

# SILVERTONE

## BOOKS BY DZVINIA ORLOWSKY

*A Handful of Bees*

*Edge of House*

*Except for One Obscene Brushstroke*

*Convertible Night, Flurry of Stones*

*Silvertone*

# SILVERTONE

DZVINIA ORLOWSKY

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For Jay, Max and Raisa  
with love, always

&

for Nancy Mitchell  
with love, always, too.



# I

“You never get finished with this subject, your mother and your father.”

—Robert Lowell

“I’ll play it first then tell you what it is later.”

—Miles Davis



## SMOKE ON THE WATER

In China, the fans no longer give  
a damn about Deep Purple's Last World  
Tour, but our town's Middle School band  
conductress still showcases the song,  
pushing the tempo fast, baton raised,  
under arms swinging fiercely  
like hammocks  
in a Midwest storm.

Once, cheerleader-sexy under bleachers  
in cold November air,  
the pride of our county  
is now a dry-cleaner's  
hot ticket sweating profusely  
in a starched three-quarter-sleeved  
white jacket.

The horn section seems to suffer  
most—black slacks, starched shirts  
wafting Axe—hair water-slicked,  
ears and cheeks flaming red,  
eyes burning through sheet music,  
every note blown cavernous  
into just *some adult shit song*.

*Disperse the smoke,  
Drain the water.*

Long stripped of Purple's  
leather pants and sooty asses,  
parents love her song choice.  
It signals the end of the school year,  
dented rental instruments turned in,  
locked all summer in their metal cages.

*As long as they start and end together,  
doesn't matter what they play in between.*

My husband's own favorite:  
*Any one hurt?*

We fold our programs, let out a collective  
discreet sigh of relief, smile as we file  
to our cars, a light drumming of rain  
on the hood—

Did we really think we'd ever lose  
those heavy booted chords?

*No turning back*  
the worn tape rattles  
the car's speakers' bass blast,  
windshield wipers slashing  
the short ride home.

## BLACK DOG

*Solstice Summer Writers' Conference, 2006*

It's a lie we go on forever  
if we love a favorite song or poem deeply enough.

But tonight under the college president's dining room's  
*best-bet* dimmed lights,  
ice coolers are packed with beers,  
and outside, a sudden summer thunder storm  
has just missed the campus.

My 14-year-old son, drafted as the night's DJ,  
doesn't know what writers want to hear.  
He wants to make sure he gets it right:

*Paperback Writer, Respect . . . ?*

He flags me over, about to select a song  
he's seen me let go of the steering wheel for,  
shimmying my shoulders,  
clicking my fingers,  
air conditioner cranked,  
feeling deliciously dangerous  
mouthing lyrics to strangers  
staring as they pass.

For him, I'll make sure  
whatever he chooses appears to be  
an immediate hit,  
not care who's looking  
across the empty dance floor  
as I throw myself in wild abandon  
into its center,  
hoping for one willing partner.

But I have worried for nothing.  
When Max switches to Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog,"  
*Trooper*, the director's three-legged lab,

cameo, mascot, limps excitedly onto the dance floor  
as if on cue.

It's a lie we go on forever  
even if we love a favorite song or poem deeply enough.  
And I have loved this song for a long time.  
But tonight, it's mascot's.

Judging by the way his whole back wags,  
swinging its weight, risking his balance  
on the polished floor,  
he can barely contain himself  
that we have come.

## USED BOAT

If it starts, the engine alone is worth  
the asking price, not to mention the trailer hitch—  
clearly a give away. Someone could make  
a fortune restoring this classic,  
with new slip covers return its luster,  
dead moths and acorns swept free,  
the mouse's nest dislodged  
from a torn life vest.

A car slows down only to speed up again  
as the driver and his wife or girlfriend  
see my husband start to walk toward them,  
a cracked plastic rake in his hand.

Looking at our boat, I wonder if there's  
anything that screams as loud:  
*it devours gas;*  
*our backs can't take the open waves anymore;*  
*the freezer stayed*  
*empty of fish all summer;*  
*Even with sun block,*  
*my face will soon*  
*resemble my elbow.*

But like a heavy iron  
docked on an ironing board,  
it fills the yard  
with promise,  
waits for the smooth deal that will hitch  
itself onto a young family's Ford truck.

And they come—mom, dad, son,  
together, to decide.  
They hand us  
five hundred dollar bills.

It's our job to add the mild look of envy

to their happy decision. A look that says,  
*if we had the money, we would*  
*buy it from ourselves.*

The mermaid on the ripped cushion  
seductively curling her heavy tail,  
whose wink was never for us,  
we eagerly throw in for free.

# SILVERTONE

## 1.

Every Friday my father's voice, drunk  
on plum Slivovitz, rose from our basement  
through the heating vent on my bedroom floor,  
not a light-hearted warble—a deeper velvet  
vibrato, the color of his eyes.

Alternating three minor chords,  
he'd strum his guitar, lips pursed,  
angelic as an adult Hummel figurine,  
hold each note until each word released  
from the luscious center, stretched  
like taffy into a *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*  
or *Once-upon-a-time-there-was-a-tavern*.

Across from him, my mother, shoulders back—  
black turtle necked, black stockings, legs  
crossed and wrapped around a bar stool,  
poured herself another half glass  
of Schwartz Katz wine,  
the small insignia plastic black cat  
dangling from the bottle's neck.  
She'd lean toward him, cautiously,  
as if he were a wren that could  
be easily frightened away.

She'd plead—*please play*  
*the sad song again*—the one  
about the village girl who, ignoring her mother's warning,  
slipped into night to meet her moody lover,  
but not before first inspecting  
her reflection in the family's well.  
Pushing her hair away from her face  
to check the curve of her cheek,  
she leaned over too far, fell in,

but no one heard her cries,  
no one wept in chorus.

2.

Once I was caught spying on them—  
envying their adult fun earned crossing  
the ocean from Kiev to New York,  
then down long back roads to Ohio.  
I was supposed to be asleep  
and out of their way.  
But I wanted to hear my father's voice,  
see my mother fall in love with him again  
as he carefully plucked the strings  
that now look rusted, tainted,

medieval—as if they could slice  
through thick bread or a hard wheel of cheese,  
or could send an arrow flying.  
They could cut fingers, too,  
if the player didn't know how to press them  
properly, fingertips angled just right,  
nails evenly trimmed.

I was sent immediately to bed. No second  
goodnight, no quick cup of water.

3.

In the Scituate Music Shop,  
a young guitarist-salesman holds Father's guitar up  
to the window. He says the neck is warped.  
The strings are shot from human sweat—  
not enough alcohol rubbed on them over the years.  
I could replace the strings,  
but they'd barely sound against the badly damaged frets.  
He turns it upside down and shakes it  
until my father's Lucite pick  
falls out like a tooth.

*Silvertone: Sears and Roebuck*, he mumbles. Catalogue ordered in the 50's. There were a lot of them back then.

It was not the guitar I imagined my father bartered from gypsies and carried through harsh winters with barely a shield to protect it, the one he and my mother made love next to for the first time, the guitar propped on the bed next to them, the large tear-shaped guard and wooden bridges I thought I was born of.

Instead, it's 1959. My father sits near their bedroom window, his black glasses perched at the end of his nose: Doc Orlowsky of Brunswick prudently studying each guitar, imagining the weight of its wooden body in his lap, his left hand circled around the neck, fingers poised, right arm resting heavily.

He decides on the one pictured slung over the shoulder of a Midwest cowboy, the guitar sturdy enough to take, if need be, to a fall-out shelter.

#### 4.

The salesman continues to tilt the guitar in every direction, shake it violently, upside down, like an obstetrician, as if to make it cry or to force whatever was still wedged or stubborn out of the sound hole:

my mother's shiny bobby pins loosened from her hair—no, further: Mother, herself, hanging onto her wine glass,

Father reaching deep,  
fingers stretched into a seventh chord,  
to find his soul—  
fur hat,  
cowboy hat,  
a bird.

*Not bad*, he says,  
*for what they were*.

He twists the tuning pins with pliers  
to see if, one last time, they might budge  
then, resigned, lifts my father's Silvertone over the glass  
counter case. Handing it over to me,  
it's now as weightless as a stingy bouquet of carnations  
presented at the end of a paltry recital.  
*Good luck*, he says.  
It's so light I can barely carry it.

## ROSES IN THEIR HANDS

### *White Roses*

A note card with hand-painted white roses says *devastated not to attend a funeral*, which will never take place. No one could believe that this was her last wish: simply to be blessed by a handsome, thick-bearded priest, all things clamoring forgiven, then cremated with her personal letters, her stack of black and white photographs my father took of her leaning slightly forward as she opens the door of a shrine-sized refrigerator wearing only a baby doll nightie, her nipples cold and erect in the diffuse, almost holy light.

### *Red Roses*

Why wouldn't she want to pose in a baby doll nightie while her breasts were still firm and her hips, curved like the contours of my father's guitar? She already knew she had dark, seductive eyes—eyes a young girl might readily be punished for having, eyes that peeked quickly over a book taking in the lightly falling snow riding the tram on the way to school, eyes that unnerved the Russian geography teacher who accused her of deliberately darkening her lashes with coal dust. He made her rub and re-rub her eyes with his rough white handkerchief, then wrote *liar* in her notebook because the eyes he hoped would smear into dangerous and dusky thunder clouds converging over a nocturnal river only turned red.

### *Green Roses*

My father too, the doctor, of whom it might be assumed his medical career was most important to him, who would believe he harbored the soul of a musician, a lyric poet who could feel the green from grass rising up through his bare feet? He wanted most to feel my mother's eyes watching him as his fingers moved freely over the guitar neck pressing and releasing the strings over the frets; the other hand, openly strumming; and she, to stay forever in full bloom, half naked, just about to prepare a snack out of air and a low-watt bulb, opening the refrigerator door.



# II



## BAPTISM

Lightly scented oil trickled  
off my forehead and into the font,  
lay like a skin on the water.  
For a second, I may have thought

I was asked to drown—though no life yet  
to flash before my eyes—just birth,  
a green room filled with applause.  
After that, one unremitting nap,

both hands tucked in tiny socks,  
my soft nails growing too fast.  
Squinting to see who'd startled  
me awake, I was calmed back to my

Godmother's bottomless rocking.  
I surrendered, wrinkled, red-faced,  
some later said *ugly as a baby hyena*,  
a few spiked threads of hair

the color of beeswax.  
My mother clutched a candle  
as though it were a bowed and twisted  
rose scraped of its thorns.

Hand-picked choir voices rolled forward  
crashing over the tops of pews.  
Where could I run, days heavy,  
in my mother-of-pearl baby shoes?

On the 16 mm film, stained glass appeared gray.  
Everyone gathered to see me made pure,  
to keep me from being numbered  
among the beasts.

## IN GOD'S LANGUAGE

Each liturgical word  
hung like a sun out on a branch.

Each was ours to behold—  
a promise of resurrection

while the earth slowly turned  
into a large cemetery.

We learned to know the difference:

Words from hell sounded like crackling fire,  
syllables spitting through droughts of empty pews.

Words from heaven sounded like ringing glass  
through which we rose,

our bodies, soprano,  
the crucifix, a musical notation.

## ADVENT CALENDAR

### 1.

It doesn't matter how you're dressed.  
Open that first door.

There it is—a candy cane.  
*Sorry.*

You expected something better?  
Sacred as a star

calling back to you.

### 2.

Open the next day's door—

a startled squirrel clutching a nut  
like a grenade.

### 3.

Try another—

a one-winged  
wind-saturated dinner goose

to keep you curious  
and hungry in this life.

### 4.

Savor each easy-

pull gold tassel,  
open the next-to-last door.

*Voilà:*  
Black-velvet clad party children,  
a nutcracker's open mouth

empty as a yard sale  
play set kitchen shelf.

5.

The last door, admit it,  
you also rushed ahead to open,

before someone lit a candle  
and called the door a clock,

or a window,  
a mirror—

There, peeking out of straw,  
a large piece of chocolate.

You thought you heard  
a donkey bray,

and prayed for the wise men to come.

## PRAYING TO FRA LIPPI'S MISTRESS

*Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh*

—Robert Browning

### 1.

Opening the triptych panels wide, I kissed faceless

what I thought  
for years was the true Madonna

saying prayers before I pulled back my bedding,  
washed off my make-up.

I watched her disappear over time,  
smear into a red window.

### 2.

In art history books we learned she wasn't sacred after all,

but, rather, Friar Lippi's mistress,  
Lucrezia Buti,

for whom he risked everything—

set against steep cliffs  
and stunted trees,

the glow of her skin  
rising over the banks of angels.

### 3.

I've watched my daughter press her cheek  
against the icon,

slowly trace with her finger  
the large pear-shaped pearl

hung low on the Madonna's shaved,  
perfectly domed forehead.

But if the Madonna wasn't sacred to Fra Lippi, what  
would he have done with us?

Would he have painted the skin  
of my daughter's cheek

as she knelt in prayer, her long brown hair  
cascading down her back?

She places a kiss  
on what's left of Lucrezia's face.

Afterwards, she gently wipes her mark.

4.

There's space left by adoration  
to place one's face.

*This is a woman, this is flesh.*  
We know what's ours to pray for—

all of us, sumptuous vanishing points.

Cloud of breath,  
heavy dew.

# THE GRASS TALL ENOUGH

## 1.

The bust of Taras Schevchenko, national poet,  
stood erect in a field,

determined as stone.  
We would march to him, honor him,

cut back the weeds.  
For this our parents waved goodbye to us

for three weeks of camp every summer.  
*The Homeland* they'd remind us

before driving away.  
For this, they saved.

## 2.

The Amish  
driving their carriages

on a dirt Middlefield road  
turned their heads

to face what had just passed—  
a line of uniformed children, single file

and brown ankle-socked,  
the synchronized clock work of our feet.

## 3.

Yet, standing before his heroic head,  
we wondered of what use were our meager offerings,

chosen token sacrifices  
placed obediently on the ground:

snapped gum wrapper chains,  
tabs pulled from pilfered soda cans,

the grass tall enough for lies.

A Polaroid of my beloved pound-found  
mutt, Vasha,

her eyes averted,  
paw raised—

I hesitated to leave behind.

Finely lined pockets  
turned inside out,

how quickly a hand  
turns up empty.

## SHOE LACES

I was always slow to tie the adult-size sneaker  
nailed to a small wooden board  
made for practicing on,  
one lace crossed over the other,  
then *quick-dip-under*, my hands  
coming up empty and questioning  
like those of a magician's whose  
signature trick has just gone sour,  
the fail proof knot dropped.

## BORSCHT

Each Epiphany, clear blood  
sipped off polished silver spoons,  
no slivers of beets to tempt us into biting,  
we longed to curl our tongues  
around the “little ears”—*Ysbka*,  
folded boiled dough stuffed  
with fried onions and mushrooms  
and pinched closed—  
or Chinese dumplings to the Stop & Shop clerk—  
three per guest crowding each small ceramic bowl.

But as children we feared they could hear  
our thoughts:  
Johnny masturbated.  
Diane touched the classroom’s *Do not touch!*  
clay model volcano!—  
her finger destined to blaze  
like a Pascal candle.

After company left, Mother poured the holy  
soup down the drain.  
We were safe  
once again  
to believe  
the soup’s steam  
whispered only its flavors.

## UNCLE

Bits of mustard ham stained the linen napkin,  
dropped off his moustache  
as he'd first chew then whisper,  
*Do you want to see me roll my tongue  
into a fat cigar? Sure,* my sister would answer  
resigned, kicking me under the table.  
Then after dinner, standing  
too close to us at the sink,  
he'd offer up his middle finger:  
*I can make a baby with just this!*  
He'd wait for us to laugh.  
In the next room, Mother snapped a napkin  
to get our attention. She tapped her fingertip  
against her right earlobe:  
*He's hard of hearing—*

Were he alive now, he'd never pass through airport security,  
his overcoat pockets stuffed  
with gifts: Manitoba souvenir fork spoons,  
lacquered *matryoshkas*,  
two stuffed, plush velvet mushrooms  
we called *what-the-hells*,  
their *X* eyes and long grins  
stitched with gold thread.

Muggy Sunday afternoons,  
refreshed after a second shower,  
smelling of cologne,  
his face flushed with color,  
fingernails surgeon-scrubbed,  
he'd stare at us long and hard,  
tap his middle finger against  
the hot tea glass making sure we noticed, too,  
his silver cufflinks.  
Only Mother laughed,  
offering more tea.

After all, he was family.  
And he'd traveled so far.

# STOLEN

## 1.

Pretending to be looking for Band-Aids,  
we pulled them from the back of the drawer  
gauzy teddies, zebra-striped *baby doll nighties* we held

up to the window light, thinking they were missing curtains  
slipping freely through our hands  
until we could see that we could try them on,

undressed to the waist, each sister exposed  
through the transparent cloth. Our breasts were  
too small for the under-wired, lace push-up bras

arranged into rows behind the flannels.  
We rolled them up and pushed them back.  
What else did Mother hide in the heaviest drawer?

Thick shot glasses, joke shop rubber vomit,  
a siren purple wig—  
Did this make Father laugh, his gold molar

glinting in the dark, before he passed away,  
before our mother had his crown pierced,  
affixed onto her glittering charm bracelet?

## 2.

But who took the odd small, rock sculpture  
stacked like a bear, *love* written  
where its belly button might've been

lifting it off the bamboo shelf in the guest room,  
the ceramic Model T Ford evergreen  
plant holder from the kitchen window sill,

a poster of a topless woman bending  
forward, a watering can in her hand,  
from behind the washing machine—they all

appeared and equally quickly disappeared.

3.

Or did we take them in our sleep,  
our mother lighting the way with a candle?  
Their gone missing was enough to punish us,

send us straight into hell, blistering  
and teeming, the devils angry and red  
as her holiday lipstick.

4.

In daylight, we rushed out into the wind, tossed  
our cloth dolls high over telephone wires,  
waiting to see if they'd catch or fall,

then stand them up on wobbly legs.  
Sometimes we made them  
faint in beautiful positions, hand to brow.

Other times, feeling cruel, we punched them,  
knowing God, watching, might steal us as ransom  
from *Pearl Road* where we lived

and return us old, too late, our hair  
graying, bones too slight to carry  
a water pail to our horse in the meadow—

He, too, one day disappeared, neglected,  
his eyes rimmed with green-eyed flies  
though there were days we swore we saw him

like a mirage in the rising heat  
grazing peacefully just past the neighbor's  
heavy lidded gladiolas.

# III



## WHAT I INHERITED

### *Lipstick*

It was the shock of pre-party red to her lips that my sister and I stared long into—its fleshy open bull's-eye, hungry Venus fly-trap, out-lined with dark borders, an accent mole as if her face were a clock painted by Magritte, a perfect dot right about at 4:00. It was never *Mom* or *Mother* we saw coming down the hall or standing in half-light by her bedroom door. It was her red lipstick. She kissed the rim of her Gimlet glass. She kissed the back of her hand. She kissed squares of toilet paper. She must have kissed us too though upon waking, studying our faces in the mirror, checking our palms, we never found proof.

### *A Need to Keep Moving*

*Train leaving!* my father calls out as my sister and I, squeamish, careful not to touch each other's bare feet, pile on our parents' bed. It's our way of rehearsing for, or altogether avoiding disaster—all of us together, first days then years, throwing salt over our shoulders, spitting quickly to the side when passing a graveyard, stepping twice over a threshold, or tossing spare change onto the floor of a brand new car.

He presses his index finger lightly against his lips, closes his eyes. German bombs whistle heavy-bellied from the sky. One explodes next to our sway-backed horse at the edge of his barbed-wired pasture, another one blows up our four-foot above-ground swimming pool sending fragments of inflatable rafts, flippers, goggles, spinning into the sky. We feel safe knowing we are accounted for before a third bomb blasts out of the otherwise soundless night shattering unmade beds, fracturing mirrors, scattering neighboring families in human litters of fire.

### *Tracking Names Easily Forgotten*

For now their names stay with me: *Figa, Vasha, Matska, Bobuk, Horoshok*—mostly mutts from accidental litters. Some could do tricks—climb a tree after a cat, lap beer out of a mug; but all,

particularly the pure breeds, were destined for misfortune. *Fifi*, an overweight standard dachshund, couldn't digest a mouse after killing and swallowing it. *Aza*, our Chihuahua, one winter day mysteriously rolled out of her baby blanket, out the unlocked front door and under the wheel of the first speeding car. While my mother stood in the middle of the road screaming *Murderers!*, I hid in the bathroom covering my ears with my hands. Tall summer grass rippling with an approaching storm took the last dog, *Masha*, collarless and meadow-wild.

### *Buried Bell*

The Sohio station attendant, *Mike*, stitched in red above the pocket of his blue uniform, leaned into the window of the back seat where I sat, *Cindy and Sue*, my paper dolls, lined up on the seat.

Shaking his head he asked my parents in the front seat, *Pelagia Dzvinia? Now what kind of name is that for a little girl?*

My mother whispered under her breath: *Dzvinia, Dzvinka, Dzvenyslava. Wild flower. A Little Bell. Noble one. Pelagia, Pelahia. Martyr. Daughter of the sea.*

Handing my father the receipt Mike said, *Let me give you a little advice . . . keep it simple . . . friendly, American.* He looked back at me appraisingly, and after a few seconds he nodded his head saying, *She looks like a Peggy . . . yea, Peggy.*

*Just in time for first grade*, my father agreed, his eyes beaming at me from the rear view mirror, as he pulled out of the station. Through the back window I watched the attendant grow smaller and smaller, my father's view of the highway ahead framed by the windshield, every smudge swiped and drying clean.

## FOREIGN WOMAN

She rarely visited her young grandchildren.  
But when she did and they misbehaved  
by crying or pulling on the dog's tail,  
she'd lean forward, point her finger,  
warn *Baba never coming again*.

Then she'd pass the chipped plate  
of all she had to offer:  
a Salvation Army-purchased  
fold out play pen with exposed rusted  
screws, the wooden duck placed inside  
with torn rubber flapper feet  
and a lead paint nose,  
the over-sized stuffed burlap Teddy Bear  
for a pillow,  
the naked doll left out in the rain, in the sun  
with missing tufts of hair,  
a cloud of gnats circling her pink torso.  
She named her *Va-va*, foreign woman.

If she ever held them, I didn't see it;  
if she ever held me, I don't remember.  
Now holding in my hand  
what she kept  
like medicine near her bed,  
a single bruised apple,  
its ripe *never*.

## FIRING MY FATHER'S MOSSBERG

### 1.

At the shooting range,  
my elbow raised, safety  
unlocked, squeezing the trigger  
I block out surrounding shots, whisper *breathe*

as if to my father,

a rebuttal to my husband's  
*You're scared of these things . . .*

Scarlet leaves of sumac ambush  
the periphery of an otherwise cleared path  
over which the bullet could be fired.

### 2.

It was a loaded lie: the buck  
hanging from our backyard tree  
*just sleeping* in a frozen body,

its wide open eye, a mirror,  
in which my hair split  
and tied high into two pig-  
tails brushed the fur  
collar of my short down jacket,  
curled into blond parenthesis  
around my face.

### 3.

Father kept his Mossberg's  
little brother, BB, hidden  
behind sample prescription drugs  
crammed and forgotten  
in the bedroom oak cabinet.

He kept it to protect us  
from the Hell's Angels  
who revved their motorcycles,  
swarmed like bees  
onto a rotting pear,  
circling the parking lot  
of the restaurant next door.

Windows rattled, my bedroom  
stained glass hexagons  
of roses fell, broke on the floor.

4.

Father liked to point out  
the tiny hole in the BB's slide—  
in case it was ever stolen.

It had the capability, he said, to shoot  
the shooter with the spent casing.

It had sense of humor, he said,  
for a gun.

5.

Aluminum pie pans spin wildly  
from branches of our cherry tree.

Crows flap their wings  
shitting in terror.

We couldn't eat the cherries fast enough.  
They softened on a plate,  
exposed rancid gaping wounds,

black oozing bruises our tongues  
learned quickly to avoid.

6.

Each time the target sheets  
shudder then sway  
loosely on the pulleys.

Distant pinpricks of December light  
move and stay—

scattered bits of black feather  
and sumac berries in winter . . .

*And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul  
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple*

. . . not exactly angels or simple

or the buck reawakened.

## ILLEGIBLE POSTCARDS

*Bone* where we once misread *stone*,  
*fear* rather than *dear*.

*They dragged our neighbor outside*,  
not *We met our new neighbor, shared bread*.

Turn the card over to a golden field,  
grain stalks clearly scripted against the sky.

My family gathers around our own warmed loaf.  
A single white candle pierces the middle,

drips long wax lace onto the small wheat hill.  
Was that tiny ink blot *not*, before *shot*—

Grandmother's feather-shaped eyes  
sweeping through foreign woods

for her missing son? Dreams flowed loose,  
tore on brambly banks.

In my father's handwriting, words spatter  
*rain steadily kicked us*

on the back of a hand-painted  
postcard where a skinny,

knock-kneed boy  
clutches a wind-thrashed umbrella

in one hand, tilts to the weight  
of a water pail in the other.

Fleeing, was this all  
my mother and father had time to write

or standing here  
all we could bear to read?:

*We were carried.  
This morning*

*among flowers  
we were married.*

## WILD VIOLETS

—for Miroslaus & Tamara Orlowsky

They shadow earth that bears them,  
single-letter alphabet of April's fields,

deep bottle blue of temples'  
veins, eyes opened and closed

at like hours, lids half-  
swollen above thawing ground.

Velvet assassins,  
let me pluck them from Father's cold,

knit fingers where Mother lay a bouquet of them,  
sift her ashes, twenty-nine years later,

for their bruised flecks.  
They cannot grow under stone.

## HER GIFT

Mother promised her gift to my sister and me was no matter if we wanted her to or not, right after she'd die, she'd hurry back as a steaming bowl of split pea soup or a glass flute of champagne toasting her name day or any occasion that called for bare-legs dancing in bright purple half-slips or running barefoot through snow, screaming as we touch-tagged the nearest tree then turned to run inside the wood-heated house, each log sputtering in sluggish code. She promised to find *some way* to tell us what it was really like to die, but in the meantime, we'd have to learn to endure loneliness and long dark halls until a crow cawed or the wooden banister knocked back.

For two nights my sister and I whispered *Mamo, mu z tobouy—Mother, we're here with you*, into two long nights, finger-stroked her hair away from the fevered aged child face, took turns pressing our foreheads against hers, skin of our skin, listened as through a glass held to a wall.

The morning she died we arrived to find a waxy vinyl curtain encircling her bed protecting her from strangers' eyes, airborne germs, the stifling August air we leaned into to take in *at peace*—eyes closed, her mouth unlocked, sprung open like a large locket.

Did she cross the ash bridge to my father beaming as a newly-wed, meeting her again after twenty-nine years, aged as she or the same as the day he died? Did he remember to bring an empty hard-shelled suitcase, the brass-trimmed traveling alarm, her favorite white satin autograph dachshund—for years unsigned? Was Grandmother there at the window, unseen to the rest of us, sifting through morning light, dressed in her floor-dusted apron around her thick waist, the last word in the argument she and Mother started fifty years ago on her lips?

There were no secret notes for us inscribed in her skin, in the tiny blue veins of her eyelids, or scripted in her gray-tipped hair flared across the pillow. It looked as if she simply stopped wherever she was, whatever she was thinking or doing, wherever she

thought she could still walk to if held up by her arms. She simply stopped, her face turned slightly to the right as if she were listening to something distant. In her hands she clutched a soft leather pouch—*God*, she would have said.



# IV



## JESUS LOVES FAT PEOPLE

*Scrawled in pencil on an 8<sup>th</sup> grade  
Algebra book above a hand-drawn crucifix*

The cross so deliberately and thickly drawn,  
it could've been pulled off the wall  
of some rustic pagan-Roman Catholic Church  
leaving one of the stations unoccupied  
and suffer-free. Tonight my young

daughter pushes her food away.  
Everything is either a vein or fat or a strand  
of hair clinging like a slack tourniquet.  
It wasn't that long ago that I weighed  
myself, my body disappeared,

the softness my husband couldn't find  
leaning his head on my shoulder,  
running his hand across my hips,  
sharp rims of a broken clay bowl.  
Our family is gnarled with branches,

anemic and leafless, specks of filtered sun,  
bits of meals inhaled quickly, looking over one's  
shoulder until not eating felt *released*  
and air-pure. Is this another lesson  
I'll lie awake in bed wondering if she'll turn

her stomach inside out to be rid of, then  
swear she's not one of those girls  
whose damaged, marked bodies rise up  
through their throats?  
I want to ask Jesus, already erased.

## SIZE ZERO

Holding bread crust up to my lips,  
I watch a crow hop past its black, feathered anchor  
into *just a bit of atmosphere*.

My cat lunges into a rhododendron bush,

another January mouse pushed out of earth.  
Disemboweled, its whiskered head will be left  
behind like a misplaced chess piece  
or bodiless, a perfect *size zero*.

My dog says its time to eat again,  
but she'll have to wait before dry food  
hammers dinner into her blue bowl.  
Outside, water thinly pours down the gutter,

drips just barely into a puddle.  
*Size zero*—once, no weight or shape,  
now these pants don't slip as easily  
past my bones anymore.

How *did* I fill with them with zero,  
slim-cut jeans carefully placed on the bed,  
breath held, my body, a bluish flame  
I perpetually gave birth to?

Released at the waist,  
I never knew I could expand  
like a choir, suddenly swelling  
into a hallelujah,

my face glowing bright as a banjo.  
I allow my body a few moments to settle.  
In late morning's first splinters of light,  
I allow it to stay.

## STILL AS I WAS

### 1.

From the magic eight ball passed  
to our hands, ghostly white swirled  
*maybe* every time we asked  
if we were, in fact, the skinniest,  
most flat-chested girls in Brunswick,  
Ohio, filled with thorny cells  
destined to die alone in our  
beds with only our mothers there  
to lean over us whispering  
*At least we're together now.*

Our worried faces fall  
through my memory  
like confetti: who would inherit  
our mother's long-stemmed black rose,  
her dark caterpillar brows arched  
above her eyes staring  
deep into my blue as if asking:  
*Where did you get them  
and what do they mean?*

### 2.

I understand now it was his  
illness talking, not mine,  
the man I'd eventually leave  
at the Mission Hill Green Line  
stop, when he said if I ever  
got sick whatever it was  
would catch onto me like *fire*  
*to a hay bale*, there was so little  
of me to go around—why would he want  
to marry me anyway? He had a list  
of women's numbers locked  
in a blue plastic bin in his closet.

But after a short week apart  
he said what he had to offer  
was too long, well-shaped,  
too good to waste, I was the kind  
of girl who looked good  
naked in a wheat field,  
a piece of oat nut bread  
at my lips, yes, while I was still  
young, he could imagine  
me lying there on the white blanket  
stroking his dog.

3.

I've survived waking  
those first three months  
to rainfall behind lace curtains,  
my vein's tiny red puncture  
like a jewel tucked into my arm  
bent and resting across my chest.  
I thought *sad* could be like  
perfume lightly dabbed to my wrist,  
not the granite rock holding  
me prisoner all day in my bed,  
lifted at night only by my rosary  
that held up to lamp light  
would glow pale green  
draped around my opened fingers,  
feeling every inch of my skin,  
every rib, every mole,  
wondering what, if anything,  
has started its life in some secret

place I'll never know I even had  
until the doctors tell me  
*It has to come out.*  
I've endured my husband's face,  
pulled tight as a drum  
skin by fear, his hands  
flowing down my exposed back,  
uncertain currents, words

spilling over and over  
*It makes no difference.*  
*Nothing has changed.*

4.

Still, every morning I pause  
under white clouds swirling  
across dense blue skies, a spare  
canopy of black tree branches  
destined to snap under the weight  
of winter's first storm  
but for now reach across  
the road as if toward one another—  
one past sagging telephone wires,  
the other above brown  
fouled underbrush,  
a scattering of someone's  
smashed Styrofoam cup,  
coffee bled into mud.

The dark hollows of my eyes  
are no longer those of a child  
whose love for words  
was stronger than her desire  
to eat, hiding meat among  
the sour cream, *the quiet one*  
who held the bread  
under her tongue  
until she could roll it  
like a wet damaged  
bird onto a cloth.

5.

In the woods, slick toadstools  
nudge their bald heads  
through the damp earth,  
poisonous in daylight,  
tapped at night by more rain.  
If I could roll my right shoulder

out of sleep, the side of my body  
that cries to heal,

I could push the dirt  
out of my mouth,  
lift myself out of this animal  
weight, call each morning

with a warble,  
dawn turned to dust,  
slight taste of blood, anemic lip.

**6.**

Night fields ripple so deeply  
they disappear.  
My eyes open to a black sky,  
a slow rowing of moonlight,  
the oarsman wearing  
a cap dusted with Ohio wind.  
It could be my father.  
I don't answer the words  
he calls to me,  
his pale hand extended,  
nails buffed into mirrors.

In my dream, my mother  
tosses her walker  
across the nursing home  
dining room,  
rushes back to him  
holding her wrist up  
*see the bracelet*  
*my daughter*  
*got for me—*  
milky plastic rivulet,  
each letter of her name  
slowly rising.

7.

After four, not quite  
five years, we welcome the new  
scents my body gives off.  
We name them  
*Sugar Pearl,*  
*Black Lace Strap,*  
*Red Feather from Above—*

not Yankee Candle *Last Christmas You'll Ever See*  
placed near the skin I was told  
I might never feel again,  
my right arm raised

over my head, resting  
on the pillow.

Our mouths seal  
to one another's breath.  
We're done with spoken words.  
Questions drop  
onto the floor, answers  
undress more slowly, stop,  
unbuttoned, at the waist.

## MY ACUPUNCTURIST DISCOVERS A POINT

where *good woman* meets *bad man*.  
It burns like a hot cinder, makes me jump,  
despite the lavender scented satin pillow  
stuffed and puffed into a diapered  
moon cradling my face.  
*Have you been married before?*

I could lie, face down, starrng through the hole  
in the table and onto his seven-grain beige  
carpeted floor. But he's onto something  
touching my shoulders blades,  
something the color of my tongue,  
a deep *un-red*, a lightning-fire tear  
down the middle won't name.

From a table a dusty cloud  
of Moxy twists upward  
past a brass bell. It smells heavily  
of cigarettes, seeps into my coat  
neatly placed on the chair.  
Next to the bell, a carefully arranged  
line of carved wooden elephants  
labor toward us, trunks curled up for good luck.  
Thirty years in practice, he's heard  
many women complain

of constantly feeling cold,  
felt their sluggish pulse  
and not just in their hands or feet.  
I could tell him how my first husband and I met,  
shyly sharing a pole on the subway,  
how years later, I learned to use prayer  
like balm, slathered forgiveness

on the dog leash burning my legs,  
the hand raised to my face, my neck  
exposed, barely enough heft  
in my voice to call the body back.  
He rubs oil down my spine.

*Your lungs are burdened  
by the way you stand,*

*the way you sit—*  
Rising up from the table,  
my blood rushes to the floor.  
*Six weeks, six sessions—*  
*Could be,* he says lightly  
patting my back,  
*you just don't like the cold.*

## THE FOX

At night I hear it screaming as if it's being robbed.  
There are signs of other wildlife too.  
It must be that I'm dreaming—headlights, a car coming to a stop.

Who unlocked the gate?  
A deer stands motionless—lost, but in view.  
At night I hear screaming. Is someone being robbed?

Coyotes break from a shadowed mob,  
Raccoons, opossums, wafting pool of skunk.  
It could be that I'm dreaming, the sound of a car stopped.

Whose flashlights unearth each barren den?  
Daylight witnesses are too few.  
At night I hear it screaming, as if someone's being robbed.

I lived so long without it—  
Fire streak, a flick of russet tail. Perhaps I was only  
Dreaming, no blood trail found or stopped.

How brief the wilderness at last had come.  
Awakened, it wouldn't stay.  
At night I hear it screaming, as if being robbed.  
It must be that I'm sleeping, the sound of dreaming stopped.

## TO SEE A HORSE

*. . . in human flesh, descending on a hammock through the air, and as it nears your house is metamorphosed into a man, and he approaches your door and throws something at you which seems to be rubber but turns into great bees, denotes miscarriage of hopes and useless endeavors . . .*

—Dictionary of Dreams,  
*Gustavas Hindman Miller*

Its forelock she'd mistaken  
for a flaring match  
then rising from a hayfield

his shape eclipsing the sun  
shovel in his hand She'd  
released a swarm of bees

each time she opened  
her mouth certain  
they were words

Night after night  
he strikes her in the face  
but she will not leave him

thick netting settling  
across her lap  
He strikes her legs

She will not complain about him  
*No frustrations or loss of hope*  
*as long as the shovel doesn't break*

Awake now in her family's basement  
she gently rubs his honey bathrobe  
against her face

light smell of shower  
water soap  
She only remembers circles of snow

blowing upward as if retreating  
to sky his slow  
walking toward her

now standing on the rug  
where underneath he'd scarred  
with a pocket knife their names

the wood given in to promise  
how that night he called her *mouse*  
*my mouse* of all things

and she said yes

## MUSE

He even tried it once—throwing his legs over his head in a kind of weird yoga tree pose, doing his best to enact going down on himself. I, impressed, thanked him for telling me something so cutting edge, for having the balls to be so honest. There's more, he said, moving closer to me on the porch swing. He'd been considering cutting a hole in melon and, right there in the park, getting *real personal* with it . . . —as a joke, just to blow the minds of the town's college professors and interdisciplinary majors away—something about performance-body-art. I listened carefully, my legs folded under me, naked under my loose Batik dress, an orchid tucked behind my ear, never thinking by the end of August I'd lie in a sunlit grass field for him, summer humming hungry and open around us. I'd be his muse. I never thought he'd leave me for the blond one-car-garage-band guitarist who'd leave him for a short-tempered water-colorist, never thinking, twenty years later, at the dinner table, turning my head from my husband, quietly spitting watermelon seeds into my cupped hand, black and slippery, one sticking to my lip, I'd want so badly to phone him, hear him try to guess who it was on the other end of the line—me, the muse he swore on his life he'd never forget—feel his whole body straining into his tongue's tip, coming up just a few inches short.

## STUNG

Barbed wire fences  
keep score,  
each knot a hitch  
on thorn rope—

petal-less rose  
grasping its steely life,  
guitar string just before  
snapped broken,

last note flung into air.

## NORTH OF PATSY CLINE

—for H-B

My daughter presses a mini recorder  
like a conch shell up to my ear

and whispers *Listen*.  
It is her fifteen-year-old voice

singing about heartache—  
mommamas and daddies crying, cursing the wind,

swearing never to love again.  
But we are still safe, years north of that day

when our hearts fall,  
when even my lit silk orchid branches

reaching up from the floor can't lift us,  
when we won't quite clear

the tree tops, but hit instead on rocky ground  
with Hawkins, Copas and Hughes,

into the swamp of Cline  
some five jagged miles off the Tennessee River—

Poland Spring bottles  
hidden at the bottom of a crowded gym bag, one bottle

at a time, not a lick of water  
in that well-kept, long running, secret well.

## PROLONGED

Promise me heavy wagons, trodden grasses,  
smoke rising from deep within woods,  
the open pit fire.

Promise me hunger and a voice with which to answer  
the *never was* dinner bell.

Promise me a room that drinks in night,  
chairs and beds that never existed  
and therefore can't be moved.

Promise me  
the wick that burns with words that refuse to leave  
its prolonged sentence,

Thursdays, starless and idle  
that surprise us with Friday's green, furrowed paths.

Promise me the alarm clock that misplaces its hatchet,  
the prescribed pill that gets over itself,

the mailed letter capable of crying.  
Anything unfolded can cry.

Promise me midnight's passing winter rain—  
street lamp, moon lamp

on the other side.

## MEMORIZING MUSIC

Leave desire unmeasured; let your body unfold  
toward an unmarked pitch. If your eyes  
tighten, you're thinking too hard.  
Feel instead yourself reaching  
past winter's black keys,  
toward the page-turner who loves each last note  
that makes her rise.

But if you must count out triplets  
with a metronome and in rhymes  
remember *beau-ti-ful e-ven-ing*  
as the last of a summer storm,  
a swamp singing through soft bodies,  
damp, hollowed seeds on the circular shore.

## EARLY HOUR

The moon would rather be a rock star.  
So it hangs onto the night sky, spot light and open door.  
For the man and woman tired of its one tune,  
it offers a burning candle's trail of smoke  
that rises and goes nowhere,  
a piece of bed gliding through an MRI.  
It says sleep is for woodpeckers tired of drumming,  
for a family of deer who have leapt into a pond of ferns.  
Instead, the moon urges *live*.  
The black leather jacket drops into words about a black leather jacket.  
The crimson firefly swells at the tip of a cigarette.  
And you know it, standing alone in your yard,  
closing your book of poems by Yevtushenko,  
that this is the grand reunion tour—  
the constant hammering in your brain  
naked mind, naked body—in daylight  
butterflies that will die if they hitchhike onto your clothes.

## NOTES

The ending line in “Black Dog” *that we have come* is inspired by James Wright’s “A Blessing”: *they can hardly contain their happiness/That we have come*. This poem was written for Solstice Director, Meg Kearney.

“Borscht” was written for Jeff Friedman.

“Stolen” was written for my sister, Maria Sestina.

In “Firing My Father’s Mossberg,” the couplet, *And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul/Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple* is taken from Richard Wilbur’s poem “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.”

“Memorizing Music” is for Eugene Kaminsky. Thank you, in particular, for Saint-Saëns.

“Prolonged” was written for Franz Wright.

“The crimson firefly swells at the tip of a cigarette” in “Early Hour” is a variation of the line “the crimson firefly of a cigarette” translated by John Updike with Albert C. Todd in Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poem “New York Elegy.” This poem was written for Ray Gonzalez, and John Martyn.













