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A Joining: A Collection of Poems

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A JOINING: POEMS

A THESIS

The Honors Program

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of English

by

Brenda R. Dukerschein

May, 2000

PROJECT TITLE: A JOINING: POEMS

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A Joining

Poems by

Brenda R. Dukerschein

FOR MY GRANDMOTHER

BERNICE DUKERSCHEIN

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ONE

Curling Photographs

I Can't Remember

I watch the fog push down
through the trees, how it thickens
against itself. I move along
the glass. My fingers tunnel
the moisture.

~

I built this house with my hands.

Sharpen the teeth.

Hurry the cutting.

All must be level.

~

I know I fell yesterday. Left
shoulder bruised. And aches.

~

I want to wash memory back in:
the smell of cinnamon in her hair.

I wrestle with breaking.

Photograph Without Color

A dusty wind pins
your skirt between
your knees. Little voices
sift the long grass.

Words plucked
from my mouth.

Be brief. Lift my hand
to your hair before
it whitens.

The wooden sidewalk
fingers the dark.

The Closet

for m.

When I decided
I could speak

I had to brush
the moth

balls from my arms,
pull out

the hanger
between my shoulders,

step over
the galoshes

to find the door.

Town Fool

Hay bales line

the field edge.

He rides through

swamp fog

along Old Highway

Eight. A wraith

on a brakeless

bicycle, collecting

cans in a burlap

sack for twenty

miles, singing.

Lessons

I learned to play Debussy
in her studio. Her white, lined
hands played *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*

like lyric verse. At twelve, I puzzled
over the black and white picture
taken inside the church

where she was married.
I sat at her Steinway
once a week for six years.

She shook on Max's arm
as he helped her to the car outside
the chiropractor's office. Skeletal

and gray, like the imprint of leaves
in autumn. I listen to the woman
in a European suit

define *allegretto scherzando* and say
why I must learn dominant
and diminished sevenths.

What the Bride Did Not Wear

I

17 August 1945
Australia

Airmail, all speed to:
Bernice Jung Sp Q3rd
Wave Quarters "D" Bks 16-156
Mass & Nebr Ave. NW
Washington, D.C.

*Last night I came into possession
of my orders, air priority, etc.—for one
TDY to US for 45 days . . . I will be with you,
watching the green in your eyes.
All my love, Darling—*

II

1 September 1945
San Francisco, California

*I don't feel like writing—I want to be able—
to hold you, to kiss your hands—to see your face.
I want you to be my wife. You will be a busy girl
for 45 days, after three lonely years of loving.*

III

Tuesday evening, the eleventh of September
One thousand nine hundred forty-five
Doylestown, Wisconsin

Baskets of rose, yellow and white gladioli line
the aisle of St. John's Lutheran. The bride wore
floor-length white rayon net. Her fingertip veil fell
from a band of white asters—
she carried yellow roses.

The groom, recently returned
from the South Pacific, where he served
the 14th AA Command for forty-two months
in supply distribution, stood in uniform.

The grass brushed the bride's bare feet;
she didn't want to appear so tall
in the black and white, curling photographs.

TWO

Other Amputations

Driving Home from Chetek, Wisconsin

I wake to black grazing.
I call his name.

I stare down through
matted eyelashes. The car
crumpled against my body.
My arm twists behind
me, both legs fractured
at femur and ankle.

Fingers dangle
like marionettes.

I count time
as blood dries in his watch,
twelve and three.

(He always answers
when I speak.)

From the ditch, I hear
the needle grass.

(Your life used to be perfect.)

They pull us out,
pin the joints
of my fingers together,
stab the loss of him
into my bones.

My life used to be perfect.

(Now I want broken hands.)

I Keep My Silence

with thanks to Louise Glück

Are you broken or do you only think you're broken?

I told you
from everything
everything could be taken away.

Can you accept yourself yet?

I can endure myself, if that counts.

But will you tell anyone?

I told you
if I gave everything
nobody would suspect me.

In the house I keep my silence.

And in the hospital too?
And in the psych ward?

I was platinum: when I silenced myself
I didn't feel everything.

Were you hopeless then?

I was always hopeless, even when I was smiling.
Even when I was dying.

So you couldn't protect yourself?

The clenched fist
opens, the dam, the gate
inside the mind opens.
I had been invaded—

Do you think you'll recover?

I think I know the limits of my self.

But do you think you'll recover?

I gave everything and I was still empty.
Like dishwater, my emptiness
was drained. Then
fear was added.

A Conversation

You know how I fit.

Now loosen all the bindings.

Call it duty, but do not call it care.

Tend to my failures.

Unfasten thought.

I cannot teach what you cannot know.

Approach me. Unmake

what I have so carefully made.

Aren't you afraid I will hurt you?

Remember, all seams undo

themselves and fall away.

Vanished

Warm sun,
rain coursing down my face.
I stoop, press lips
to your withered cheek,
ivory poppy
in folds of creamy fleece.

You smile,
even your mouth
moves slowly.
Stomach, breasts,
back laced with tumor.
You sit delicately

vanished.
The yarn you knit
unravels. Vanished,
I whisper, then walk
out the door.

To My Father's Cousin Nancy

When I was fourteen I ate
mangos and blueberry muffins
in your old farmhouse—dried peonies hung
from the rafters. We thought
you were content.

The year Stephen left to teach
in Colombia you chose another man,
split your family in two.
Like that woman in the Bible,
you divided the child.

Your father waits, his mind softening
like carrots cooked too long on the stove.
Stephen comes without you to relieve
your mother of your father,
if only for two days.

Where are you, as he tends to them
as if he shares our blood?

Keening

Leave your people.

Your name changed.

Tend to the broken.

Say: use me—

I am yours.

Cocooned in dry leaves.

Scratches on the skin.

Hands glued. Keening.

Bless me.

Carry me from

my place. Red shed

across the field. Rotting

wood to shut

myself in.

Losing a Father at Age Twenty-Two

This tree, the one a bit taller than the rest, to the left
of the battered string of wooden telephone poles,
was planted by a farmer, in 1955.

He dug through warm topsoil into shadow,
grit under his nails to plant the first
slip of red pine. He died, after thinning

his acres, leaving his son to cut the lowest branches
so that the trunks would grow straight and smooth;
the bark will patch itself, unblemished.

Other amputations do not heal so quickly.

THREE

Village Limits

Glen Flora, Wisconsin

White roadside.

Pinwheel daisies dense as iron.

Golden circles frozen in masses

hover over slim green stems.

A description so exact,

I stand among them,

breaking them with my feet.

Berry Season

My grandmother taught her son
to make raspberry pie. Then she taught
the fourteen-year-old hired girl—

my father's first love.
They stand in the kitchen;
she rinses the berries, adds sugar

and tapioca. He scrapes the pastry cutter
against the bowl. Uses his callused hands
gently to mold the paper-thin crust.

They pause to kiss before she pours
the raspberries and he scallops the crust.
When I walk in the front door,

a perfect pie sits on the counter, dotted
with red marbles of seeded juice.
My parents lean, his fingers brush the inside of her arm.

Making Bread

The pine in the front yard,
skimmed with frost,
tastes quietness
on fingered needles.

Five loaves rise
by the window. She lifts
white cotton towels,
presses down
with practiced hands.

She remembers the woman,
not her mother,
who taught her this,
the summer she found
she could love
the woman's son.

After he washed the dirt
from his hands and sat
at the large table,
hot in the noon sun,
he ate the golden slabs,
piled on the green
counter like offerings.

Before the First of May

I could not see them, Spring
Beauty, until I watched the stream
of water bubble and break
on edge of maple root.

I pressed my hand into the thick
cedar moss, dainty fat feathers
curled along the tops of rocks.
I knelt on wet ground,

brushed debris away to uncover
little fringes of green
bending low, tightly
curled, like my hands

the day we buried you.
Even though my mother
said I should, I couldn't
bring myself to touch you.

Watab Postcards

with thanks to Franz Wright

Algae undercurrent

Head light minnows

Taste of SPF 30 & sweat

Red-rusted graffiti the iron rail

Will have no space for me

White Church on Second Street

An old bar of soap: faith
dries the skin on your hands

and makes you clean.
Religion is like this.

You forget whose hands
you wash and who

you want to go home
with when the service ends.

Village Limits

The stream, a culvert, really,
runs under County Road B

and into the grove
of box elder and elm.

An otter slides through hushed
water, face tilted just above its body.

Land dappled with tenderness—
full of deer hoof.

FOUR

There is More Than One Kind of Loneliness

A Choice

with thanks to Frank Bidart

*please stay I know you cannot
but tonight*

*pretend I am not me
and you are not you*

*When I am with you my mind loosens
into your words and self*

I drown and soar and drown and soar and drown and soar and

but tonight
pretend I am not me

and you are not you

*see you have a choice
that is not a choice*

please stay I know you cannot
but tonight

pretend I am not me

Fragments

To make you into the person,
I am willing

to want so badly:

To think makes me—

Somehow I couldn't promise.

My arm you are not—
I can give you up.

I hate myself harder
than a thousand hours.

Come over here.

It Is Felicitous that I Am Alone

He faces me, wet and naked. We barely touch—
only our lips and his hands in my hair.

His mouth, moist and tender, like violets,
presses into mine. I tremble

as the tile I stand on splits and purple
flowers poke through the cracks.

I lean into him to steady myself. The water,
hot on my back, runs down my legs.

I turn the temperature up. I want
to scald my mind clean, burn out

the knowledge that he didn't love me.
Sweat, suffer, remember.

Presage

Twelve roses mark the first
week of our engagement.

Large, weightless petals,
silk zibeline, drop

on smooth wood.
My hollow

stem will someday grow
barbs to tear your fingers,

my emptiness.
I fear you will leave

when the thorns twist
under your skin.

Silence

Would I be enough
to carry, love?

I didn't blink.

Stubborn, he waits
for minutes. I lie—the narrow
bed aching.

Give me this promise,
your life for mine.

I did not say anything.

Winnowing

I wake to rain. Lightning etches
the room. I try to fall asleep,
roll to your side, position

my body to fit you.
My stomach presses
your back. I wait

for you to inhale, cold
stripped from you. Close
my eyes to the light.

In Absence

I

You lie exhausted and waiting
under my grandmother's quilt.
I watch from the doorway. My feet ache
from eight hours at my part-time job.
I am quiet. If you were to wake,
your arms would open for me.
There are lines of yours I know by heart.
What last thought settles
like sand as you sleep?
I walk over to you, lean
down to touch your brown hair.
It folds around my fingers
as my hand moves slowly on your skin.
Water condenses inside the window.

II

Water condenses inside the window.
We mark movement with paper—
blanks to be filled with word
and word. I consciously halt my pen
to brush my lips to yours. Once.
Our necks press against each other briefly
before I push away, content to be
alone within my separate mind.
Sometimes after rain the lines are down.
I turn pages of the overweight
dictionary—stormy with irritation.
You cup my chin with your hand, lift
my eyes to yours. It passes for a kiss.
There is more than one kind of loneliness.

III

There is more than one kind of loneliness.
Bones washed soon dry. I wander
aimlessly through hallways, on to porches
where I have never been before.
You trust me, let me go.
I reach for something solid. Cats can travel
weeks back to the place they call home.
You think I don't notice how I fade.
Plums dropped in laps are often overripe.
I hold the fruit like words, cherished, almost.
Your arms are empty. I fall down
beside you as you lie
exhausted and waiting.

What Is Written When a Poem Is Not

I rise to his stirring,
up from the white
wrinkled sheets.

I bring water
in a glass
to the other room.

I bid regularity:

knocked knees
against the wood

of my chair.

A Joining

I cannot see

(stitched closed)

breath caught—

(at the tongue)

A Weighing

If I eat my sack of cherries slowly,
will six days pass?

I look at each inflated roundness:
if color deepens at stem, if I break

into burgundy skin, if I taste each bit
before swallowing, if I hold

the pit in my mouth
until no fruit remains—

will I ripen and fall at your hand?

NOTES

FOUR

In **In Absence** the italicized lines are from the poems "Poète Maudite," "Cabbing it south to my first night at you," and "What You Might Answer," by Marilyn Hacker. (*Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, 1986).

