

4-2006

Traces

Paulette Guerin

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Traces

by

Paulette Guerin

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Laura Mullen

Department of English

Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of
the Upper Division Honors Program.

April, 2006

Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I

FRAMES	1
MOTHER	2
VISIT	3
TRUTH	4
FIRST THANKSGIVING WITHOUT GRANDMOTHER	5
VISIT II	6
BEHIND GLASS	7
FRAMES II	9
DOLL/HOUSE	11
MOVING THE REMAINS	12
NEW ORLEANS, JANUARY 2004	13
IN THE RECORD BOOK	14
GOODBYE	15
REMOVING THE SILENCE	16
RECORD	17
LOST SMILES	18
ALMOST ALL	19
GRANDMOTHER	20
BOUNDARIES	21
STARE	22
BABYSITTER	23
POSES	24
RUNAWAY	25
BEFORE DIGITAL CAMERAS	26
SECRET	27
AGAIN	28
SINGING SAND DUNES	29

PART II

PART	31
THEORY	32
ALL FLESH	33
CONFESSION	34
SCRIBBLES	35
HOLES	36
A POEM'S PROCESS	37
POEM	38
AMONG THE SWANS	39
"PIANO" IN ITALIAN	40
FLIGHT	41
FOUR FLIGHTS UP	43
PIECES	44
UNA CENA AMERICANA	45
"Questo qua è per te"	46
"Piccola Stella Senza Cielo"	47
IN ROME	48
UNSPOKEN	49
TRANSLATING	50
HIDDEN	51
WINGS	52

PART I

FRAMES

She takes off the shoes
Wet grass softens the calloused heels
Unpainted toes grip the ground

Rolled up sleeves
Arms scribbled ink stains
No soap removes

“This journey will be taken from here”
She has returned to the land she never left
Where fruitless trees are waiting

Eyes close for more than sleep
To see, in color, in gray
The harsh sunset

Days pass
A drop of water falls as if to say
Silent prayers are heard the loudest

Her face
Her hands, empty and open
Like orange peels

Here is the hand-written portrait
A name she no longer uses
The binding ribbon untied

MOTHER

Not ragdolls, beating sticks, inanimate objects,
 Slaves.
 She always referred to babies and small children
 As people.
 She talked in a grown-up voice.
 I was not the other,
 The road block,
 The hurdle,
 A plank in her vision of the world.
 I was
 The talking doll she never got at Christmas,
 The delicate one, with arms extended.
 She, a caregiver, finally.
 I hers: Eyes saying, "I need you," erasing other visions.
 Caring for this 'little person' was caring for herself.
 I was me, and she was me too. She was the broken
 Child
 Who couldn't grow,
 Hidden in the dark
 Closet
 Between oil-reeking shirts and the wall.
 The lightheaded girl always looking up to heaven,
 Leaving her neck exposed.
 "He broke all the furniture.
 It was
 Piled
 In the stairwell
 Blocking our way out."
 I was that child she pulled from the closet and held,
 While her eyes adjusted to light
 Reflecting off the new photos in our hallway
 A window of frames we looked out and into,
 A window with curtains no longer drawn.

VISIT

Returning home to almost stinking magnolias,
House creeping away from where it leans
Against the hillside. One inch between the porch
And the door steps marking the separation.
Not severed, not pulling away, just a sinking
Down like an old memory that takes effort
To retrieve.

Stone toadstool where we sat as children, feet in dirt,
Pause where pansies grew under
The sun dial casting shadows to mark the time
That we couldn't yet read.
Thick, old door. "Doorbell is on vacation.
Please knock." Vacant for years, for sale
But never sold, sitting.

A taste in the mouth of flower perfume
Registers at the back edges of tongue, sickly sweet
Magnolia tree taller than the moss-covered roof,
Moisture seeping through where winters were always warm.
I sit in branches I was always too afraid to climb.

TRUTH

Autumn winds freed leaves she captured in drawings,
Bright maple leaves refusing to linger on trees.

They fell so quickly, off by morning. But the ground
Was so beautifully buried we accepted the change,
Drinking hot tea before it too went cold.

We watched the last of the trees shrug off their coats,
But she kept sketching as if they were still there.
I wrote that they had completely disappeared,
Which was what I feared.

FIRST THANKSGIVING WITHOUT GRANDMOTHER

Broken bread, words breaking silence
Surrounding fields blanketed orange
Rakes propped against the cranberry brick
Bare tree limbs waving their last leaves
Like young ladies who used handkerchiefs
For goodbyes in black and white movies

Clanking silver, delicate china
Ivy vines winding
Like those on the hillside
She planted to keep the earth
From running away

Maple pumpkin pie, one sprig of mint
A tint of blue lingers in the darkening sky as
Warm puffed clouds drift away, to the equator.

VISIT II

December's melting ice is making lakes
Across the landscape.
Grass blades, the only green,
But sharp, pointing to icy clouds,
Bending to chilly air.
Through the bones of bare trees
We cannot tell if the shimmering water
Moves in the wind or if the trees shiver
A moving reflection.

Icicles drip on the doorstep
A new painting in the foyer for every visit
Except the young girl with short hair swinging
Who never changes, who, though young,
Always feels like my age.

Warm oven and warm faces,
Some rosy, chapped from skiing trips
Or long walks. A soothing warm,
Internal, like the rush of hot chocolate.

The warmth that suddenly draws one outside,
To feel the contrast, to not blend in with winter
But exhale steam like condensed life.

Paint-peeled deck. The flakes occupy our hands
Sweeping them across the boards, across the seeds
That have been waiting for birds. One of the helpful
Little ones begins sweeping off the leaves and
Pocketing the acorns.
Smell of snow in the air.

BEHIND GLASS

They love to write across decades, through realms.
A reply on crisp paper, the figure waiting,
That one in the photograph.

She wrote the letters he found.
Was dead before he read
Them with those eyes. Like a confessional,
Slats of covered windows let in
So little light. I dreamed of you then,
Always in black and white so you would
Never yellow.

Vintage bottle—cork is rare now,
Rarer than that wine you collect. Will be worth more
When she says, “what might have been?”
Dust would have happened, had to have happened.

The pen is in his pocket, the pen is in her hair
To free up their hands. Damn these buttons,
These now cracking buttons. Damn the tie,
I am too young to untie.
I am shaking to untie.

Skirts are so much easier, but proper women wear them. Ha!
Always leave the neck uncovered, go there first.
Trace that sweaty trickle, a teardrop years later.
Forms a pool in the sink of her back where he washes
His lips. They’ve not done this before.

It is almost time to toast at the punch bowl,
Almost through quenching thirst.
He clears his throat for the speech. All look up,
Faded, blurred but attentive.
Why are they so moved?

An honorary dance. Lights, strings!
This part is giving me problems. The dance hall,
What does it look like? They are dancing in the
Wrong halls: All the ones I’ve been to,
Not the ones where they went. And would it be
Black and white or color?
It’s all snow after leaving the 3” by 4” world.

Black and white, not counting the flowers.
Or that hair pin. Lipstick? Just a shade darker than
Natural. We were not there yet.
The war was not there, yet.
(Though they suspected.)

Visions would not wait too long.

They two are there watching through the pain
Of glass. Condensation, the heat. The vibrations
Clapping. Couldn't breathe behind glass, clapping
Ovation, ovulation, tears, sweat, blood, teeth
Still white.

FRAMES II

She's fixing her panty hose under our window,
 Dropped the letter she was clutching.
 I read her secrets with my tea.
 It was written to someone who is dead.
 I signed the letter and put it back in the mail,
 Hoping it would come back to haunt me.

~

Her calves speckled with wet mud.
 That's me, I said, looking at her,
 And considered the journey through quiet rain.
 Shoes kick up all we want to trample.

The panty hose are stained.
 I bathed. The bar of soap is new,
 I read *Ivory* with my fingers.

~

She removed her hose and kept walking
 Purposefully, forgetting to look back

~

Reflected in a bare window
 I wore my skin, tight
 After the hot bath, stretched and porous,
 Soft places I would not cover or discard.

~

Running, not yet sure.
 Hear that sound.
 Stop. Not a car, or plea to come home.
 Not a bird, not the gravel sliding underfoot.
 The gray cloud says, not rain, not yet.
 The sound, her own scream,
 Triumphant exorcism.

~

Curious to know what she had left behind,

That bookbag always on her back.
Thackery, Wharton, Chaucer,
Long-hand notes, a compact mirror.

DOLL/HOUSE

We have carved a home out of a house
Dressed this naked doll, long abandoned, long waiting for someone to claim her,
To peel away that wallpaper skin left up thirty years, find stories inside mirrors.
We gutted the place, living in the letters "us" in house
As we looked under beds, cleaned out cobwebs

Grandmother's antique doll in disrepair,
Porcelain pieces once carefully painted, now worn
Unbending knees, she always stands. Same sad smile slightly smeared, years puckered
Waiting until summer grows old to catch leaves in her hands and hair
Signs of many miles walking around her, a city growing around her,
Standing in days of rain.

We run our oily fingers over dust-clothed wood floors,
Sing a song just to hear the echo while there is still nothing
To absorb the sound, while we can still hear our own feet tread.
Raising arms to put on the hand-made shirt
Ceramics creak almost painfully as we put on the petticoat,
Anticipating winter.

Wind like a baby's first breath releases dust, wrinkled faces, traces of memory
We seem to get more rain now so we wait under the eaves pretending
There is no place to go. Only a place to *be*, where age forgets to look in the mirror.

MOVING THE REMAINS

Since you moved, Grandfather,
This house is the headstone of an open grave.
When I go to pay her my respects,
There is nothing to speak to.

You left because the old house was too full,
Holding thirty-five years of her
In carpet thread and wood veins.

But you are lost in your new house
Full of belongings
That don't belong.

At least before, your feet traced her tracks,
Shoulders brushed same walls,
Eyes found her favorite cup,
Paintings on walls kept her alive.

I never put flowers on her grave,
Only in her kitchen. She is not
In the church's plot, but in the suspended dust
That settles inside this empty house.

NEW ORLEANS, JANUARY 2004

Outside was all wet,
Away from service, business, tourism brochures.
The room down a block,
Mothy hotel, dusty chandeliers.

Eating the air around Bourbon St., not stinking, not yet.
Then, at dinner, saying, "Can you taste those flavors?"
Piano notes under the January chill.

A sense of my virginity there,
At once transparent. No one else saw it that way
Anymore.

A Tennessee Williams poem found
In the Faulkner Museum, scribbled in some
Test booklet. Another swallowed secret
Fished out of the loose-lipped mouth.

Caught up in the ironwork,
Sharp points, cold, bent around me, a frame for the city.
Bars to hold in the spirits, the mist.
Walking over the rumble, the threat
To tell me all, make me look into black passages.
Putting aside the haunting myths, but admitting
"They could have happened. Look where we are."

IN THE RECORD BOOK

I can't get enough of this alphabet,
All words, concepts, and images reduced to lowest terms: letters
Something like a Chinese character for each memory.
We can see them better like this. I can see all of you that was twisted
In the M. I gave you only a letter, on the lower-right side of the page,
Not even in the corner. You are still nine years old, still afraid to cry,
But now you are more.

GOODBYE

Sunflowers not following the sun, east to west, but petals folded in to cover the faces. They made me uncomfortable folded up like that, but they do anyway, actually, because they move like humans, more reliably than humans. They stare like I'm supposed to say something to break the awkward silence.

I said to my protector that it was a shame 'you had superpowers but no disguise like Clark Kent or Spiderman who could live a pseudo-normal life somewhere.' The enemy couldn't follow to the private life, but that was not the case with you. They knew you and so wanted to kill me. But you were still nonchalant watching a movie on the couch while the fruit on the table changed colors, which means that the Master was in our presence. I said how about eating for nourishment. You acted interested and got up but instead went into the closet where two ninjas were hiding. I didn't even hear them die. I was scared the whole time and kept telling you but the movie was your meditation that the Master advised—everyone needs to wind down to clear the mind. You were preparing to take them all on with me at your side like an unnecessary appendage and I didn't want to come with you in the first place but I couldn't let myself sit around to hear you were dead and that they had taken your body

That would mean that they would kill me for fun and the fear would cover me all over again. So I had to die beside you, I was dying beside you but you didn't see it—not you or me or us being attacked. The movie was on and you were meditating and I couldn't get in between your body and mind,

squeeze through the synapse to even kiss you goodbye.

REMOVING THE SILENCE

It wouldn't have mattered anyway
 After hours playing tug of war
His mouth was closed, his eyes were gray

Set on removing what he would not say
The feelings he no longer has
 It wouldn't have mattered anyway

He swallowed his voice and the bait
 Now all I can do is follow the cord
His mouth was closed; his eyes were gray

I have tried pulling in play,
Imitate the children we were before
It wouldn't have mattered anyway

Hands in pockets, we walked different ways
 Setting the hook until it tore
His mouth was closed; his eyes were gray.

His eyes didn't say go but didn't say stay
 Although I had him at the core
It wouldn't have mattered anyway
His mouth was closed; his eyes were gray

RECORD

I had a friend named Katrina
She was the Queen Bitch of third grade.
I was glad we were on the same side,
And I away from her spewing fury.

She was tough because her parents were dead,
Which seemed to matter a lot. She had to say it,
Could never conceal. But when she said,
“You’re my best friend,” I only kept a shred.

And now, Katrina is a letter in a long word on a page
In a closed book. The letter is M because her
Front teeth were so jagged. She liked to smile.
The letter is in black ink from a fine felt pen
(All things worth remembering are recorded this way)
Re-corded. Rope, lasso and the scene is tied up
And tied down, re-corded. If squeezed tight enough,
A scent of the day, room, teacher, returns.

LOST SMILES

Unseal the bottles, the vinegar. Waxed edges, silver peel.
The past doesn't come back to haunt, I am forever haunting it,
Green glass, unknown insides,
The spaces I only assume are finished.

Days: 7665
Unable to let the dead disappear,
Try to remember a spark for each:
Trying to re-cast ourselves,
A face, word, sound.
To make our shades feel
When everything is only vaguely familiar.

I knock on the door where they have been acting,
Those parties when death showed up
Looking for something to explain those silences
Drinking water—the healthy fuck.
Our surface is illusion
Tired of no one answering, I break the lock,
Dive ten meters deep
House with broken windows,
Never touch bottom

ALMOST ALL

Photographs silver, cold as steel frames, all of dolls.
Pain, realization. No, the moment just before realization
Blank cloth, torn. The shadow was the scariest.

Then emerged a red haired angel in a white linen dress.
Mike in front of the crucifix casting lots.
Megan bewildered
Man without gender observed indiscriminately

The stones and colors, weights, and symbols.
Long blond hair, pointed nose
High cheekbones, indented eyes
Dantean figures in our Purgatory

Stuffed doll hanging, doing penance for someone else.

GRANDMOTHER

I found her missing glove
Between two rows of daisies
And her trowel in a flower pot—
The hose she used to water pansies
On the ground by her coffee cup.

I searched for other remnants, scattered like pollen,
Wondering how far her seeds had wandered.
And then the wind blew through the blossoms
Then the wind blew through my hair,

Whispering

BOUNDARIES

Was that your hand,
Not reaching, but pressed
To penetrate the glass?

I was watching you while
I was
The glass.

Why are we about boundaries,
Parameters, punctuation?
(To close off a thought)

Keeping

Separate.

Why can't I slip into folds of your flesh,
Erase the lines of skin
Screaming "you" and "me"?

When your body senses this separation,
Does it want more than fulfillment?
Does it want to be lost, forget question marks

STARE

My lips are moving,
Free in conversation.

The white corner of my eye
Feels your pupils dilate.
The light is not changing.
I hold my breath.

I begin to taste the air in my mouth,
And my voice vibrating on teeth.
You stand too still, observant.
I feel myself, skin in clothes, hair in pins,
A wandering heartbeat.

A sudden need for silence.

BABYSITTER

We were dropped off at the lightly glued plastic box,
Identical to the other trailers in the park,
Except for blue tissue curtains
And a dry window plant.

My brother and I were never whipped
Like the others. We were “good,” she said,
Putting her hands on our heads.
We made fudge—
The magic stuff I’d only heard of.

Her belt wrapped her wasted body twice.
She smoked with the windows up, which was fine.
We kept her from flipping burgers,
Kept her from missing her soaps.
She kept us fed—cereal, fudge, cereal, fudge.

We were always playing in the dead field
Among branches and curved legs of a rocking chair
Where the trees made a cave we played house in.

When we stayed the night, we shot bottle rockets
From her boyfriend’s cold, emptied beer cans to the sky.
The next morning she wouldn’t get out of bed.
Were we scared?

POSES

My mother had visions of other places,
Once, a life pursuing art, not labor.
But I did not stay for them to one day haunt me too.

She is here in this room, posing in familiar frames
With the little girl
Who never grows old behind the glass.

Next to me, she sighs,
Familiarity is only a pose.

But she wants the moment back,
The one that hangs but never dies.
That smiles back at us.

Even I am afraid to look away
And forget my own face
Again.

I cannot ask her to break that gaze,
For when I play her song—
The one she requested night and day,

She poses for me in the yellowed sheet music.
I would ask her to move into the
New songs I've learned.

(But she cannot hear.)

RUNAWAY

I was alone in bed and I didn't know where you lived when you did not live with me. You were supposed to be with me, then, so I went out looking for you, knowing that night was dangerous here, in this area. When only yesterday our cars had blood on the handles from some crackhead checking doors for something to steal. I walked outside and it was dark, pitch dark, but people were moving about as if it were day, walking dogs, driving around with the music loud, talking audibly. I walked away from the house where we used to live and up to the house where we live now. My legs kept getting caught in traps. I jerked them out defiantly, but thorns sliced my thighs.

Scott answered the door because he lived there. He was a little surprised that I was looking for you, and pointed east for a place to start. I went to the end of the road to a tall building, waiting for someone to mug me, and felt that you were inside.

The narrow stairs slanted down, my feet slipped, and my arms grabbed the splintered railing. I was walking down fifty steps to the underground, lit only by fluorescent light bulbs to find you. I thought I was looking for your house, but people were playing and studying, walking around as in a library, either aimlessly or with purpose, none of them looking at me. I found you there, at three o'clock am, after I had been waiting in bed for you for hours. You were gathering up the last of your graded papers, putting them in a leather satchel that did not look like anything you would own, and that look on your face

Asking why on earth I would have come looking for you. My clothes were torn from the rose bushes without roses, the never ending stems of thick thorns. Two crescent moon cuts across my thighs. I showed you and you looked at it and acknowledged the large pieces of flesh ripped out that had somehow stopped bleeding. I covered them quickly so the dust filled air would not attach to them. They needed cleaning, and more covering than band-aids. But they didn't hurt; I was just afraid because my legs wouldn't move, neither up nor down the stairs.

BEFORE DIGITAL CAMERAS

I said, Aren't we seeing things again?
When my dreams began to form into a photo's negative:
Sky the color of wet tea grounds, faces dark as coffee, cream lips
We felt so underdeveloped driving that day,

Our sighs unaccounted spaces between frames.

As he drove, my eyes wandered out
To Dali's fleeting desert.
Why was I with another last night, in the dream,
Making new memories from forgotten ones?

How did it go again? You kissed
My arid lips and they felt nothing but a passing brush.
I could say *that* out loud, without alarm, if the rest
Of me had stayed dormant, had not poured sweat against the heat.

Never tell everything imagined.

Where will I hide the undeveloped
Strips? How will I sever them from the familiar frames
And keep my new lover from holding them to the light to find
The other face, hands, lips?

Slip them out the window, across boring orange sand.
Passing figures, etched in landscapes, who never get larger,
Even as we pass. The realization that
I can burn the negatives, but the etchings you will find when you touch me,

Read them like a blind man. Read them with your senses, then your hands.
I will have to explain the hieroglyphics from a fallen world.
The man who kissed me is buried, yet his face is littered all over the desert,
Strips upon strips I let slip.

SECRET

I said, Aren't we seeing things again?
I could say *that* out loud without alarm
Dreams vanish, or else where would I hide them?
They would do too much harm

I could say out loud without alarm
My arid lips felt nothing but a passing brush
Any more would do too much harm
When breath is mixed with dust

My arid lips felt nothing but a passing brush
Slip words out the window, a mirage on boring sand
When breath is mixed with dust
There form woman and man

Slip words out the window, a mirage on boring sand
Broken sweat against the heat
There form woman and man
Fallen secrets all over the seat

Broken sweat against the heat
Driving through the desert of no end
Fallen secrets all over the seat
Aren't we seeing things again?

AGAIN

I said, Aren't we seeing things again?
When the world began to look like a photo's negative
Driving through the desert of no end
Wondering what would want to live

When the world began to look like a photo's negative
Sky, color of wet tea grounds coffee faces, cream lips
Wondering what would want to live
In Dali's fleeting desert of trips

Sky, color of wet tea grounds coffee faces, cream lips
Our sighs unaccounted spaces between frames
In Dali's fleeting desert of trips
The past negatives slipping out with names

Our sighs unaccounted spaces between frames
Broken sweat against the heat
The past negatives slipping out with names
And, before us, the faces we used to meet

Broken sweat against the heat
Driving through the desert of no end
Before us, the faces we used to meet
Aren't we seeing things again?

SINGING SAND DUNES

The dunes are called barchans, bellowing a low moan
The strength of 105 decibels
To awaken the mind and spirit
Or make the body shiver even in the desert
Where the heat makes them
Roar like they do. No one can pinpoint why, or
Why my head is full of them
Singing at the same frequency

Or why I can pick out a distinct melody
From those crystalline-shaped grains
That accumulate after days of being polite,
Acting appropriately, and following the rules.
After days in bathroom stalls wondering
Who was martyred today, anywhere, because in that brief moment
I am locked in a little dim cell with no eye-level windows

The same way I feel when crossing a bridge—what
I would do if I drove off the edge, accidentally or not.
Would I open my door in mid air and let the impact of water
Kill instead of being crushed in the car, instead of giving myself one more
Minute of breath inside before the water pressure broke the
Windows and swelled this body?

I think on these things
While the sand dunes sing,
Underneath the roar, whispering
death death death death
Ever so sweetly.

PART II

PART

The threshold, a tourniquet—the other side cut off,
Worse than locked doors with no key—the places we cannot enter.
My eyes look inside the amputated room where the doorway
Never seals off a scar. You dwell there, beyond that wound,
In the phantom limb, smiling casually, living in a lost part of me.

THEORY

Afraid to give away

A secret
cracked like fortune cookies

The messages laid out in neat rows

Telling the history

of when the world was only mine,

spinning, thinking
she is the center.

If I say to you

yes

And throw the world off these shoulders

I know you would tilt the axis, reverse the rotation,

Start a revolution
around the sun.

ALL FLESH

What are we but grasses standing up to midnight?
A life so green that it must have come from
Something dead.

What are we but our own blade
Seeking the smell of being freshly cut
As if grass could be nostalgic?

Let us comb through ourselves
The parts of you that are me and I of you.
The parts that are tangled,
But woven in our greatest moments.

All beneath the surface, where life and death
Dance, then mingle. We remember our roots,
Ground ourselves there, grow out of them

I am

Waiting for your words that are my bed and
The dew that comes just after midnight.

CONFESSION

It would matter to me if you never ate an orange again
Because we shared one on the balcony of our third floor hotel room
The morning after a heavy April rain.

You went inside to shower, but returned a moment later
Wearing my plastic bath shoes with pink flowers,
Because your luggage was headed for Georgia.

I lied and said the service desk would not replace your items
So you would share my toothbrush and razor
Because sharing a bed is not always enough.

SCRIBBLES

To the spot I sit now.

Pirouetted

I

as

have picked up today, picked up my hair and shirt tail

March breezes

Burn the carbon for heat.

If I have to settle in the middle, I will

Yes.

Do I write anyway, hoping for a diamond?

Yes.

but I am afraid of writing a dirty black substance that no one wants

—like carbon?

A poem is waiting to be written,
the leaden words.

In my white book, in case I ever break down

HOLES

I hung a poem on the wall to cover the holes
But spaces between letters, words, and stanzas
Only organized them.

Words covered something but
The longer I left them hanging there,
The more transparent they became
Until the holes sucked them away,
Letter by letter.

A pattern emerges, a message from the festering
Wounds. The page lifts the secrets
That at first would not be revealed, but now scream through
Thin coverings. The message here is

There is no point in concealing;
Each dark blot will emerge
A reminder of his eyes watching from behind the wall,
From beneath the mirror he could slide over and see

Age holds no immunity

Some holes were from nails, others drilled purposely.

Small cameras

Compartments, removable panels, where sawdust
Had collected. Barely a pen's head visible in the
Sheetrock.

Ten years old. He could see everything.

A POEM'S PROCESS

Idea is born:

- 1.) Virga (vur ga)
 - wisps of precipitation streaming from a cloud
 - but evaporating before reaching earth

First draft:

- 1.) Spasmodic
 - a. having the character of a spasm; convulsive
 - b. happening intermittently; fitful: spasmodic rifle fire
 - c. given to sudden outbursts of energy or feeling; exciting

Poet:

- 1.) Percipient
 - having the power of perceiving keenly and readily
- 2.) Reticent
 - characteristically hesitant or disinclined to speak out; reserved

Fear:

- 1.) Platitude
 - a. a trite or banal remark or statement
 - b. lack of originality, tiredness

Poem:

- 1.) Laconic
 - using or marked by the use of few words; terse; concise
- 2.) Immanent
 - existing or remaining within; inherent: he believed in a God *immanent* in human beings.

Relationship:

- 1.) Tête-à-tête (tayt uh tayt)
 - together without the intrusion of a third person; intimate

POEM

I am not a savior, shoo, shoo stubborn animal.
Quick breath, fumble keys, close paws scratching sidewalk.
Why have you chosen to follow at my heels
Whimpering of hunger?

You stalk me like a stray dog claiming a master
Changing eyes and a low growl,
Snapping sharp teeth, foam flowing.

Bitten, backed against the door.
A return of the senses.

AMONG THE SWANS

At the pier's edge,
The romantic spot where the hundred white swans
Swim, keep the same mate, inspire monogamy,
There as the Galway stones drink the bitter ocean,
Lapping as someone long thirsty or long bored.

My toe in the water, you pointed to where
You read they drop
The bodies. The *they* I do not know.
We cannot be sure, I say,
Some black seaweed drying on the rocks. It just ends.

A pier should end, but it *is* the end for some.
He is regretful for telling,
And now I am sure of less,
No longer regarding the world or cities
Or the inevitable dark planks as symbolic

Or literal, off which they are forced to walk or are thrown,
Unsure of yes, myself, for a moment,
I did not see imagination coming
To suffocate me in the trash bag,
To freeze me in the water like

Last night's dumped body of the unnamed girl
Trapped with my own blood, my own breath,
But only for a minute until I return to the surface, my toe
Now out of the water, among the swans.

Colored cottages in a neat row like small candies
Blurred horizon line.
We should be sailing,
Even though we don't know how

“PIANO” IN ITALIAN

Means ‘slowly’ or ‘softly’

Not just the *sound* of piano being soft.

Key of C: its own natural essence.

Piano music should be soft, here,

Like a sun-warmed wind on goose-flesh.

Not just some music box in its upright wood case

Built around the feathers inside that fly out

When unlocked with the right key.

Comforting music. Soothing in a hospital.

Roots, like ancestors. I listened before I was born.

Before I was water or dust or breath.

FLIGHT

*Sei una bella ragazza*ⁱ

Her first words, taking my hand

Not sure how I even made out those sounds

I knew so little that day:

Lasagna, pizza, pasta, ciao,

Dove si trova il bagno?ⁱⁱ

Necessity produces learning.

Sono stanca, dormo.ⁱⁱⁱ

Wood and marble floors, 20 foot ceilings, four stories

My own balcony! No air conditioning.

Smell of basil at the door, just coming from school,

After pointing to my house and yelling

at the bus driver, “Casa! Casa!”

When the bell to signal didn’t work.

He didn’t listen and took me far away, to the next stop

Walking, crying in the August (Agosto) heat

Ferentino, Frosinone,^{iv}

Roberta, Maria Grazia, Rita

Scrivania, lampada, stanza da letto^v

“Ripeti, ripeti, ripeti

Dovrai imparare!”^{vi}

Scrivania, lampada, stanza da letto

Mi chiamo Paulette.

Come ti chiami?^{vii}

Help me, I cut my foot

Day at the sea, hoping the salt would

Then the letter came:

“There will be flowers on the table when you get home”

Beth wrote me, only six years old.

Non mi posso svegliare^{viii}

E’ un verbo riflessivo (ma che vuol dire?)^{ix}

Late October, season for eggplant

Come si chiama? *Melanzane*.^x

Rain dripped into a moss covered well.
I thought wells in houses were a novelty

But it was only the first of many.

Cara Maria, amica mia,
Perche' non mangi?^{xi}
Maria took me to a monastery in Veroli.
Alessandro said a Pope died in this room.

Scrivania, lampada, stanza...

ⁱ You are a pretty girl. The first words my host mother said to me.

ⁱⁱ Where is the restroom?

ⁱⁱⁱ I am tired. I sleep. For the first two months, I only spoke simple sentences such as these.

^{iv} Cities in the province of Lazio. I lived in Ferentino and went to school in Frosinone, about fifteen minutes away.
Rome is also in this province.

^v Desk, lamp, bedroom

^{vi} Repeat, repeat, repeat. You must learn!

^{vii} My name is Paulette. What is your name?

^{viii} I cannot wake up

^{ix} [svegliare] is a reflexive verb. (but what does that mean?)

^x What is the name for this? Eggplant.

^{xi} Dear Maria, my friend, why aren't you eating?

FOUR FLIGHTS UP

Last school bell rings. I ragazzi trip
 Over each other down the flights of stairs. All I hear is
 Oh dear, oh dear. No, they are saying
 Oh Dio, Oh Dio, *Oh God*. Complaining how hot
 And suffocating the September heat is, so much so that they
 Kept the classroom lights off during
 Filosofia. Il professore always smokes a cigar
 And gets a shoulder massage from the girls
 Descartes: io penso...
 Maria Grazia, whom I think is Maria Grazie,
 Or Maria Thank You
 Instead of Maria Grace
 Gives me her juice. She knows more inglese
 Than most. She tries, sputters ten words to me
 For every hundred in the lecture. That can't be all but
 I tell myself that body language is 30% of verbal
 Communication, especially for Italians.
 I read with eyes, listen with eyes.
 My ears are tired, not trustworthy. Writing is
 All over the walls, which are ashy colored.
 We joke about the lack of fire exits.

PIECES

At least "piano" is a word here
It doesn't mean the instrument piano,
But "floor level" or
The adverb "quietly."

But at least I can pronounce it right.
The students probably laugh to hear me
Speak when they ask, come stai?
And I answer, "Bene, grazie. È tu?
Right out of the travel books.

Passed the record store where the students
Have a smoke before school.
The buildings are too tall for the sun to reach us yet.
The featured album is Springsteen's Lucky Town. Sorrido
But no one else gets it, that a piece, a peace has
Been given to me, who is

Always looking for a semblance of home, even if it's
Just a Coca Cola bottle. Sentimental value
Without strong emotional attachment is best. Safe to
Think about Coke in the middle of the day.
Risky to remember parents...

UNA CENA AMERICANA

The must have researched Gli Stati Uniti
Because they bought
Pollo (chicken)
Patate (potatoes)
Piselli (peas)
For una cena americana
Minus the fried part
But it was the words, not the food, I
Couldn't digest.

“Questo qua è per te”ⁱ

Dear Elizabeth, Dear Jared,
I love you. I miss you.

Your letters make me cry
 When I read them facing east,
 Where the sun rises but where
 You are the farthest.
 I have to circle the globe from that direction
 To get to you.

“Sole,” the word for “sun” sounds almost like “soul,”
Sounds like “solo”

Note to self: solo is the same in Italian
Except it is “sola” because I am a
Girl, lady, woman?

Dove sono andate le montagne?ⁱⁱ those sitting west
 Just outside the kitchen window
 Today they are disappeared
 But were they ever here?

“Pioggia,” she tells me. I grab the English/Italian dictionary.
 Oh, *rain* is coming
 The mist has taken away the first
 Familiar view of this place
 After three weeks eating breakfast facing
 The only thing permanent.
 Rain wiping away the mountains, leaving a damp residue.
 È troppo.ⁱⁱⁱ I learn that even what we think will never change
 Can disappear.

ⁱ This is for you. The title of a contemporary rock song by the popular band Ligabue.

ii Where have the mountains gone?

iii It is too much.

IN ROME

The apricots had not ripened when they all dropped from the tree, hard and green.
The smoke had not yet cleared from the air
No mirror shows a true reflection as no image makes me believe.
The world is dark, eating fingers of saints and praying to robed statues.
The blue firmament does not respond to my confessions.

In the hotel room my feet are bare for holy ground
Lies not behind red velvet ropes with golden tassels.
His light breathing carries over to my desk,
Where a razor, apricot, postcards, and three apples rest.
He is unaware that eyes watch him; he is unaware we breathe the same oxygen.
A kiss for each toe and he stirs.

UNSPOKEN

You slept so peacefully there
Where we had perched in the
Cliff's nest. I watched wings spread, using the wind,
But appearing to move as the tin whistle sent its breeze,
At once tingling my spine, cold on the neck, and warm

I had to keep myself from jumping
I did not want to leave

This is not the first time I have almost
And it has nothing to do with
It is too much music and air and breath

Staying, sitting, I want to stand
Speaking I want to whisper
Walking I want to fly
Falling I want to capture gravity
Living I want

I am asleep beside you.
Asleep and watching,
Seeing the backside of your ear
Only a breath's distance away,
While white crests thrash beside you,
Though hundreds of feet below.
My vision reconciles the two,
Deep perspective and near
Sigh like the splash,
Like the body burst

Of the skin underneath and
The not-skin we have no other name for.
The exhale that must have form,
That you see dancing. The vision
That takes shape,
Makes the ridge,
Erases the folds,
Highlights the shadows.

TRANSLATING

Do I really want to know what the Gaelic words mean?
The words that don't say, but paint as they speak,
The Irish landscape, or a reflection,
The way the world looks in choppy water
Just after or before a storm,

Not quite a picture there.
A few pieces, maybe,
Torn apart
Not asking to be put together
Or to form some obvious meaning.

When I have been given everything but mystery,
When I understand the words, always the same reply:
Is that all there is? Common language.
When the frame holds the whole picture,
What keeps my eyes there, looking?

Unless they meet the blurred horizon
Where perhaps a ship is being tossed
And the passengers are all afraid,
Where inside the darkened windows
The women comb their hair

Or their lovers comb it for them

At the edge of the frame, just beyond the eye's reach
The barefoot girl is singing like a siren.
You can hear her and would jump
Through the glass at her if only
You knew for certain that you would never find the end

HIDDEN

The long grass bends to rocks
Spread like random tombs.
No one will sacrifice a machine
To the unbreakable beings.
Rotated cows trim the field
Every few weeks, but it is always called
Long Grass Field.

The lingering clouds know the name,
A low blanket of stunning gray.
Crimson flowers bow and from their crowns fall
Sons and daughters to claim the land.

When our bodies fall, who will look
Beneath the long grass for our smiling faces?

WINGS

A pair of butterfly wings
But not a body to fly them, torn away
Resting on the ground, almost still,
But the breeze brings back a suggestion
Of movement

Blue outlined in black,
V of white, semblance of an angel flight
Colors chipping away as careless shoes
Kick up the cutting sand nothing lives in

Now we can hold the beauty in our hand
Or we think we can. There is the beauty,
There it is. I can put my finger on it,
But to touch is to wither mystery

The colors, still vibrant,
Are the pulse in my eyes
Until the patterns, all undone,
Fly