

Birth Order

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington
2013

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
Dept. of English

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I.

Ice Age Acupuncture

Someday it'll be Austria, but today it's a cave,
a set of sharpened stones, a pile of charcoal.

When she asks about the hunt, show her
where it hurts. Hand over the bones you have

collected. She knows which to whittle down
and fire, which to toss into the stew.

The blackened bone slides beneath your skin,
to the place that spasms when you sleep.

There are other lives inside our own.
Parts that cannot be touched, only pierced.

Where She is Now

Remind me again why we're here.

They are not twins, the two men twinned

Fresh air. Isn't that always it?

by senescence and the ocean's uniform horizon.

*I always wanted to swim across
the English Channel. Like that girl.*

Skin slackened over elastic waistbands, they stand

*Her name was Gertrude. Same as my wife.
She crossed the month I was born.*

thigh-deep waiting for cold water

*Once, I jumped fully-clothed
into a hotel pool.*

to quicken circulation in hairless calves.

*My daughter couldn't make it
to the ladder.*

Physicians say it's good for the heart; still,

She must have been eight or nine at the time.

it's the nurse's body in a black bathing suit

I wonder where she is now.

that ultimately moves the men toward the sea.

Birth Order

First came the light: the beginning,
the measure of great distances.
Light was not dark, the two easy
to describe until earth arrived,
blurred day into dawn and dusk.
So rods refined, and cones that best
sensed yellow were called red,
according to what the others
could not see. When a berry
bounced back something not
green, the human mind invented
magenta. The effects of birth order
aren't real, remain the simplest
way to explain what occurs
in our mother's eye.

Eldest

No one sets out to be the fall guy.
No sign up sheet for *sparagmos*.
Sitting at the bar on a Wednesday
and a pint glass to the face, meant
for the asshole two stools over.
Stepping between the punch thrown
and a friend's nose can't be planned,
comes naturally to the man who once
pulled his sisters around the cul-de-sac
in a Radio Flyer, who wrestled his
brother's bully down to the asphalt
then penned an apology letter.
He's the only one in the family
who can't dance. He paces in front
of the television during professional
football games. He drinks cheap
beer. Bloodied on a bar floor,
he won't press charges, only
asks that the bill gets paid.

Genealogy

Can't have Fuchsia,
the girl in goggles and surf shirt
holding her breath
until the wave passes overhead,
without the colored ribbon her mother
wrapped around the wedding bouquet.
Can't have Fuchsia's mother
without the grandmother
who stretched out on tip-toes
to water drooping blossoms
and left the balcony
with a handful of wilted pedals.
Can't have Fuchsia's grandmother
without the colonizing of Hispaniola,
the English garden, Teutonic botany.
Can't have Nachnamen
without nicknames
without cunning
without foxes.
No foxes without furry tails,
tight, hairy, bushy tails,
trains that flame,
that balance the body
on a henhouse, on a hothouse,
on a nursery rhyme.
Can't have the foxes, so follow
female animals – badgers, martens –
back to their dens,
and count the hours
until the young emerge
from burrowed earth.
Notice the hawk.
In time, you'll hear
compressed air expelled
with a wheeze and a hiss.
Fuchsia waiting to surface.

Echolocation

Propelled by flukes
and a trace of human hands,
the sperm whale is one-third junk.

During the long crawl
back into the sea,
certain senses were salvaged:

The nose blows kisses.
The jaw listens.
The ear feels the smooth mantle
of a passing squid.

You don't have to use the body
in the ways you were taught.

He puts feet against his face.
She still wets the bed.
Fixation, fetish, developmental delay.

Our temples overlay fused bones
found separate in other mammals.

The temporal shields our sense
of balance. Directs us
to stand, to walk upright.
Yet, our insides are swimming.

Upright is best left
to physics, mechanics.

To metaphysics, magic
and a form submerged
under four miles of water.

The Tree of Spirits

Temperature controlled and tucked away
from colonial treasures, a glass case
holds only hush. The tree of spirits sinks
its roots into the bottom of a bayou.
No longer spun thread, spirits suspend
from branches as plastic bags and truck tires.
Grackles shit and squawk, having survived
mass extinction to stab maggots from the trunk.
Bluebonnets mistake the basin for a meadow.
Mosquitos wrinkle a muddy puddle, make
for the bare arms of a girl. She cycles past.
Summer storms transform ditch to tributary
long enough to provide the tree of spirits
bruised blossoms but no fruit. It is enough.

'86

It was the autumn
of windmills. It was

the year of two shoes.
Same laces loosened.
Same legs alluded.

When one lives on a hill
the hill is not painted.

The mud of a meadow
a combination of shades

a collection of strokes until
cornflower and cotton are only
sky above open trestles.

Dozens of windmills
but only two of shoes.

January to June for the pair
back lit with orange.

July onward for another
grounded in black.

Yes, there will be
peasants and self-portraits.
Posthumous renown.

This was a year, a season
balanced on a body.

The Martyrdom of St. Peter

Spine into pivot;
shoulder, a pulley.
They heave until
stone toes point
heavenward.
Below: one
thin halo,
fragile as
an obelisk.

Middle Child

She's been told meditation can help
with the anxiety attacks, so she sits on the floor
and closes her eyes. At ten, she chose
a science project: *The Semi-Permeability
of the Cell Membrane*. After releasing an egg
into a solution of vinegar and water,
she watched the weak acid erode
ellipsoid strength; the egg achieve
neutral buoyancy. At last, only a thin layer
kept yolk and albumen intact. And she, uncertain
about the exact analogy intended,
found it all very romantic.
A floating orb unshelled, she
entered the talent show, applied to an Ivy League,
taught public school. Said yes, and yes again.
Took him back because he was sorry.
Leaned the weight of her body onto one shoulder,
then the other, a pose the yogi called heart-opener.
Until, one day she could not get out of bed.
The project was a failure. The report neglected
to explain a cell's selectivity, how the membrane
allows entry to some; denies others access
inside. Her therapist would nod.
Her nose scratches and she itches it.
She's filling up when she should be
emptying out. When all she'd really like
to do is take a long, hot bath.

II.

Microcosmique

I've already told you,
I'm not coming out.

Think I'm bluffing?
You know my place.
In comparison,
this bathroom
is palatial.

I won't hurt
myself. That isn't
the point.
Just need time
to think.

What? The water
is running because
I'm taking a bath.
I found one
of those balls,
a bomb is it?
It smells nice
and makes
my skin feel
all tingly.

I wish I had
a book, something
like *microcosmique*:

All those i's,
all lowercase,
all turning into
Jacob's ladder
and the wrestling
angels all at once.
After that, the i's
are arranged
in sweet little
sex acts.

When the fire
department arrives,
please send them away.

I won't have them
taking the hinges
off the door again.

Cincinnati

After Diane Seuss

No one says Cincinnati anymore.
When you utter the word,

walleye seize with estrogen
pumped into Mill Creek
by the dishsoap division
of Proctor and Gamble.

Cincinnati, shh! Secret
headquarters for Macy's,
because no one would believe
Santa comes from a city

so difficult to spell. No one
expects three N's and three I's
but only one T to cross
alongside the parish priest.

Store Cincinnati with
the city's other discards:
Humbolt Road, Frankfurt
Street, Hanover Way,

although the city's poor
still reside in Over the Rhine.
Cincinnati, from Cincinnati,
pro-patrician, citizen-soldier,

dictator only when
Rome really needed one.
He wouldn't say Cincinnati,
only Root! Root! Root

for the Redlegs! He'd pop
open a Bud Light and
recline in his Lazy Boy
satisfied with his place

in the world, secure
in the silent majority.

First of her Kind

Strabo's got his version and I've got mine: barefoot
she came, carted from Dacia to the center of the earth.

Her eyes leaked the Danube. Her hair smelled of smoke.
A slave may spit in stone faces, if she holds an oiled rag.

While others sought omens; she longed for favorable omens.
Her god, a treed fox. Herself, a linden split by lightning.

Now she makes for the stair and the palace above.
Every step cinder, every step another glass slipper.

Eldest

Chondria. No need to begin with *hypo*
because she really doesn't think about it
excessively, and not without good reason.

There's the fatty tumor in her right bicep,
the darkening mole in the middle of her back,
the current between her temples mid-flight.

It has given her empathy for the whimpering
infant two rows ahead or maybe just envy
for the languageless, the patted and cooed at.

Provided an appreciation of mothers, or the one,
who walked with a cane, rode an elevator
between floors. Who spoke only in whispers.

Her awe does not extend to the daughter,
eleven, who served dinner, did the dishes
when her mother could no longer stand.

(The daughter's strident voice, bitten
nail beds so like her own). She's learned:
Take care to be the taken care of. Take care

to smile sadly, thank the caretaker softly.
It's become a game she plays with lovers:
Invalid carried to bed, palm pressed against

forehead, glass raised to lips. She lets
herself go limp. He'll be disappointed
when she falls asleep in his arms.

Eyes like mine

Eyes like mine
struggle to extrapolate
from swatches
and color cards.
I strain to see
the difference
between sow thistle
and mauve finery,
warm stone and
wrought bronze.
A letter left
in the doorjamb
addresses my husband
by his birth name.
I bring it with me,
back into the hallway,
where primed walls
will be painted with
what I decide.
The note, signed
illegibly, asks him
to call a phone number
penciled in either
iron ore or rock bottom.

Lunchtime at the Office

Is it appropriate to talk about the hooded man?
There are reasons no one wears hoods anymore.

The briefcase? Not cash; besides, it's impolite
to ask. Can we talk about suits? Certainly not guns.

Don't mention the woman, or women. People
of color? Perhaps none applied for the position.

Wire taps and cell phones are for conspiracy theorists.
As are polarized sunglasses. As for lapel pins: divisive

and useless. If lapel pins mattered, we'd put on two,
take courage in our collars during the next hurricane,

but let's not get into weather patterns. Should we mention
the sun? It's awfully bright today, but that's all we can say.

And, of course, we're all hoping for the best, praying for
an end to the hostage situation playing out in the lobby.

Shed

My love for you
has all the insecurity

of a backyard shed
on a corner lot

in a mixed-income
neighborhood.

Mossy green,
it matched the house

until the house was
repainted blue.

The first burglars
must have been kids;

they took only
a weedwacker.

You counted us lucky,
hired a lawn service

and bought two
new padlocks.

The next time
I lost my bicycle,

you lost your power
tools. I tried to get

the home security
technician to install

a motion detector
inside the shed.

He refused, said
there would be

too many
false alarms.

Youngest

Another graduation in another college town
with too many hills. Mom's cataracts prevent

driving after dusk. My sibs celebrate at the bar,
won't let me try to fake my way in. Wish I could

get drunk. Wish mom would stop staying I hope
we can still afford tuition when your time comes.

A hundred yards ahead, an antlered deer steps
into the road. My foot eases on the accelerator

of the economy rental car, a Ford Focus
that would surely crumple upon impact.

How much is this car worth? One buck.
And my life? Mom is yelling now, pointing.

Braking hard, I watch the buck jump, join
three or four smaller deer on the shoulder.

They may have been waiting for him,
may have been nosing the bushes for the first

blackberries of the season. Mom says
I've given her three new grey hairs.

I continue on, a little slower. I'll see
my brothers and sisters maybe once more

this year. I should go to school, become an actuary,
learn to derive value from the likelihood of loss.

For Keats

*I can feel the cold earth upon me—the daisies growing
over me—O for this quiet—it will be my first. - J.K.*

Down the street from your deathbed,
a shop window exclaims *I need Spain!*
in eighteen-point Arial and clipart.
The merchant includes a date of return.
The white sheet curls at its edges.

Home is a necessary arrogance;
as is the future left locked behind glass:
Cats of Rome, Twenty Thirteen.

Best to go as you did,
in the arms of an acquaintance.
Less chance of drawing things out.
Of asking too much of language.

If I had buried you, I would have torn
out the violets and planted daisies.
Would have let the violets dry
in southern sun, pressed their petals
into letters left unopened.
I would have kept the stone smooth.

But I'm getting carried away now,
taking the joke too seriously.

A old woman busks trained birds
before the shuttered store.
The bed is actually a replica.
I empty myself of euros.
In the shade of a misplaced pyramid,
I offer you two blue palms.

Etching Paint

Protected from the corrosive solution
by thin plastic gloves, we run out of rags.
A pair of boxer shorts stand in to dress down
the kitchen cabinets of our new old home.
We drag a chair in, extend on tip toes
to reach the shelf behind the fridge,
find a plastic bag filled with pills
inscribed "watson 387." She searches the
internet, comes back with eyes wide.
We continue on, recover Xanax, Sominex,
a cigarette. Above the stove, a dried
long stem rose, a one-hitter. Each discovery
elicits scandalized smiles. Our re-collection
swells. In the last cabinet, the shine
of silvered plastic: a 24 hour sober chip.
Knowing full well the memorabilia
spread before us should be flushed,
we speculate about the former tenants.
Who would just up and leave all this?
The gloves begin to tinge brown and tear,
the etching agent stronger than we'd thought.
Weeks later we find a stack of pictures
stuck to the top of a kitchen drawer. A man
with other men. With a woman. At a party.
Hugging two little girls holding Easter baskets.
We look closely. He looks nothing like me.

Petosa's Handcrafted Instruments

Petosa cares about
accordion keys.
Sinks his savings,
begins a family
business. He believes
in the consistency
of walnut, though
other kinds of wood
might do to move air
through two boxes,
a body. Always
walnut underneath,
he caps the keys
in Lucite,
which curdles light,
makes them
delicious to touch.
If accordion keys
matter to someone,
anyone, well then,
there's got to be
hope for us.

III.

A Man in Camo

A man in camouflage carries an executive
expandable attaché case covered in the same
woodland foliage and berry design of his jacket.
In the mall parking lot, he looks out of place.
I might follow him if I didn't have to exchange
this fleece for a different color, maroon or brunette.
The best disguise is a brick wall or a distance
of several hundred yards, or my face.
Everyone's always telling me that
I was at the deli counter or on the elliptical
last Thursday. I assure them I was not.
My brother does not see in three dimensions.
The ophthalmologist asked again
but still the butterfly's wings did not budge
from the cardboard, not even with the plastic glasses,
and Mike was too young to fake it.
A patch was prescribed. My brother grew up,
became a pastor, replaced seeing with believing.

Myth

She defined grace differently
from Catholics and Neoclassicists
and was thrown into a deep well.

After many years she repurposed
her rib cage into a jet engine,
strapped the babies to her back.

Used up all her fire, leaving
that well. So when she fell down
another, she settled there.

When her grown children visit,
they bring Chinese take-out
and descend by stone stairs.

Monterosso al Mare

Bluff is not a place
but a verb. A half-day
hike from the giant;
longer from Byron's
Grotto. I'll say the terraces
grew olives, but they're
lemon trees. I'll learn.
There used to a road
until it washed away.

Dehiscence

in the desert garden
water rots root systems
so the pistachio tree
pushes out fruit
high in fat

highly combustible
in cargo holds while
drowsy second mates
and ordinary seamen
sail into open water

lucky for us
there's California
to circumvent ships
and out-orchard
Mesopotamia

our aunt's arrived
with her dried apricots
and unplaceable accent
summarizing her paper
on Scheele's green

there goes little brother
slipping into the
basement to get high
give him some space
he'll grow out of it

the party's just
a bowl of salted nuts
an awkward exchange
between generations
re: purpose v. function

I read somewhere
that one can reach
maturity intact still
splitting along
a seam is preferred

by those with flat teeth
and machines that shake

kernels from the tree
I guess it depends on
one's idea of a seed

The Great Vowel Shift

Once the epidemic eased, we began
to inspect the mouths of our neighbors.
A finger sweep revealed dress hems
unspun into fleece; bats camped
in baby's stead; ears raised to ire.
We feared for our health, so recently
returned. What would become of home?
We hoped to staunch the flow, over-
corrected, scrubbed tongues until
beets taste of brine. Still, our lovers
sang in their sleep, swore at pregnant
cats on the stair. Left us to moan the loss.

The Advent of Modern Psychology

I don't believe in restraining the insane,
despite the consensus on estrangement
and the summer season. Nevertheless,
the patient exists in such a state, is capable
of causing the body considerable harm.
The extra guards are for his protection.
We took his clothes only as a precaution.
Sycophants, so-called Loyalists (the coachman
and the Baroness with her damned umbrella)
indulge the poor man in his paranoia.
Accuse me of treason, they would have him hang
from a necktie, from a bathrobe belt. No plot,
only progress, only a well-trained bureaucracy.
I recommend fresh air and strenuous activity.
A reassessment of the individual vision.
You must not think I am insensitive, blind
to beauty; I feed the swans. I recognize
the elegance of a neck when the head bows.

Youngest

In the way other sisters bicker over baby names,
Meredith calls dibs on the car accident. Blind spots
or black ice might cloud cause, prevent resentment.

I've heard drowning is relatively painless. Silence
and plaids of refracted light. Of course, there's always
the possibility some sport fisherman—with my luck,

a cardiologist—might pull me up, press my heart into
beating again. The difference between my sister and I:
while she may survive, she refuses to be saved.

Middle Child

Once, I sat down in a circle, left space
for the friend whose family was always

running late. In Sunday school, snacks
followed a story of three men in a furnace.

Then songs with arm movements. I rocked
the baby found among the reeds, suited up

for spiritual battle, then measured the space
before abdomen and sternum: the parameter

of Christ's love for me. What a crock. I shoot
a well whiskey, leave the creeps at the bar.

On the sidewalk, girls smoke and slur verses
of camp songs. *She winked her eye and said,*

It'll be a hot time! In the old town! Tonight!
Lord, I hope they don't link arms, don't sway

or kiss cheeks, rouged from dancing and liquor
and December. Don't, I'm standing too close.

I don't know the words. Some guys jump
into the cab I've flagged. Shit. Shadrach,

Meshach, and Abednego. And perhaps a fourth,
his face unrecognizable in the flare of brake lights.

Pedals

One slows the country road
to tall grass and sunset.

Other to the floorboard,
we move mountains.

The Rules

Hitching a ride to Venice, city like stolen shoes,
the augur says, You must choose between green and grey.
Venetians sigh behind masks of stained glass,
say, Born in one tomb you live in another.
Amid shards of glass and old glue, you say, Am I
the hero of this mosaic? The Buddha, shaking his head,
says, The origin of suffering is attachment.
You say, I'll be right back,
return to the kitchen to refresh your drink.
Some say, If there's ever a time for you to picnic, it's now.
Others, Three walls signal a beginning or an end
of a century on horseback collecting heads in a sack,
a gift for the virgins in the luxury boxes.
What else is there to say? Close the map and look
to the big-eyed bird coughing up bones. The mice sing,
Life is full of things to see, in a way.

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