

A New Bedspread

By April Penn

© January 2011

This digital chapbook is available at:
http://www.bbtp.net/april_new.pdf

Contact: pennapril@gmail.com

The following poems are extra work that did not make it into my chapbook, *One Inside The Other*. After writing 365 poems in one year, I wanted to make a larger amount of work available online. My chapbook is available for \$3-5 sliding scale. Just email me your name and address if you're not in the area to pick it up when I'm at the Cantab, Stone Soup, or Brighton Word Factory.

Thank you to:

Michael F. Gill for compiling these poems from the 365 blog, the Brighton Word Factory for having the most awesome people and poets, the Cantab Poetry Lounge for all the support, Michael Monroe for his tireless efforts in running the 365 blog, all the poets and readers on 365, all the poets and listeners at Stone Soup.

Table of Contents

The Piny Woods Beyond

Walking Home

Heather's Cabin

A Motel Memory

Therapy

A New Bedspread

Resiliency

Trying to Be Good

Trauma Survivor

Dad's Ritual

Entering “The Real World”

a taste of culture

The Abuser's Strategy

Basketball

Day in the Life of a Temp Worker

Stages of Social Awkwardness

Authorities

Not the Marrying Type

Attempted School Shooting

Outside Myself

Under the Sofa

My trip, Boston to Annapolis & Back Again

My Favorite Things as a Child

Glen Burnie

Three Roommates' Social Class

My Grandfather, Carlos

If I hadn'ta

Inheritance

The Piny Woods Beyond

The ditches led to the dead-end
Then went straight under the road
Rocky slopes beneath
We'd ride our bicycles
Toward the sudden fall
Where transparent water turned rippling white
Sometimes we'd throw rocks
Hear the gentle Ker-plunks
Like orange juice and crackers gurgling inside us
Although we weren't supposed to enter
The piny woods beyond
The temptation to do so anyway could only be compared
To the way we'd one day crave another's touch
And want to exit this labyrinth of wanting
To go deep in the woods
Where maple and pine stitch patches of humid air
To the wet blankets of our brow

Walking Home

Walking past shrubs that line the sidewalk,
I can't help but reach my arm out.
The prickly evergreen tips tingle in my fingers,
The chaos of branches growing around each other
Like each of my nerve fibers.

It's an indefinite time of night,
Late in autumn when I'm walking back home alone.
The tall street lights flicker ahead.
Passengers pack themselves tight onto crowded trolleys.
Many turn their backs to figures like mine,
Walking briskly up a paved hill,
Passing the Everest Institute in Brighton where
You can learn to be a nurse or medical assistant.

I met a young woman who goes there for dental assisting.
Now she works as a cashier during off hours.
Mostly she just stays in a box office, waiting.
The street light up ahead with no figure to illuminate
Reminds me of how just before I say hi
My questioning face begs a performance of her.
She must play happiness or destiny,
Like the prerecorded message of an answering machine.

One sign of shame:
The need to prepare your story quietly until
You can speak out loud.
By the way she doesn't listen to herself speak,
I know she rehearses her smile,
Her spiel about being career-focused.

But one thing she can't rehearse, her moodiness,
Seeping through even the foggy box office glass.

Sometimes I am relieved by her melancholy,
The unpracticed art of cover-up performed on top of
Her capricious emotions.

When fall breaks like a fever,
I think of her in the first pair of ice skates,
Scarring the pond's frozen reflection.
Her lines keep returning as my feet to sidewalk.
But I do not expect these sudden marks of
Unstudied motion to carry me home.

Heather's Cabin

Her cabin overlooks the water,
The tall grasses,
And even the descending path
That seems to raise
Into the starry sky.

With our frozen legs
And trembling chests,
We lift our chins up.
Argue over which constellation?

The air smells like ash.
Perhaps because of a barbecue.
Perhaps because night brings us closer
To the ashes we will become.
But not as our distant selves.

As our young selves,
Decorating a dorm room
With a collection of postcards.
Marking these walls for our own,
Separate now from the copyright laws
Of suburban parenting.
Free now to be pirates,
Looting for story,
The treasure of an open mouth,
Our chins scooping the sky
Like a desire for ice cream or cheese.

Heather
She grows up on the shore
Nostalgic with Calvert County's defunct tobacco farms
Singing impromptu lyrics to a sputtering acoustic

The Jellyfish Man--

Through the vibration of his contact lens--
Sounding the cold ocean wave.

Just the right medication for remembering
How the path leads to the sky,
Us looking up before returning
Cabin-bound where half-smushed hornets
Burn in a cracking fire.

A Motel Memory

The neon VACANCY sign flickers.
A receptionist sits at his desk.

Through the windshield & the motel lobby,
He looks like one big smudge,
Like a raincoat I sew of tear drops & air.

I pull a pile of blankets over my head,
Imagine the cheese filling in jalapeno poppers,
Toasty and tucked in as me.

My brother Eric sleeps in reversed sleeping bag.
A grease stain on his cheek,
He nuzzles the car window,
Now streaked not only with rain.

Maybe Dad's voice shakes.
Maybe he never waivers at all.
I can't tell by looking at him behind the glass.
He's leaning over, exchanging a few lost words
with the smeared figure of a man.

Soon we'll have a room of our own.
White sheets like perfume,
Little soaps wrapped in paper.
I want to write a letter home,
Make my own stationary out of cut ups of
the telephone book, the Bible.
But the address of this room is untranslatable,
Like remembering the bodies that sink
in this old mattress night after night,
Like the intended kindness of my abrupt "hello"
When the maid knocks on our door.

Therapy

I tell my imaginary counselor
That I have an imaginary counselor,
But I don't mean her.
I mean somebody else.
I mean him.
She says describe him.
So I do.
He is balding.
He thinks he's very clever.
He sees beyond my awareness
And that excites him.
I cry in bed about whether
I am fucked up or normal.

My girlfriend says I am neglecting her
When I write poetry.
For the last few days, I have felt too happy to write.
My girlfriend asks if that means
I only write when I am disturbed or sad.
No, I think. That can't be true.
What about right now?
I am floating in the fluids of female ejaculate,
No longer a question of whether that can happen,
Though it never happened to me.
I am an instigator.
I am outing her to everybody.
She laughs and calls me a bitch.
"You bitch. I hate you."
This means she loves me.

I tell my imaginary counselor
That I have an imaginary counselor,
But I don't mean her.

I mean somebody else.
I mean him.
She says describe him.
I shake my head "no."

"I am pushing my imaginary counselor out of my mind.
I only let myself remember telling you
That I know the difference between
what I imagined and what I really lived.
The difference between mud and chocolate."

A New Bedspread

As we walk into Target, she says we shouldn't be shopping here.
This store donates too much money to the GOP.
Then she shrugs, "Well, if they donated money to Democrats,
we wouldn't care the same way."
And somehow that's the excuse that makes it okay again.

After we have gotten blood on our hands--
Each paid 50 dollars, sharing the price of our new bedspread--
We lament about the rude shopper who chewed out the cashier.
The shopper insisted she had the money in her account,
And the cashier just hadn't swiped her card the right way.
But the cashier insisted she had done everything in her power.
There had to be no money in the account or the card expired.

We walk away half suspecting that the shopper's yelling
Has a lot to do with a barrier between us and sympathy.
I feel like I have too much to do with the bad in the world,
And, yet, I remain disengaged from "change," which sounds like
a buzz-word spoken only for its sound, divorcing insects from
The solitude we seek as money matters abound.

When I lie down on the new bedspread, I feel like I'm in a motel.
The sheets are so much cleaner
than the yellowed of my childhood.
I've made this bedroom a getaway,
Built an escape out of blood money.
Guilt has leaked through the crevice characters of my demise,
And they are touching me with all the softness of a new pillow.

Resiliency

She wraps the new bed spread around her
Until she is a mound of material
With a furry, little head sticking out.
I press my stomach up against her back
And ask if she is really going to sleep.
It is the middle of the day,
Bright slightly chilly.
The wind rips through the leaves.
I thread my fingers around loops of her hair.
Gentle, sleeping creature,
I am lonely when you drift away like this.
My guinea pig lounges in recycled paper,
Pokes his little white nose up to the bars,
And squeaks whenever he hears rustling.
I pick him to keep me company as she sleeps.
Later my hands smell like his hair,
The underside of his moist belly,
The brown puffs of paper he sleeps in.
Oh sleeping creature, if I
Smell like your alone time,
Am I any stronger for that? I wonder.
Am I less self-conscious or more?
Am I as tone-deaf to oppression
As I am unaware of my own life experiences?
Who taught me I had something to learn?
That achievement is a chaotic wanting?
Of all those I have ever loved,
The thing we share in common must be
So ordinary we'd never think of collecting it.
That must be the reason I don't know
I love the Earth every day.
Sometimes I forget, asleep, you still exhale.
You don't need a moment of forgiveness.
You've got more going on than I can experience.
The only ache in your palette is healing.

Trying to Be Good

18 years ago my Kindergarten teacher
Devised a system of behavior management
That gave every child a little bear on the wall.
But, if the child behaved badly,
He got his bear taken off the wall for that day.
So, a bad kid must have literally acted, “off the wall.”

I don't know what it was inside of me,
But I wanted to keep my bear on the wall
At any cost.
I was terrified of being bad.
Bad was the worst possible existence.
I think I would have died for others'
Belief in my goodness.

When I was an adolescent,
Dad drove me somewhere.
I don't remember where, but
I remember tears streaming down his cheeks.
He wasn't crying about his father's death.
He wasn't crying about fighting with Mom again.
He WAS crying as he retold a time when someone praised him
For how great a job he did
Becoming the voice of Dylan Thomas in *Under Milkwood*.

I felt embarrassed that my father cried about receiving praise.
I realized then this is what stunted him—
His need to feel important and how fleeting a feeling that was,
How great it is to be great,
How fast it is after you hollow out.

He had forgotten the joy of having a daughter,
The praise I longed for from him
that was not just about my body
Looking “hotter” than mom's,
Not just about how many miles I had run
Thinking the whole time I run to destroy myself, to disappear.

I am, nonetheless, another ghostly version of my father.
That fact cannot vanish,
Though my longing for a warm heart wants to forget my roots--
The decay of his unquestioned privilege lingering in my bones.
I am afraid of his voice inside of me
And how it will crush anything in its path just to be loved.

On the last day,
My kindergarten teacher gave me a wooden bear
with my name on it.
She said it was a keepsake to remember how good I am.
Still, I hang the bear from my wall
even though I am 24 years old.
But this poem wants to burn this keepsake,
Wants every path to goodness to fuck off
And stop showing me yellow arrows,
As if I have nothing to offer but goodness,
As if you would find nothing but moralistic impulses inside me.
I want to touch the face of this growing evil and say
“interesting.”
Then I want the sea water lapping at my feet to get angry,
Start smoking cigarettes, and pull ash over my bones.

Trauma Survivor

Brenda just came home from her first day of graduate school
And said a student in her class introduced herself
As a trauma survivor. Brenda said if the first thing
You know about somebody
is some mysterious bad thing happening,
You kinda feel uncomfortable, as if some really butchy woman
Offered to shake your hand and said, "Hi, I am a lesbian,"
Before she even introduced her name.

Are there identities that come before names? Who am I anyway?
Am I just whatever gets your attention,
whatever part of me makes
An impression on you?
Sometimes I rehearse how I'm gonna
Get you to remember me, but then I don't
Come out right.
You end up seeing something in me I didn't mean
To reveal, so I get scared away from the confession building
In my chest, and I remember the days I walked around the pond
As I felt the distinct beating of my heart,
the way my lungs ached
When I pushed myself to run, hoping all this movement
Outlines my silhouette and someone I am
Outlives the short time we have together.
Brenda and I, oh...
Brenda leaves unspoken the trauma she has survived
She doesn't want it to be the first thing people think about her
She isn't afraid to be nothing
She isn't afraid
Sometimes her troubled clients attack her
She comes home with bite marks and scratches
And offers but a shrug of the shoulders
It's just part of her job, hardly something she notices anymore

Dad's Ritual

Dad sits in a dark-stained Oak chair.
He flips through thick pages
of transparent plastic circles
for the coins he still needs to collect.
He has a stack of books at the end of his desk.
Books on mostly Existentialism and Latin conjugation.
Each day, a ritual, he exchanges in place of
Religious worship, his mind, a house of echoes,
A chill of organs waking from their rust.
He slips a silver war penny into the window
Of his plastic reflection, and he grins
In the language of knee cap.
He talks to himself as he takes a bath.
He always recites the idea of words,
Some guttural noise before he chooses to ignore it,
happenstance, lathering the soap.

Entering “The Real World”

A crashing wave of
His hand over my thigh
Up my skirt--
The skirt I still own
Stuck in a plastic container,
Like other parts of me, liquefied,
Dropping tear-by-tear into
A partially crushed soda bottle.

My face gets hot, flushed,
Then cold again.
The hair hanging off my head touches my cheeks
With more precision.
The boyish look I sported in college,
Gone,
Intuitively knowing I will make more money
As a womanly woman.
A shiny necklace caught in twisted strands of hair
And a bra that says yes, I have breasts!.
I don't know if I want to look this way.
But I want my fragile place in the work world to work out.
I don't want to go home with my tail between my legs
As I cry out, “Mommy Daddy, oh middle class parents,
Let me live your lifestyle forever, your marriage in limbo
Your lack of communication, your bitterness in sorrow,
Your anger tearing finger nails across the rooftops
Of houses dressed in white siding and wild barking.

I think of our ability to want something
To REALLY want something--
How this desire grows to conform to what is possible
And becomes the closest thing to sadness I know.
We're molded into good little workers or else

Filling spaces we thought would always be vacant--
As a child, we looked at every lone person on a park bench,
And told ourselves we would not become them.
We would be married, have kids, a career by then.

I too would never have imagined
The way being touched feels
When it is a power struggle with me as the loser--
The ripe young college student,
Still focused on the mind,
The ambition, the dream
The use of “The Real World”
As something other than an excuse for discrimination.

Life begins either the moment we are born
Or an indefinable time before.
Any other random statement
about entrance into “The Real World”
Precedes violence onto the self.
So, if you hear a sudden shift between real and unreal,
brace yourself.
Hear the semi truck breathing emissions
Down the white of your collar.
Everything on wheels prepped to knock you over,
Be that the very subtlest touch,
Or a bulldozer on a mountain of slipping dirt,
There will soon be grave-robbing monuments beneath your skin.

a taste of culture

I looked down at my limbs waiting for some sign of blood.
Shouldn't I be wounded?
How can I take so much from the world without bleeding?
Some scars are invisible,
Seared into my psyche because I
Could never stay away from
the flame pit of the thing I burned for.
I burned for the incoherence afforded white middle class parents,
Their sworn atheism amidst a collective religious conscience,
Their obsession with forgiveness devolved
From Catholic to secular to silent,
The taboo of sex and cruelty,
Our "good" born of souls lost
As if nothing ever happened,
As if my life began my history,
And everything before I can learn in school.

Culture was always something other people had, or
Culture was the forgotten tongue of my ancestors--
Some mysterious thing I was missing yet haunted by.
Was I other peoples' loss of culture,
Literally standing for loss?

And when my mom finally broke,
Her words scurried out so fast
I could tell each was afraid of death
And could not tolerate a long analysis.
She hardly knew what she said,
But I said, ah yes, this is my culture
Of secrecy, real and imagined violence
Ripe with guilt.
How I have been home-schooled in self-hate,
Can speak with a floating body, a splitting self,

This is my America, wave hello,
Tell the new immigrants I love you.
I am jealous of your yet unforgotten tongues.
Your capacity for memory strikes me as super human,
Though I know we must all be simple blinks away
From the same florescent room, room where
I scrape myself empty for a taste of culture

The Abuser's Strategy

One time when an abusive and powerful man was
pressuring me to "prove" myself,
I accidentally said "Baltimore," when I meant "Boston."
I didn't even hear myself slip.
He pointed out my error with a raise of his eyebrows.
He couldn't believe I hadn't even noticed my error!
He said mistakes like that keep me from being strong.
He wasn't giving up on me,
but he wanted me to practice
Being strong.

The fact that I make errors proved him right.
There was some glimmer of distance in me yet to be pinched out.

He kept saying I looked confused,
Like his ability to perceive my confusion put him ahead
Of how I perceive myself.
He wanted to be an irritant between me and myself,
For he knew real control over somebody like me
had to come from within.

He sensed a kind of instability he could not identify.
He did not know where he had thrown himself.
Exactly where did one draw the line between me and myself?
His abusiveness grew all the more lost
Until a moment when I slipped from myself--
A moment when I did not hear myself speak.
That was the moment when he inserted himself.
That victorious moment, he thought,
When I can convince her she is weak.

Basketball

Overlook Park was where drunk teenagers smashed beer bottles,
Turning the grass to glass.
This was not a place where I should become good at anything.
Still, I carried the basketball, "a peach," my father said
Because it had been worn away enough to throw out.
I didn't bounce the ball because the cracks in the sidewalk
Played defense, frequently stealing the ball away.

The basketball court was the part that the hill overlooked,
So I liked to imagine I was being watched by drunk kids.
I was terrible at basketball but it made me feel good
To magically think others would only be on my team.
They too would never bounce the ball on broken sidewalk.

Overlook park was where mom played as a child
Turning the grass to pink lines on her back.
Her body was not a place where I had yet begun
Still, I watched her like a drunk kid on a park bench
Unafraid of the open bottle I held to my leg
I knew nobody in the entire world would find me
But I let them watch anyway
I let my many youths meet her in the park day after day
I saw the skin of her scraped knees all over the concrete
And decided it was okay if the ball got away

Day in the Life of a Temp Worker

The older man eying me says
He wants me back next week
A lady coworker nods
Yep, it's because you're smart
That's funny
I knew the minute he saw me
He wanted me, my body
Struck him good & deep
Duh...I don't think smart was
His first impression

But I made so many copies
So many copies
On a copy machine
Larger than three-grown men
Who coulda guessed
I'd go home and write a poem
With florescent lights,
Metal filing cabinets, and
The sandpaper carpet
Of their cubicle plight

Stages of Social Awkwardness

Here I am home from school after the last day of second grade.
My guidance counselor, Ms. Tajian, wished me off.
She said when I play outside this summer,
I need to talk with neighborhood kids.
Maybe swing together,
But whatever I do,
Never
Never
Bury dead animals again.

Let the authorities handle that.
But why?
Nobody shuts the squirrel's eyes like I do
Nobody appreciates the way pine trees gleam
In their last swirly film.

Here I am a good, little student
Writing an article for the high school paper.
Can I interview you for an article about bullying?
What's that?
Sit here?
Okay!
I just had to wear white pants today.
He just had to put ketchup
on the burgundy chair before I sat down.
Well, at least now I've got the bully's perspective.

Ashley Gluck says I can sit with her,
And she won't play any tricks.
She never makes fun of me
'Cause she's in special ed,
And that means she knows what it feels like.

When I go home, my dad's got a sign on his bedroom door:
"Do Not Disturb."
My brother's playing World of Warcraft.
Mom's away, but the sofa still depresses in the places
Where people have sat the most.
From across the room, in my swirly chair, I speak
With their absence in just the right spot.
The music of the air between us bends like an eye
Looking up at a rainbow with a building in the way.

By the time I go to college,
All people are a threat to my dignity.

Afraid they'll see what has already been planted
Inside me-- the way I fold into a chair.
You don't think to take me outside
Or so much as whisper "sweet dreams."

Sometimes my emerging sexual feelings--
Severely delayed after the onset of puberty--
Awaken the possibility I will approach you
And proclaim,
"I think I am experiencing sexual attraction to you!
Do you know what that means?"

The funny thing is some people make me feel
Like I'm the one with social grace.
Like Everlyn. You tell her, "Come sit with me."
And by the time she gets out of the lunch line,
She figures you've changed your mind,
So she sits alone.
When you get up from your spot
And sit right beside her,
She looks like she's gonna cry.
Your presence frightens her,
And you don't think to ask why.
You just know you're not alone.

Authorities

The dean of the department tells me to find a video about,

"You know, diversity, cultural awareness...
Something like that."

When I tell her I've completed the task,
She leans over my shoulder
And dismisses the YouTube video I'm watching,

"No, no that's not academic enough!" she hisses

And my face blushes.
She goes back in her office.
I return to the room in my head.
No matter how hard I try
I can't get the authority out--
The one listening with anxious anticipation that I'm
About to say something fucked up.

The secretary I'm replacing for a week
Has baby pictures of her niece
Dissolving from side-to-side on her computer.
People keep calling me the wrong name.
They say, "Leaha?"
At least they suggest their own error as they
Hand me a paper for a task I don't know what to do with.
Nobody but my supervisor knows
I am not the authority on anything.
As kind as it is for them to assume I'm in the know,
I know they haven't made me an imaginary friend yet.
If they retreat to a room in their mind,
Fake flowers pretend to wilt.
Non-real things become more deceiving,

Else we all just tell the truth;
It's made of plastic!

The other professor chats about getting
Her stomach and love handles done.
She puts in a word about her chin,
Snaps the phone shut,
And walks out to get some coffee.
I stare at her more closely,
Like I'm deciphering a flower from afar,
Real? Not real?
The baby photos keep sneaking a cheek at me.
Somewhere an open-mouthed infant has yet to speak.
But, I wager, she knows the difference between Leaha and me.

Not the Marrying Type

When my mom was a kid
Her older sister Carol
Flopped back on the bed
And said, "You know...
I'm a real woman 'cause
I have breasts."
She looked at my mom
And her sister Linda
And accused them
Of not being "real women."
Linda felt destroyed by Carol.
Every morning she woke up
Disturbed that the mirror
Showed but two swollen mounds.
She worried her unreal body
Would one day be invisible,
Not the dreamed for invisible
Of superhero-worship
But the ache in her throat
When she resented her speech
For sounding too childish.
Mom, on the other hand,
Waved her flat-chested body around
Like a flag in the wind.
She only ached that her little breasts
Flapped around so much.
She pictured herself stream-lined,
A climber, trail blazer of sorts.
When she tells me the story,
She always shrugs her shoulders
As she says, "I was a Tom Boy."
That's the way she always says it
Nonchalantly, "I was a Tom Boy,"

Like she was born accepting herself,
But something in this story hurts her still--
How Carrol felt the need to ram
Her realness down her sisters' throats
How realness is the sister of important
Mom has always felt like less
Her family said she'd never get married
And when mom actually did, her sisters
Screamed, "Never! We never thought you
Would be the marrying type!"
I hide under the floor boards sometimes
And hear their wicked gossip
I am not even born yet
I see them changing in their bedroom
Aunt Carrol sports a lacy conical bra
She doesn't have herpes yet
She doesn't fuck a quack who tells me
Aliens were buried underground
Mom hasn't dealt with her pain yet
But more fundamental than that
The silence between mom's teeth
How she has no real word
For what her sister's assume about her

Hearing the story once I know
About sexual orientation and gender,
I wonder if the stereotype of a lesbian
Never sunk in, but, no, mom never said so.
She just said they thought
She wasn't the marrying type.

Attempted School Shooting

*Based on my journal entry on January 18, 2002
When I was a sophomore in high school*

A long high school hallway
Shrinks down to the size of a straw
A kaleidoscopic fragment
Of the girl with purple hair
Who has a loaded 36-caliber pistol
At 9 AM, outside my classroom

Ideas of death
Always have the underside
Of my desk frosted above my head
Like the sweetness of any shield
Before you expect to use it

My language alternates
Between dad's nagging cynicism
And mom's list of abuses
The fireflies that escape
These glass jars
Dive like jet planes
Scratching the sky
With fleeting histories of movement

Through lighter fluid doused hallways
Adolescents shuffle
The bleacher teacher asking her megaphone
Did anybody see anything?

I nod no
Fiddling with a straw in my mouth
Gnawing on the tunnel vision
I sought to create
The sympathetic structure
Of my tightening throat

Outside Myself

In preschool it would seem I only have hands
The rest of me has not grown but no
I am just looking around and my hands get in the way
I am constantly distracted
When I look back, I can't remember much
These big ol' hands think I could be outside myself

I decide to make a video with my webcam
And replay it back so I can see myself like others do
When I see myself I wanna be the man in porn
Who sticks his big dick in my mouth
I wanna touch myself without consent
And fall into the silent pain of not saying anything

I lie back on my bed and can't stop
Tossing and turning and wanting to erase
What hatred I feel toward my image
It feels like wanting to breathe
When you're at the bottom of the swimming pool
"Come back to me," I say with air for a mouth

Under the Sofa

Under the sofa that has not budged for years
In the far away corner I see a glossy tanned leg
Like a piece of my old baby doll
Who I once held close to my nipple

When I pull on the little leg
I get something unexpectedly larger
"What's this mom?"
She grabs a cushion from the sofa
And throws it down between us
Blocking my attempt at seeing her toy
Her face gets hot and flushed
She speaks not a word

I sink down into my pillow and blanket
And pretend to sleep on the floor
My mind ripe with the knowledge
Mom still likes sex
This woman of dark corridors
Once-a-week showers
And shapeless moo moos
She has so given up on her husband
They live on separate floors
And communicate only on dry erase boards
But through it all-- the depression
the silence, the mold--
She has room for desire

My trip, Boston to Annapolis & Back Again

She surprises me with her restless energy.
She wants to leave Boston at 2 AM,
So we can drive through New York City
Without the congested line of cars.

I give in to her insistence
And my own excitement
That leaving is the best part.
When you have only to think of fleeing,

Who are you?
More motion than you comprehend,
70 miles per hour & sitting still.
The highway will make sense if

You forget to breathe.
She won't let me turn up the volume.
She says the radio gives her a headache,
So we talk instead.

But how could I remember
What either of us says?
I am lulled awake
To the clambering sameness of highway life.

The truckers in their sleepers
MacDonald's employees mixing oatmeal now
The plastic sticker of a wreath,
Bearing "Home for the Holidays."

I see that same sticker
On every rest stop door.
Home? Is that where I'm going?

I can't picture where my Dad lives.

He prepares me, though.
Over the phone, he says,
"There's projects nearby,"
As if this is something needing confession.

I have a confession too,
But I don't think of it that way.
I don't think the way I think, you know.
I use terms I don't know about.

And lulled in the sway of my seat,
Jerked awake by a sudden bump in the road,
I am torn between the same old path
And telling Dad something he already suspects.

I wait.
I do not wait for him to offer me
A chance to explain myself,
But he provides a path anyway.

"Whether you two are just friends
Or more than friends, you seem compatible,"
He says. Finally I realize
I must tell him.

"Oh... well I wasn't sure when to tell you,
Dad, but... um... well... Me and Brenda
Are dating." He nods, understanding.
"I'm okay with that," he says.

I say I've already told mom.
"Oh," he says. "When did you tell Mom?"
"In college," I reply.

"So are you mad I didn't tell you sooner?"

"No," he says, no questions further.
We move on. He talks about W.H. Auden.
And I am shocked
He doesn't care about my sexuality.

He doesn't even think twice about it.
Still, there is something unbearable inside me.
These mixed emotions saying, I'm ready
To go back to staring at endless road.

Try to get away from myself,
Flee from fleeing and return
As casual as not caring
But as far from apathy as I can

Be grateful I am no longer stuck
In shopping strip suburbia
Where doing something is buying something.
I have learned to gauge freedom

Off of how well I believe in art.
Even now, there are rocky spots
Where I slip back like a smart car
Climbing an icy hill.

When we finally get back to Boston,
We have to borrow a shovel,
Dig ourselves a parking spot.
A neighbor says he thinks the car will fit.

She tries to back in,
But the wheel hits a boulder of snow.

I yell, "Stop!" and "Go Forward."
A few more shovels and she'll fit.

My Favorite Things as a Child:

Fire hydrants
Styrofoam
Bubble wrap
Dumpsters
Ditches
& Sharpies

If anyone forgot about these
There was sure to be something important
She was missing

Glen Burnie

Cigarette smoke flies out of his mouth
And disappears over my face as I glance up
At the new neon sign for Cluck U Chicken
Jessica says he's her boyfriend
So we get in his red sports car
On the interstate, he does 90 miles an hour
Laughing as I frantically search for a belt buckle

"Oh quit your worrying," he says
He has a heart condition that means he's gonna die
Before he ever turns 30
But we're willing to take the risk like a blessing
Jessica because she is broken
And me because I'm lonely

I've been hitched to Jessica
Cause she wanted to be my friend
The first time she laid eyes on me
I was the new kid, still trying on the new place for size
Glen Burnie with its cheap buffets and dollar stores
Taco Bells and nursing homes
Never felt right on my clothes

I look around at the houses with white siding
Chain-link fences with beware of dog signs
Apartments that look like teeth
Pounding on the dentist's door
Let me in I need a whitening treatment
I wanna get drilled and filled with a new nerve center
One that loves to be here
Over one that loses your vein patterns
to the trails of cracked cement
Rocks kicking the road with the smashing wheels

Of men who shoot through suburbia with no purpose but to hoot
They are why mom says don't walk down the street alone girly
I do anyway

Me and Jessica get away with her new boyfriend
We think it's pretty cool to be speeding away
When we usually can't even walk down the street
Without someone saying don't move
The next boyfriend just comes to Jessica like a spirit in the night
She meets him at the 7 eleven
where she works the grave yard shift
To pay for rent in the house of convicted sex offenders
Which is still somehow better than living at her home

It's no wonder all I ever dream of is moving away
I still feel guilty that I found that privilege
To go to college, to only briefly return home
To watch the cracks in the sidewalk
like they are just beginning to quake
Like everything that has been there a long time
is just starting to make sense
Why I'm just festering for a response
to my past life in Glen Burnie
Always eating up my parent's security deposit
Were we just globs of grease like the food at strip malls
Living in and out of pizza boxes?

All my mom ever wanted was to find "home."
So we moved in to her parents' home
Past a bunch of windy streets where the houses sit up
And wait impatiently in their high chairs for a bib
Grandma fed us there and kept our feet quiet stepping
Shhhhh! The ghosts in the house will hear, she'd say
The ghosts in the house lived off of the hidden bruises

that we press like flowers
Into the parental insistence to be quiet
And never get a tattoo that tells the whole world your story
One grandma almost tells the neighborhood on the front lawn
When she yells
Don't you come back and call 911 if anything happens to you!

She kneels down and presses her hands over my cheeks
Do you understand? She means to say
I nod numbly
Leaving the 2-story suburban house
Unwinding a temporarily curled hair into the straight,
Horse-tailed street

My family's boxes gather dust in the apartment
We don't want to open them
So I turn to hanging out with Jessica
Her dreams of running free through Baybrook Park
Past brick row houses overlooking Curtis Bay
A straight road leading directly to the smoke stacks
Throating the city

I wanna be that straight of a road
Leading, leading to something
That big and built up
Where tons of people are unafraid to feel
The sweat and germs they exchange holding metal bars
On the light rail or pressing nervous fingers and palms
into the seat

Feeling the open embrace of the city
I manage to sleep soundly all through the night
When I wake up in my parent's apartment
I try to remember there's a much bigger world out there

People spend their lives trying to reach it
To make sure it knows we're here

Three Roommates' Social Class

Middle Class Roommate:

Value her parents instilled: "Follow your dreams."

Current job: AmeriCorps Volunteer, Getting paid poverty-level wages to help build community resources

Working Class Roommate:

Value that her family's experience taught her: Money = Life

Current job: Care Facilitator at a mental health center, Earning 12 dollars an hour for 60 plus hours a week

Upper Class Roommate:

Value she learned from a privileged upbringing: "Shut up!

Here's money..."

Current job: Sex worker, Earning large sums of money in a short amount of time. But still not remembering to feed her cat

Hi, I am the middle class roommate.

I used to struggle with guilt because I am more privileged than my working class roommate who is also my girlfriend. (No, not "girlfriend" like a cheesy way to say she's a girl AND my friend. What I mean is, we're lesbian lovers and NOT the kind licking dildos stupidly exchanging real feelings for plastic nothingness... oh but I digress.)

My working class girlfriend told me don't stress.

She's proud to have grown up in poverty in the desert in a double-wide trailer guarded by dogs that were sometimes adopted by packs of coyotes. She knows how to fire a gun and sever a snake's head with a machete. She likes that she's not bratty. She doesn't think I'm spoiled either. She's glad I have dreams. She's even willing to let Upper Class Roommate borrow money from her. She's even feeding Upper Class's starving cat.

My Grandfather, Carlos

Grandfather sits back in his lazy boy

His mouth open

Pointy grey teeth poking their heads out

As the light from a large window tunnels in

He snorts

Then a question about food and drink

Where's my coffee and baguette?

Don't forget the olive oil!

Grandmother scurries around the room

Like a squirrel gathering nuts

Beneath the Grandfather tree

Grandfather resting one palm on the table

And forgetting where he set himself

A dirty plate he never washed

Greasy with the spray of olive oil

Sprinkled excessively

As if trying to compensate

For his opposition to hand lotion

The last few years of his life

He only sleeps and eats

No one knows if he shuts out the world

Because he's sick of it

Or because he lost his ability to connect

He lunges from lazy boy

to table chair, table chair to railing

Railing to his room where he flops on the bed

Huffing, all these distances between everything

Yet all his life he was a walkin' man

Walked all over

Araguari, Brazil
His father beat him
His mother threw him to the streets
How did he ever survive on eating grass?
Heavens knows, Grandmother says
While he just rocks back
Offering us nothing more than a faint presence

We know he came to the United States
To raise his big Catholic family
In the sprawling suburbs of Baltimore
And somewhere mom's face is
Smushing her nose up on the glass

Looking at Grandmother like she's crazy
For keeping all the old butter containers
Stacked under the cob webbed sink
Whatchya gonna do with all ah them?
To which she explains
The Great Depression left her hungry
And holding on to many things
Grandfather wants to be that way with stories
Holding on with a firm grasp
But he can't keep his words together
Apple sauce drips down the corners of his lips
Sometimes he compensates for being humiliated
By looking humble, secretly saying if there is nothing
It is okay because he has been there before
A belly swamped with grass, imagine that
I can't
Help but stare at his distended abdomen
Wondering if after seven children
He inherited Grandmother's womb
But I know that's not true

If I hadn'ta

If I hadn'ta moved here
The streets would still feel like a closet
Church Street, in particular
Where my parents got married
All I ever wanted was to shove my hand
Into my crotch and yank out
Question marks and scatter them like acorns
I mean, touch myself in public
The way men had without question

I need no building's resplendent windows
To tell me the sun burns
Ruddy brown moons in my eyes
No street lamp's flicker to remind me
An eyelid obsessively lowers curtain
Though I welcome the sidewalk's canvas
Wherever I go

I am not where I was
The street that bit a bitter wound
Travels down my chest
And I won't let it rest

If I hadn'ta moved here
The holes in my consciousness
Would not fill with blood
Or know that bleeding is a part of healing

Blood was only a stain once
A Kool-Aid ring around my mouth
Part of a museum of contemporary living
See the sea shells in the bathroom
The framed photos of cousins

Inheritance

We have this in common-- the running
The chance to inflict heavy breathing
And tiny fractures in our bone
The family skeleton, as if there was
Only one, a towel
You wrap around yourself in the shower

Everyday is backwards in our family den
You turn the spigot off then on
Notice I've been leaking all night long
The ham radio in my toothbrush
Scrubbed teeth succumbing to the signal
My tongue going numb with bristles
How do I inherit the family name

The rocking chair
Where you fidget away
The pain in your jaw
An excuse for crying
If only desperation was always physical

Funny how we deal with our depression
With quick strides, bunny ear shoes
Like the definition of harrier

We're readers, runners, and brooders
We have each these three throats