make something of himself
and came home on weekends--sometimes.

To him the TV was "that wretched noise"
And the car, the food, the money, the bills--all wretched.
That was his word
and it meant everything bad he could
think of without being profane, obscene or vulgar.

He bellowed the word from across the room
sometimes jumping up
with his arms out and his feet wide apart
shaking his hair when he said it.
It reminded me of when he read
"Blow your house in" from the three little pigs
only this time there was fire
instead of laughter in his eyes.

The hurt of being wretched
was bigger than a slap--with a slap at least
I think I could have hit him back
but I couldn't tell him that
HE was the only
Wretched One.

To Mother

I remember the books you read me
and the ones I read you--and hiding in the jungle
of house plants you kept in the living room.

I remember water balloon fights
and the little league games you always watched
and you telling me from the window to get out of that tree.

I remember weeding the strawberry patch
and hiding under the eaves together in a cloudburst;
only the outside edge of your pregnant abdomen got wet.

I remember laughing and talking until nearly dawn,
and waiting outside your bedroom hysterical at the cries
as you gave life to a tiny wrinkled boy.

I remember the frantic hissing,
"Quiet, please children, quiet, your father's coming"
and the angry noises and the tears.

I remember lying next to you on the bed holding your head
in my hands your salt stinging--as my Dad ran away
from middle age to the sunshine of Albuquerque.

I remember you trying to do everything and be everyone for us
and wearing yourself down to a stump of humanity
and a distraught frazzle of nerves.

I remember the day I came home and you weren't there
and the neighbor who said you were in the hospital.
I remember playing the piano to drown the echo of her voice in my ears.

I remember the hospital--the cold polite formality
and the clean white bandages--and wondering
what frightening psychotic foulness lay beneath them.

I remember the pain in your eyes on my wedding day
and I felt like a traitor for allowing myself
any happiness when you had none.

I see and remember and wonder
how it is you have come to where you are
and Why.

Honeymoon

I had never seen a man before.

Never done
the thing I knew he wanted me to do,
and I had heard about the pain.

He was getting anxious
and the cold knot tightened
around my throat.

I didn't want our first time to be
so tense--so hurried
I wanted to look at the stars,
to sip sparkling cider
from a stemmed glass,
to soak in a steaming Jacuzzi
and talk about the future.

Our honeymoon suite
was filled with the stale, nauseating smell
of old cigarettes.

I lay on the bed fully-dressed,
crying and afraid--my back to his chest
while he coaxed and pleaded.

The movies make it look so easy.

Heart Murmur

It is the fourth time
and again my body
has failed me.

While his eyes close
mine begin
to burn.

His breathing deepens
to a rhythm
I do not feel.

The grief begins
to squeeze my chest
and vocal cords.

And I wonder what cruel force
has drained me
of desire.

And I wonder if he knows
or feels the pain
I do not speak.

Certainty

He is lying on his back with his head on my crossed legs
my book on his chest.
Sleeping?

I read the poetry aloud in case he is listening
exploring his sandpapery jaw and lips
with my fingertips and palms.

I catch him watching me
and I search the warm-colored flecks of his eyes
for thoughts.

We are little more than children
lounging among the weekend sheets
late into the afternoon.

Occasionally he seems a stranger to me still;
Upside down his smile is different, but
his arms circle my waist securely.

I lean down and teasingly kiss his nose--the scar on his chin.
I take comfort, in spite of all, in that which
binds us together.

Waterfall

Alone
on the afternoon
of our first
Wedding Anniversary.

It had been
a long uphill hike
to the September canyon--
Past the abandoned
gold mining town
to the fifty foot drop
of a mountain stream
into a canyon
carved rugged by
friction.

Drops shoot up
from the rocks--
Spray flickers
in the waning sun--
Wind from the
fast-falling water
lifts my hair--
Thrilling.

From the
water's edge,
I looked up at him
on the rocks
ten feet above
with the thirty-five
millimeter
resting in his hands.
His eyes
slightly narrowed,
his knees wide.

I whip
my shirt
over my head
to see his response
and he is by my side
smiling slightly
and breathing
on the back
of my neck.

On the bed
of our clothes--
Cold spray prickling,
Wind caressing
--something bright
astounding
a little irrational
and completely
NEW. . .

Impasse

She overlooks this small cruelty
and doesn't mention his latest annoying habit,
She stores them up without meaning to
and the pressure builds inside.

Why did you have to say that?
Why did you look at me that way?
What is that supposed to mean?
A passing breeze seems to have caused a hurricane.

He says, What's your problem?
She says, You are!
He says, You're hysterical
She says, You never listen to me

He turns away and pouts in the
cold silence of undeserved injury.
She stamps and sniffs and sighs in burning anger
hoping to attract his sympathy and guilt.

Scraping The Frost Stars

It was Autumn so recently, but now so cold.
Breath comes in clouds
even inside the running car.

The glass is frosted with stars.
Not many, but they are delicate with facets
and have so short a life expectancy.

The shriek-shriek-shriek raises every hair.
I hear the crying, and wonder why
he has to scrape them off.

They are stubborn.
Not wanting to let go of their few hours of life.
But he is stronger and leaves a few orphans only.

Gay. . .I See

My husband's brother. . .My friend.
I have liked Scott since I met him two years ago.
He seemed so mature, so sensitive.

I remember talking to him Christmas Day,
after an overload on Mom's amazing ham and potatoes,
as comfortable and relaxed as if he were my own brother.
He told me about Liz. . .He thought it was love.

He wrote not long ago with news.
He knew we were concerned to see him so withdrawn--
so distant after the friendship of Christmas.
He thought we should know about. . .his realization
and the lifestyle he had painfully committed himself to.

My head spun.
Perhaps in shock--perhaps in understanding.
The sensitivity I loved could be part of what makes him gay,
or simply part of what makes him Scott.
And it wouldn't matter or at least I know it shouldn't.
He says he has been this way for as long as he remembers.
Even at Christmas?

I don't entirely understand,
but at the same time I help but remember
being an awkward adolescent looking at the older females with awe,
examining their curves--the shape of their lips--the colors in their eyes
and wondering what it meant to be a woman.

Closed Doors

My in-laws are coming for dinner tomorrow
I've got to hurry and scrub the oven,
sanitize the toilet, dust behind the doors
plan a meal: impressive, nutritious, balanced yet economical.
It wouldn't do to let them think me extravagant.

After nearly two years I still hear him say,
"That's not the way my mother does it."

A man and a woman with emotions hidden behind propriety
Never showing the depth of their anger--or their pain
and while I respect them for not driving a gay brother away,
they cannot leave him room to share his anger
or his joy.

I fear their displeasure while admiring
the seeming durability of their home.

I hide myself from them--
My emotions, my opinions, my parents' divorce.
Would they accept me as mother fit for their grandchildren,
if they knew my own mother was undergoing
electroshock therapy in a mental hospital.

Les Devoirs d'une Femme

So much to do today
cleaning, washing, mending
dishes, cooking, baking, bottling
Child care--Husband Care

Some say "Women's Work"
others say "Degrading"
still others say "Drudgery"

I laugh. . .
and dread another day
at the desk and keyboard
another day of
Transformational Grammar
and lectures and research
and the rattling of hurried papers

I crave the freedom
to yawn well and stretch
to kneed a firm brown loaf
to spend an afternoon
in the sweet smell of peaches
peeling and pitting them
for bottling
(and most of all)
to rock slowly--rhythmically
in my favorite chair
with a tiny child asleep
at the breast, her milk breath
tickling.

Angela

1
In this bed,
he looked toward me tender
and I toward him.
A tiny blue-eyed mirage flickered
between our whispers.

2
Four weeks later
in this bed
I lay wondering and grateful for the
organism sucking its strength
from my blood.
And I kissed him as he slept.

3
Seven weeks. . .
the pains came in the silence--in the dark.
Still and uncertain I waited
in this bed
trying not to wake him
trying to sleep between cramps.

4
Morning,
(he had dressed and gone, unknowing)
Alone I found it. . . oh the blood
a perfect disk of flesh
red and white fibers reaching, reaching.

The child I longed to hold?
I stumbled blind and frantic
from bed to phone to mirror to bed
and collapsed in heaves.

5
Every stranger has a word or touch
        It's usually for the best. . .
        One in five end. . .
        You can try again soon. . .
Leave me alone
alone with my grief.
Your words moisten my eyes,
your touch brings back my choking.

6
Even love cannot fathom it.
        Let it go. . .
        I don't like seeing you like this. . .
        Crying won't bring her back. . .
All my thoughts revolve around this bed we sit on.
It is selfish to expect me, for your comfort,
to forget what is all around me--
what was a part of me?

Satisfaction

A change has fine tuned my nose
and changed the channel
on my appetites.
A whiff of sewer gas or cigarettes
sets me gagging.
A blueberry muffin
and two glasses of milk
decorate the bathroom wall and carpet

The porcelain pot is cold
under my fingers
My face flushed is
hot with sweat and boiling tears
as my empty stomach
continues to heave
and my muscles give in to
uncontrolled shaking.

I do not understand this
re-programming of my body caused by
the seedling of a child,
but it is not entirely bad.

Success has slowly
redefined itself as the gold
of freshly bottled apricots
a sanitized toilet, a moment alone
in which I simply sit
smiling to myself.

Ultrasound

On the table
in a hospital gown and sheet
the gown pulled up just below my breasts
the sheet over my legs and lower hips.

The stranger speaks softly
and squirts cold vaseline on my growing abdomen
from what reminds me of a
cafeteria ketchup bottle.

The screen begins to glow quietly.
A maze of black and white speckles
come together in shadows and shapes to form
a small figure.

I see you. . .
your head, your beating heart
the stranger pushes a little on me
and makes you kick.

I see your face,
mostly bones and shadows
probably no bigger than my thumb;
I think you are beautiful.

Over twenty years ago

you brought me into the world
kicking, fighting and crying
and taught me to love
being alive.

Today I am preparing
to become a mother myself,
and I often look back.
I remember radishes and bubbles
and stories in your rocking chair.
I remember recitals, ball-games, and
the first day of preschool--I knew
you would always be there.

You taught me
about singing and suffering;
reading, working, laughing and crying,
and I am glad you took the time
to be my Friend. . .

Another Verse

Feeling the bumping inside
Firmly rubbing what might be a back
or maybe a shoulder
I want her to know I am here.

I have been told, at birth
this child will know my voice--that
she can hear me now and so
I sing to her.

Softly at first
then louder with more
confidence--more passion
The songs my mother sang.

". . .may you build a ladder to the stars
and climb on every rung
and may you stay, forever
young. . ."

My cheeks are a wet puzzle to him
He thought I was happy. . .wanted this child?
I tell him he just doesn't understand this
Mother-Daughter thing.

False Labor

The pains are seven minutes apart
The top of my uterus is tight and hard
the bottom--the stretching cervix--is tender and aching
I unzip and check the contents of my suitcase one last time

There is a stiffness in my joints--my hips
I stand, stretch, walk around
I convince my husband to walk around the block with me
We take a few slices of dry bread and walk down to the river
We throw crumbs to the ducks.
The pains become more irregular--but do not stop.

We return after dark
and settle down for some rest before the last attack.
As I relax the pains also relax
and I see myself--the victim of false labor
False Hope

Every time my child stretches I hope again
to feel the pains
Unlike some, I want to feel the pains
I want every pain to come strong
and unmedicated
so I will know it is real.

After Pains

I hold you to my breast
the first time and feel the cramps.
I feel as if my heart has been torn out

I remember seeing you
the first time--wrinkled, covered in blood
under your yellow grease.

You looked up at me with the eyes of an old woman
and the pains were gone--nothing mattered
except that you were in my arms.

Now, I cannot kiss you enough.
I cannot hold you tight enough
to take away the ache.

I will never again
protect you as completely
as I could only a few hours ago.

I hold you up against my shoulder
your face soft against my neck
I stroke your back in firm upward movements.

The Amazing Female Breast

I sit in the sunlight
as it filters through the closed binds
I look at my breasts
round and smooth with their brown circles
and their raised nipples.

These are the badge of my
womanhood.

As an adolescent
they drew the attention of boys.
As a newlywed
they attracted the closeness--the intimacy of
my husband's hands and mouth.
As a young mother they feed, they soothe, they comfort.
They take the fear, the pain, and even the hiccups
from a crying child.

If I were to lose them
I would lose *more* than a few pounds
of Flesh.

Umbilical Cord

After a sponge bath, I clean the stump
of my daughter's cord with a Q-tip
and Alcohol and imagine
my own mother performing this ritual
twenty one years ago
and her mother also
and hers.

This ugly, withering stump was once,
not so long ago,
a living link between us--invisible to me
through which I pumped life juices
into this tiny, squalling,
beautiful
thing.

I imagine a tremendous umbilical cord
attached invisibly to my navel
a living link to the
Universe.

Progeny

Small one,
what do you see that I do not?
For I know I see more than my reflection
in the black part of your open eyes

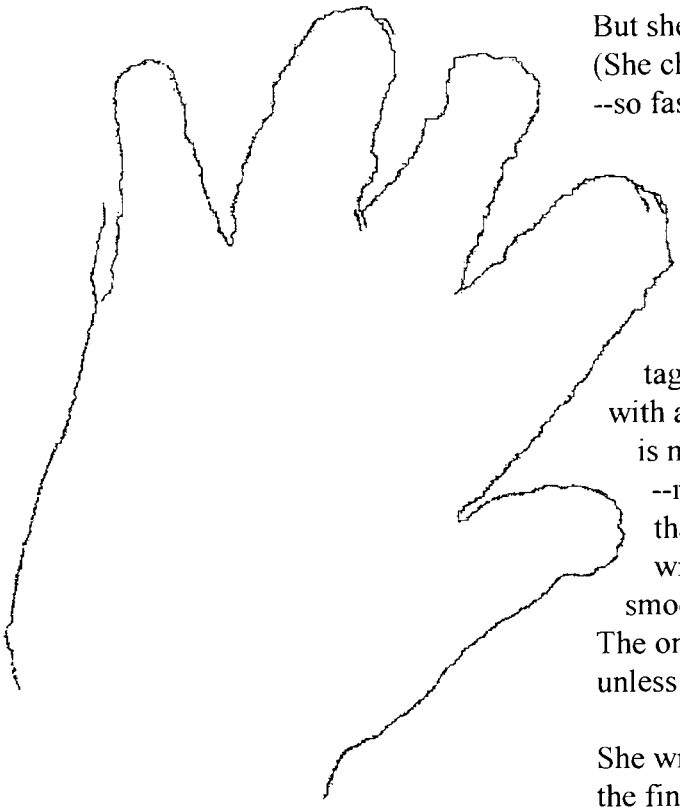
Do you see raindrops like people?
Some whisper, Shalom, pattering
on the rooftop; others, Dona nobis pacem,
but it is the same.

Do you know when putting your hand
in the fire, it will be burned?
For the somehow world revolves
on this principle.

Do you see Society's lawnmower
shaping us all--already
cropping your potential
to its own designs?

I fear by the time you can answer
my questions, you will have forgotten
that particle of the divine
I see in your silence.

Tracing around a Child's Hand



I try to hold the crayon
so steady as I trace around her fingers
But she moves so much--so fast
(She changes so much
--so fast)
And the crayon always wiggles
just a little leaving the fingers
fat and deformed.

Perhaps this ruined replication
of a hand which she races to
tag on the fridge
with a dusty magnet
is more Real
--more True
than the one I did not draw
with its perfect contours and
smooth lines
The one I could not draw
unless she slept.

She will never again fit
the fingers of this tracing
She moves too much
--Time changes too much
Today: This moment captured
(wiggles and all)
in the crayon tracing is gone. . .
but preserved for
tomorrow.