2006

Chutes and Ladders

Katherine E. Anderson

West Virginia University

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Chutes and Ladders

Katherine E. Anderson

Thesis submitted to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Poetry)

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Jim Harms
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Department of English

Morgantown, WV
2006
ABSTRACT

Chutes and Ladders
Katherine E. Anderson

Chutes and Ladders is a collection of poetry based primarily around our collective notion of childhood. The poems that follow are both a celebration and a critique of the American Dream, the picket fence, and all the things that lie beyond that. The text is written from the perspective of a variety of characters and voices. Like childhood, the meaning behind each poem is typically clear when experienced or first read, and more complex when remembered or read a second time.
Acknowledgements

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Chutes and Ladders

Poems by Katherine Anderson
INTRODUCTION

The Rules

Here is Spot. See Spot run across the page. Here is Baby Rebecca. See Baby Rebecca pull Spot’s tail. See Spot yelp. See Spot run away to live with a family that understands him.

The poems that follow are inspired by similar narratives and tails (pun intended) from America. They are a jingle written and intended for everyone and no one to sing along with. They should remind the reader of their own growing pains (actual or imagined) and the reader should feel free to project their issues and hang-ups onto the poems as needed.

Childhood is a complex and varied experience and so are the style choices of these poems. Some of the poems have long, rambling lines, while other poems have shorter, blunter lines. The longer-lined poems are intended to reflect the excitement of the moment. They carry the reader through without allowing him/her a rest and, therefore, encourage the reader to experience the poem and the poem’s contents with little reflection. In contrast, the blunter-lined poems do allow the reader to rest and reflect, thus furthering the reading experience from the experience occurring in the poem. If the long lines prompt the reader to relive their childhood, the shorter lined poems should prompt the reader to lie back on the therapist’s couch and think about the damage done.

Both the long lined poems and short lined poems have intentionally awkward moments. The longer lined poems are often awkward through their rambling and subsequent wordiness, while the shorter lined poems are awkward because of their
stunted nature. The impulse for this move needs little explanation as childhood and
growing up are inherently awkward. Of course, awkwardness (in life and poetry) is a
risky and potentially disastrous move. Awkward poems and people are often avoided and
sometimes even laughed at. It’s difficult to walk the line between awkward-charming
and awkward-annoying and many people have failed. These poems do take that into
consideration. They attempt to compensate for their sometimes bow legged stance by
wearing sensible patent leather shoes and avoiding the more treacherous stilettos. That
is, when the sentences are longer (trickier to navigate), the content tends to be clearer and
vice versa.

Of course, poetic content is almost never “clear” and these poems are no
exception. After all, how clear is childhood? Typically, it’s a series of fuzzy moments
and hard to pinpoint feelings of inadequacy mingled with joy. Most things we remember
as satisfactory are actually denial and most things that we think of as unfortunate are
actually an important life lesson. Such is the case with these poems.

As with our actual growing experiences, these poems must be read and accepted
with a certain amount of skepticism. They do not always provide clarity and they rarely
provide closure. Just like life, they are filled with incorrect assumptions about proper
child rearing techniques and ideas about normalcy. They poke fun at the most average of
childhoods and encourage further destructive relationships for unhappy homes. The
reader may often hear their mother shouting “re-sig-nation” from the backdoor of their
childhood house.

Nonetheless, if the reader so wishes, these poems should give her an opportunity
to play out her nervous energy in a safe zone. As the title, “Chutes and Ladders,”
implies, it’s all fun and games from here on out. There are opportunities to imagine
and/or ignore growing pains as the poems suggest. There are places for the reader to
make up her own rules and read the poems as she sees fit. In the end, there will, of
course, be winners and losers, but as long as no one starts throwing game pieces,
everyone will still be rewarded with cookies and milk.
Opening The Picket Fence

Dear Alfalfa, Father of All Foods and Family Dinner Tables:

Once again I have found myself unable to finish my brussel sprouts. Despite the usual familial urgings, I am unable to sympathize with the recent plight of Bosnian refugees. I hope this doesn’t weaken our relationship and I promise to improve both my marrying potential and my food pyramid adherence in the very near future.

My mother speaks as though the kettle were whistling and the turkey overdone, while one of the hens has just given birth to a two headed chick.

“Of all the neighborhood children,” she says, I am still the most likely to drown in 2 tablespoons of water or leave the stove on.

She yields a certain percentage of each crop to God given mistakes. She does not believe in God, but she is superstitious about black cats and single parenting.

P.S. Though it is certainly no excuse, the recent increase of suffocation by grocery and produce bags has dramatically heightened my concerns regarding participation in the traditional family. The risks associated with leafy green consumption and, in general, family dinners are weighing heavily on me and I must admit that I have considered home-wrecking via instant rice.
I

Home Bound
The Mother Instinct: One

Here is Ruffles
the Dog,
in stuffed animal form.

Baby Rebecca chews on his ear
nimbly, obliviously.
A little fake fur gets stuck to her lip.
**The Mother Instinct: Two**

Dolly Carol has lost an arm.  
The hole in her rubber shoulder  
reveals a hollow likeness to a chest cavity.

Baby Rebecca barely notices.  
She has bigger problems as  
her tea set has been chewed on by  
Ruffles, the real-life family dog.

Teething with rage,  
Rebecca picks up the lifelike  
lifeless arm,  
raises her hand high above her pigtails  
and brings Dolly Carol’s reaching fingers  
crashing down on Ruffles’ head.
Pop Rocks

It will all fade away,
starting with snowflakes
when you are very young
and moving onto goldfish
as you grow older.

In childhood,
everything tastes better,
even plastic.

You can remember
chewing on the boot of
your favorite superhero,
getting little gold specks
caught in your teeth.

You can remember being a superhero
just by association of
a tutu and a wand your mother called spatula.

Those were the days.

Those were the days when
sunset meant something like:
sun taking brief nap,
will return tomorrow for
soda and Cracker Jacks.

Things not perceived as significant problems:

dying fairies in a mason jar,
too many puppies to keep,
American Chestnut tree blight.

But then,

after seeing the movie about the exploding sun
at the Richmond planetarium it was

time to take off the gold boots
and pull up your tutu,
Darling.
Super Hero

The plan for world domination was small, roughly sketched out in a few Coleco video games.

After all, the house was small and the smell of citrus cleaner, not to mention the burnt orange paneling, gave the family a feeling of germination, or at the most, slow growth.

At lunch, the girl stirred her chocolate milk until the glass burst, staining her green pinafore.

It was a time when superheroes were crafty with their hair and evil went pure down to the elastic wrist band.

Nonetheless, when the parents went for an afternoon drive it was not a formal outing; and in fact, no such thing ever existed in that particular household.

The girl watched their station wagon pulling out of the driveway and thought about all the adventures disproportionately allotted to orphans.

Later, eating dinner in front of the television, America strutted by, while her peas and carrots made her look foolish.

She was incorrigible. She ate them with her fingers.
The Golden Age

Twenty-four hours:
    the front stoop,
    the cradle,
    the play in his fingers.

The washboard was not to be befriended. The telescope was of itself and in itself. The water was everywhere it could have been. The backdoor was always open. His mother strove to make the bath tub larger; the sailboats stopped only for the drawbridge, and sometimes for lunch.

Up the fence,
and over the wall,
and into the neighbor’s backyard
    (see also: the thicket outside the pre-school, on account of the boredom caused by nursery rhymes).

The moment was transcendent; it breathed like the tall tales of beanstalks and children in shoes. It was his favorite piece of candy (persistent); security lay in his hands, beneath the redness of the clay soil.

Out of the crib, from floor,
across the floor, to chair,
up the chest of to table,
drawers like latter rungs to counter,
to the window of to the cake
the second floor, on top of the fridge.

Each moment (sugar and soda) fizzed and fizzled.

Here is a mud pie that was not eaten, an origami fortune teller, an entire Sunday afternoon.
A Day’s Work

You were looking under the fern,  
the fern that mother planted.  
You wanted to know where the water went.  
Other than that,  
you couldn’t hide the fact that you liked to dig your hands in mud,  
slide them around on your pants,  
and plaster your sister with mud freckles.  
Later that day, at dinner  
everyone asked about you.  
They wanted to know your favorite school subject,  
why you never seemed to like the color of your new sweater.  
You knew,  
but you only grinned.  
Surely,  
when it came time for a day’s work,  
washing behind the ears was enough.
To do list:

Sunday: Hair plucking/pulling.

Monday: Sighting of teachers and rulers when they come about with report cards showing “C”s and “D”s and sometimes “F”s. Fortunate blurring from puddle dropping to follow.

Tuesday (afternoon): Noose tying and fairy squashing – why does your little sister always leave those darn dolls on the floor anyway?!

Wednesday: It’s all about wanting to know what’s inside the canary; pulling its bright yellow feathers off its wing, feeling its heart beneath your thumb, and gently pulling on each of its overwrought legs.

Thursday: Ms. Sillerman’s dog – excessive yelping (not to be confused with the more admirable barking), punishment yet to be determined.

Friday: Cookie baking day for following day’s bake sale – feign scraped knee.

Saturday: Meeting at ship rock with Jack, Mark, Tom, and Jim. Discuss playground takeover for upcoming week, give special consideration to the problem of girls taking over swing set.
Essay On the Problem of Asparagus

Asparagus is something green that all children abhor. I can’t tell you why except to say that it’s not peanut butter and jelly. It’s not cookies and cake, and frankly, it doesn’t have a micro malleable thing to do with liking licorice. That’s why children don’t like it and that’s why children don’t sing for joy when you serve it. That’s also why animals so often become sick after dinner.

On the topic of dinner and wildlife, we can all say that we feel very furry on certain occasions. That is, there are days when we can’t even fathom the idea of eating with our spoons and knives and forks and little salt wells that come entirely too adorned with crystal roses and other insufferable things.

Why don’t we like insufferable things? Because our little legs can’t carry us that far and our little mouths can’t stretch that wide. Because when we sit down for dinner sometimes we can’t even make it to the table cloth before we have to jump into the tree trunks that hold up the table and other legged things in our house that are unnecessarily covered with doilies.

That’s why we won’t be home for dinner and why we don’t need any of your nasty, awful asparagus – and if we did, we wouldn’t eat it with our forks or our knives or even with our bellies waiting to be rubbed.
Hubcap

Lunch was potted ham on crackers
and afterwards,
creeping out onto our dirty, tobacco colored shins,
we played Hubcap.
“Hey mister! You lost your hubcap!”
Hubcap.
The car would halt and when the balding,
chicken dinner-filled man in neutral colors
climbed out of his car, we’d all run and hide,
tripping over our flip-flops while he cursed.

I never threw a hubcap without guilt,
but after a long day,
there was usually a good scab to pick at
and the Sack Man
for anyone who threw hubcaps after dinner.
II

School Days
Chalkboard: Sallie Jane Thinks About the Word “Consumer”

Sallie Jane sat upright in her seat.
She was admiring Sallie Sue’s Crocodile-esque handbag.
Sallie Jane wanted one just like it.
Unfortunately, she knew if she asked mama,
mama would be defensive.
Mama would say,
you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear,
and Sallie Jane would stay quiet.
Mama hadn’t worn the pearls out in a long time.

Mama was upset right now.
The new puppy was so messy!
Already, the grass had worn away around the doghouse.
Sally Jane wanted a newer puppy.
“Oh well,” she thought giggling,
“you can’t pull a puppy out of an oyster shell.”
**The Textbook**

The head girl,  
the one whose mother always braided red ribbons into her hair,  
trotted across the room and joined the corral.

The girl who wouldn’t let you push down on her crayons  
was organizing her collection of animal erasers.  
The little green squirrel  
stared at me.

The ponies whinnied in exasperating laughter.  
It was almost lunchtime. The hay of the day was  
a pepperoni roll and the fat boy  
who could never finish his lunch.

The girl who monopolized strawberry shortcake that year  
was busy showing off her Trapper Keeper.  
It was quite lovely; everyone agreed.

Desert was blueberry cobbler.  
I waited patiently by the crust.
Getting Above Your Raisin’ at Buckwheat Elementary
(Home of the Fighting Bulls)

That year, reading group number four, The Holsteins, met every day before lunch. Brandi, who was one of us, snorted after each word. Meanwhile, from across the carpet, The Fillies pranced over each word like blue ribbon purebreds.

By October, The Fillies took all the parts in the school play and The Holsteins knew they were not for show. Beef and cheese, steak and cheese; get your pitchfork ready, The Holsteins would be working the snack table.

Before Christmas break, The Holsteins read *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. Brandi snorted more than usual. After lunch, she nominated me for class princess.

The other Holsteins looked uneasy, but no one seemed to notice since cows have notoriously thick hides. I swatted away a few flies and chewed aimlessly on some grape gum that had lost its flavor.

In March, I was moved to The Ponies. Later that month, at recess, I refused to play tag with any of The Holsteins. It was a big moment for me and one of The Fillies even nodded in my direction.

On the front lawn, at the end of term awards ceremony, The Holsteins shuffled about uneasily. They all received an award, but mostly they just wished for some shade. I got “Most Improved” and I nearly trotted to the stage to receive it.

**

*The Holsteins came home today, but no one was there to greet them and they were not themselves.*
School Bus

Missed the ride with first kiss.
According to bus driver
weather conditions were,
“Couldn’t find Jack.
Couldn’t see Jack.
In fact, Jack couldn’t even see me.”
I barely noticed his rant.
I sat waiting for our arrival like
a wad of gum stuck to the pleather seats.
Was unsure of my ability to pass the math test:
three squared times two squared equals the sum mileage of
two busses colliding on top of Cherry Hill,
if one leaves River Oak at 3:00 and the other
leaves Ingleside Road at 2:00. That’s the problem.
Couldn’t stop calling his house and asking for Stacey.
Must have been the new red jumper.
Must have thought I was some kind of gold star
when I dialed, but now, I realized I would
rather hurl myself underneath the wheels of the bus
that go round and round than ever face
Jack again. Will write suicide poem and submit it
to the school anthology. Or better yet,
will turn my back on the storm
and pray for snow days.
Lesson

Mrs. Smith: How about the word “habitually.” Tyler, can you use the word habitually in a sentence?

Tyler: Chad “habitually” picks on me.

Mrs. Smith: Very good, Tyler! Chad “habitually” picks on me.
School Yard Bully

You were giving lip, in the schoolyard shade of *Appetizing Apricot,* which was all the rage. “Nice dress,” you said, but we all knew it was peach and anyways you never said anything nice from the top of the tower on the swing set where Sally wasn’t a princess because:

you didn’t say so that year

my cheeks turned to marble, growing paler in sections by the day. *Vitiligo: Loss of pigmentation in patches.* Often caused by stress. No way around it, No way to go, but across the monkey bars.
Hopscotch Skips a Beat

Here is my pencil.
I brought it for participation points.
Here is my heart.
I brought it for Valentine’s Day.
This morning, we’re making bags to
hang up along the chalkboard.
Here is the thing that makes all school girls
flinch –
Are you listening? –
patent leather shoes.
Don’t be shy,
I know your feet are blistered from
pacing the hopscotch board during recess.
And when the bell rings?
When the bell rings, you’ll receive your Valentines.
When the bell rings, you’ll
jump ginger footed through those cards looking
for the heart that left you an extra note.
Your word for the day is ‘reconcile.”
Detention: A Brief Look at After School Activities

Cigarettes, orthodontic appliances, 
nickels, pennies, 
feet up like the search for 
happiness in mother’s couch.

Either very sad or very happy, 
arms hurt, 
problems with identity 
(yesterday, bumped into a chair and apologized).

Molding to:  
he  
his  
he. 
She wrote a poem (in purple ink). It stained her fingers and probably ended up on your 
french fries, but it wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Note to adults: what makes you so sure that you are above the knots and calluses on her 
feet, the tension on her tongue? To contrive each extremity’s use would be - fixation.

Her loverboy stared down at the floor, but refused to reflect. He lived simply (humbly) in 
their complexity as if he was the principal’s pet Tabula Rasa. She giggled, thinking of 
his heartbeat coming into rhythm with the scoreboard, the alma mater, the “fingertips” 
short policy; 
  intense itching caused by cheerleaders’ trans-gym-floor handsprings.

It is predicted that 
the constant glare 
(fluorescent, facial, or otherwise) 
will continue to create 
a challenge to interpersonal and spatial maneuvers.

To avoid making the guidance counselor uncomfortable, the anxiety has been delicately 
stuffed with pronouns and specimen slides. Unfortunately, the entirety of the fucking 
gizzard could not be removed. It became obstinate after being forced to remain in the 
lunchroom after the second bell.
Across the Lunch Table

Julie could have been on a milk carton
from our school lunch tray,
blond like apples
baked and long legged like a picket fence in
the Carolina sun.
Freckle faced and porridge fed, here was a story
about introspection, retrospection or
possibly the greener grass on the other side.
When she left to go back home (west),
she read the maps,
looked for roads without tolls.
In Garden Grove CA, she called me to say that she was
employee of the month at IHOP,
could list all of the syrups in English and Spanish.
She was 16 then, had always bruised easily,
had always been impressionable, like a banana,
but from Carolina,
I couldn’t see the circles under her eyes.
After high school, she wanted to teach the deaf.
She liked the feeling of a language
she could hold in her hands.
As a volunteer, she translated science
for an 8th grade class;
signed – “temperate,”
“dissolve,” “desert.”
She had always been a terrible nail biter, nervous
when speaking, had kept her hand by her mouth and,
now, when signing, her mouth by her hand.
In all that time, she must have grown exhausted by her silence
because I heard nothing,
but rumors,
which grew in my Southern town like sour grass and then
even those died out
and it was just me,
staring across the lunch table.
Shedding

I peeled the plastic coating off my grammar book.  
I thought a lot about my own skin,  
how tough it was or how  
that morning I’d wrapped it in my favorite sweater.  
I had high hopes for that purple knit,  
but the bell rang anyway and then I was  
in the hall, peering into the snug  
space of my locker until I slowly  
got out my science book and went to 4th period,  
Science, where we passed around the cocoon of a moth,  
where he grew warmer and warmer in our each clammy fists, until  
he blushed and broke apart, coming into the world too soon,  
his immature wings tearing  
like tissue paper as he tried to spread them.  
At lunch I passed a note to Steven  
and he looked at it, and left it on the table beside his sticky napkin,  
too far for my crumpled fingers to get to  
before the assistant principal  
took it and looked at me and put it in his pocket.  
And I felt my words enclosed in there,  
a crust covering the pot pie on my tray,  
as I looked down.
III

Extra-Curricular
Summer Vacation: Vintage

There are a lot of polka dots. 
They represent roundness (wholesomeness), of course, and proportion 
(as seen on the hips of Marilyn Monroe).

The women wear catty glasses 
and makeup colors like 
Sun-Kissed Shale  
Caribbean Coral and  
Bohemian Blue

They smile when you take their picture, but 
even so…

the sand is an unwieldy creature. 
It understands fragmentation. It tries to persuade you, 
but you’re annoyed. You pick it from your fingernails, your hair. 
You want to be yourself again. 
You’re convinced that’s possible.

You’ll try anything…
plastic shovels, matching buckets, sand art. 
You want completeness, balance, elation, 
things easy to discriminate from the everyday, run of the moat castle.

At some point, you’ve dug up little clams, 
seen them in their multitude of colors, 
and wanted to grab them, take them home, 
put them in your collection, but instead, 
watched them scurry back down into the sand running away 
because you were afraid one might bite your finger.

You can’t even think about what will happen when the tide comes up.
Laser
Bowling/Skating/Tag 1993

Cheese Sticks,
menu in prices multiple of .25 cents,
dill pickles straight from the jar.
The boy who put on my laser tag belt
pointed out that my fly was undone.
I blushed and grabbed my gun.

The bathroom walls were painted turquoise.
My friend Christi cried
whenever a Boys II Men song came on,
and when Ray Straight jilted her
during the couples skate.

Out in the rink, under the disco ball,
boys and girls rolled their hips,
ground their skates into the floor.

In the bowling alley,
a pat on the butt makes all good bowlers strike
out. Teen pregnancy was rampant enough
that you could sneak a ball home under your shirt.

The lights flickered and jumped around the room.
We searched for empty corners.
There was no perspective to be had.
**Summer Job**

For what it’s worth,
I always wanted a moat;
but beside the prince
and his green lips
my too blue collar prints

smeared so I

I stayed in the public gardens.

Summer on my father’s construction site:

laying bricks,          foundation leveling,          oldies station,
door lock,             yellow chalk,              buzz saw,
green smoke,           cabinet making,
Tension in the Tea Set

I

They walked down the street
arms buttoned,
clasped.

The woman smacked and snapped
her gum between her lips
and pointing to the store said,
“you know what I want
if they have it,”

[A gumball machine?
I can’t imagine.]

some of those little
rubber bands

[The World’s Largest
Ball of Twine?]

II

It feels like
the whole world’s trying
to wrap me around
their 3rd grade science project,
their fat, clumsy wrists,
their mother-doted-on pony tails.

[You never know
what the breaking point is…
could be
a compulsive gum chewer.
Even in a pack of 100,
all the bands are different.]

Yeah, but we’re all “snap-snap” men deep down inside;
and whenever it seems like we have to say no,
our self-loathing can be measured by
the tension in our tongue.

It can be measured by pulling back our slingshots
aiming towards a small animal

and counting the seconds it takes to let go.
[Here’s a hint: you’re the animal]

III

Think about the first time you ever made a friend play with paper dolls when they wanted to play with the tea set.

[Let me guess, did Fun with Family Freud tell you it all started there?]

Every time you had to eat your peas, you thought, “wonder what the dog would look like dressed as a fairy princess?”

[Maybe you could use one of your dance recital tutus as a collar or headdress.]

But then Ruffles, with his neck wrapped in elastic and tulle, would never sit still.

[You’d swallow hard, think about your past or future life as a spider. I get it. Karma, snapping back on you.]

IV

They were out.

[Of the rubber bands, the clerk said]

No, just sold out.

[Can you direct me to the slingshots?]
Diner Ensemble:
Part I
Free Refills

Jennifer worries about slipping on the serving line. She grips the stainless steel counter. She pours my Sprite. She can’t forget the spaghetti order; she can’t forget the sauce. Table seven has a special order.

She wears no-slip tread shoes. She sprinkles sugar on the line.

Red sauce with mushrooms. Red sauce, no mushrooms. Her section is now half-empty.

She fulfills the sugars, she marries the ketchups.
Diner Ensemble:
Part II
Today’s Special

Sara is a Waitress at Waffle House. Her voice, like forks on plates, falls into my first cup of coffee like milk from a hand-squeezed cactus.

The kitchen staff knows their oven hath no heat like the shrill tongs of Sara’s voicebox.

As she walks by in her rubber soled shoes, the men at her counter speak softly and I think: by God, that girl really takes the pie.

I want a piece.
The Washing Shop

It was like a Norman Rockwell
but without the laughter…
so it was Edward Hopper
and the machines were dull yellow.

Please come with me.
I love someone to share my errands with.

The leaf brown counter,
the void sink,
the spring in the rinse cycle,
the summer in perm press.

Whole families being hung out to dry:

_Somebody might accidentally take_
_my one load of clothes from this room on Sept. 1._
_That’s all I have for one week’s change of my family._
_It really means a lot –_
_we have no money to buy so many new clothes._
_We have no clothes to change now._
_If you take those clothes by accident or you want those clothes_
_please keep some which fit you and then put the rest of them back._

The snack machine,
honey bun, was
a white Tom’s.
The lampposts outside, were topped
with white globes and cast shadows
on the quiet sidewalk.
All of those wrinkles
those lost
those cottons,
    rayons,
    wools.
Fun House:
Why Surrealism Makes Sense

You walk in through the clown’s mouth.

The mirrors distort your image,  
make you look like: a wolverine,    
a pervert,                         
a dollar-store rebate.

You can’t see the floor,  
but it’s gritty    
and you suspect it’s made of sandpaper  
(there’s a sudden realization of how rough life is).

Whole walls are covered in feathers.

When you walk around the corners,  
the hired ghoul grins  
and brushes your arm.    
He thinks you’re beautiful.    
He thinks you look like: a damsel,    
a messenger,                      
a three-layer sponge cake.

On the swinging bridge,  
you think about your mother,  
her gray hair glistening  
like the streamers hanging from the far walls.

You miss her.    
You miss the feeling that life has a purpose.

The rocking overlook gives perspective.    
The lights there flicker like  
the silver of a crowned tooth.

*  
(wink wink)
The Wrong Side

I don’t expect you to understand this, what with your disposition against fringe jackets;

but I need to hear more songs about the heart felt/land/ache.

I need to see plain folk/Jane/toast.

I want to feel the wind/music/ground

beneath me there is the root of all paradoxes in boot spurs and eco-conservation.
I want to make up for that in knitting with my daughter beside me, ask Madame Duval to join the Ladies Aid Society, ask our husbands to step out for the day, meet you at the tracks.
Essay on the Problem of Banjos

I wish that,
for once,
I could hear banjos
and not think of plaid
or bails of hay.
I just want to know
what those notes really sound like.
Dixie

Dixie is a land where all good people like oats
and all bad people eat them anyway.

Geographically speaking,
if they aren’t walking a straight line,
90° is the only alternative.

In these parts
it is plain to see that,
when cut down,
all trees contain knots.

In a local bar,
drinking cheap beer is a matter of humility,
a testament that you’re square with God.

Sun is for more than picnics.
The fields are growing up tomorrow
and the people are plowing their own way.

I miss Dixie.
I miss your tin, trumpet voice
and your browned, boasting hands.
IV

Late Bloomers
Over the Fence

There are no role models for girls in floral dresses: soft spoken wallflowers, asters who are late to bloom.

They struggle to button and zipper backs, but they might as well eat buttercups for all the good a man’s attention will do them.

At night in ballrooms and bars across the valleys these desert stars close up, pull their delicate arms in around their faces.

Few care to notice a dandelion in the yard. Those who do think, better to pull them up, throw them over the fence.

*

Many die well holding their seed heads tall and proud long after the flowers have finished.
Bonehead

The ring around the bathtub looked larger than it should. It looked like elves had worked all night to put it together, painting some sort of dirtying varnish around the rim just so this morning you would wake up and think you were a slob when in fact you weren’t. In fact, you were just average – liked your tea or coffee mild and your women just a little bit less vexed than the oft referenced Greek mystique (thinking specifically of the kind that turn their men into scorpions and behead them whenever their appetite riles around the male’s mutinous spirit and scum-inflicted habits). In other words, for the love of God, you just wanted someone to lay your neck around. Someone who didn’t care much for the softer side of things and in the evening left a ring around the tub and never complained about your beard shavings in the sink basin. Because otherwise, that’s what Grecian goddesses do when they get their hair all up in a fiery bunch and their little knuckles all woven into gnarled tree trunks like they were going to crush your head into a small, but rather adorable rock.
**Flatware Means Commitment**

Girls are getting tattoos
in the crook of their back
where their mother’s tied their apron strings.

It all started with Tupperware parties
and ended with
a positive correlation between
the divorce rate and
the production of plastic table cloths and
matching utensils.

Girls remember:
flatware means commitment.
**Sentiment**

The petals, bloomed out from her green bosom where she sat on the windowsill, potted.

She dug her elbows into the dirt and leaned against the sides of the pot. *I just wanted a shoulder to curl my roots around, a place to lay my stems.*

She put her hands on her hips;

her rosy cheeks dropped off.
*If those are your hands pruning my blossoms, then maybe I’ve been over watered.*
Fins: Thoughts about Dating & The Cogito

The guy in the bar
( hammered )
talks about Descartes,
but proves his existence through perseverance.

Suddenly,
my nose begins to shine excessively,
my lips, not enough.

In the ladies room,
I thought, therefore I was.

[Argument: Each time the Cogito is repeated (by the end of the statement) the act of
thinking becomes a past act. The argument loses validity when the past act of thinking
can not be proven].

Example:
Yesterday, a moment became motion sick
and threw up on my Persian rug.

I leaped frog with time. Frog leap time. Leap frog leap!

[Objection 1: The Cogito maintains integrity through the phenomena of interrelated
events. That is, the past act of thinking is proven through the connection between present
and past (the present could not exist without the past)].

Here is what happened when you did not eat your peas:
A hedonist had a charlie horse.
A goldfish jumped out of its bowl.
A battered wife filed for divorce.

(The year I starved my hamster to death, infanticide increased 10% across species.)

[Conclusion: Even considering the above stated objection, there are no guarantees for
consequences or rewards and so the Cogito remains unproven].

The guy at the bar hopped home after me.

   The last Friday of March, we had a fly for dinner
   and afterwards, he retrieved my ball
   from an ex-boyfriend’s latrine.
Report on Dinner Dates

String beans
  w/lean meat,
the space between these items on my plate
like a grid, like a fence, like our very own alienated suburbia (joining us for dinner at
5:00 sharp), like phone sex, like cyber accouterment, like all these things we do to bridge
the gap.

He says to me,
  “I think our musical tastes would probably clash.”

We chew.
We chew in that delicate way like we don’t want to get anything on our chins, like we
can’t remember how to breathe. I wish he were eating tacos (with extra sauce). I wish I
didn’t have a fork to go with my salad.

We keep chewing, very slowly. We mention the eccentricities of our relatives and in the
Freudian tradition we discuss their influences on us. Meanwhile, we think about the
clashes and complements of one another’s genetic makeup.

In the end,
  he eats more than usual, I less. We start to wonder how we’ll get away from each
other, inside each other; simultaneously pushing and pulling; wrapping my legs around
him and holding him at arms length. Tomorrow we will both have early appointments.
We will not have eggs in the morning. I will keep one eye open if we stay at his place
and one eye closed if we stay at mine. This will not wake the other one up. We will not
be disturbed, very convenient.

All items will be single serving. There will be no leftovers. Throw your Tupperware out.
**Garden Wrecker**

These leaves fell  
and we couldn’t turn on the Weather Channel  
for what was left of the winter.

You might miss me.  
I might love you  
(in a finicky sort of way).

Your toes were making molehills in the dirt,  
burying what you said were the seeds of  
a social revolution.

I tied a stem around your ring finger,  
tried to remember the uses  
for dandelion:

liver tonic, cleanser,  
merry-making, garden wrecker.

You scraped the soil  
from your split fingernails,  
wiped the yellow pollen from the tip of your nose.

Common Plant.

We might  
tell this to the kids,  
plant a rose bush  
along the hedge

    *

next spring.
After the Red Wagon

Fathers and sons
should go together,
should sit in the couch
like pretzels and cheerios,
but here,
there’s room to sprawl.
The lamps sit on the end
tables pose for shadows.

I know what it could have been:
sticky fingers on Sunday,
a red truck,
the call of dusk to one last
ride around the block,
while instead
I remember, at age 6,
you lifting your hands
up to your lips,
swooning at your best
friend’s new tricycle.

When you started middle school,
you brought me a potted flower
in a beaded vase and I
looked at the work of your fingers,
saw each bead carefully placed,
secured,
put it in the windowsill,
and watched it grow.
Girls Can Personify Wagons Too

When the little red wagon sits on a hill,
she does not roll;
her eyes face forward
and she counts the blocks of houses ahead.

She is fond of the firm ground beneath her;
she is fond of the length of the road.

In the meantime, she sits beside the flower bed,
rocking back and forth,
carefully patting the soil down,
and squeaking softly.
Girls Can Personify Wagons Two

When the little red wagon leaves,
she takes all her favorite cups and bowls
discount store tables,
the cat.
Only she knew how to cherish them.
When the little red wagon drops her handle,
it’s like a crash heard across the cul-de-sac jungle,
each echo exploding into the next,
raising the hairs of children from the gutter.
She waits,
she rusts,
she holds the children in her bed.
When Mrs. Thompson Left

It was a catastrophic problem on the block. It was a Twister. It was circles of red, blue, green, and yellow, all mangling our limbs and minds according to the spinner (split-up). It was all anyone could talk about at birthday parties and backyard barbecues and trips to the park, and my father (who was the only other single man on the block) wouldn’t let me wear anything but dresses for two weeks and whenever I tried to put my foot down or raise my hand, I just ended up looking un-ladylike. And no one could untangle the knots in their stomach, or relieve the tension in their chest, and anyway we looked at it there was no way of unraveling the mess.
VI

Church Going
The Alternative to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

There’s not space for a billion people in heaven; any idiot knows that. When you think about it, when you think about space, you just have to let all that go:

- your teddy bears,
- your snowflakes,
- whatever you, personally, keep in the bottom of your sock drawer.

If you understand, then you know you can never wish enough, wash enough, wet eyes enough, but snowflakes on your tongue, snow angels in the last storm of March: surrendering to the elements - that’s everything done with no deadlines.
Narcissus Reflects

I sat on the edge of the tub,
the porcelain white (so white) and
cold (I was cold).
I needed to be there
with the sting of the soap
the exfoliating rock –
it was pink.
I was the color of porcelain,
on the outside,
on the inside,
I was deeply,
blush pink.
I could see my reflection
in the faucet.
It was time for that;
It was about time.
Stuffed Bunny Left in Yard

After Easter,
the bunny devolved,
    returned to the
    creator of

gravitational pull.

    On Easter
    He had been
    neon pink and foam
    entombed, one
    Easter basket at a time.

    He had been
    worshipped,

his ears – had been floppy,
his mouth – had been spun opened, yearning
for children searching.
Lights, Camera…

Around here,
all you’ve got is action,
which is up to you.

Think about it.

That’s action.
We’re Having an Enlightenment: Setting Please

There is a girl who lives in a valley, we assume this. The valley is probably on an island and, against all odds, there are horses there. One cannot ignore the connection between a girl and the long mane on a horses head. It goes without saying that the horses run free, that the girl has never caught one, that to straddle a horse implies some kind of sexual activity. We will say this all very seriously, like we know it is true. Inevitably, there are many passageways and secrets hidden in the mountains. The girl will seek each one out, pick at them like the scabs on the backs of her heels. Of course she has been walking, traveling a long time. The island, it can be assumed, represents both a full-scale model and a miniature of her psychological profile. Undoubtedly, it is both a refuge and a prison. The girl will spend a lot of time thinking about these things in comparison to her clitoris. In the meantime, she will spear fish and eat berries.
Notes on Sources

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