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House Burning and Other Poems

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for Gregg Bach, Susan Hallawell, and Ira Sadoff
House Burning

Fire has forced my house to crumble. I’m shattered by each charred beam. How do I rise above my clean slate sky that patches the cloud cover? The full moon hangs like a new chandelier.

Freely women are walking in a dirty city picking up sweet smelling crusts and swallowing them. I remember jogging past them on weekends, methodically side stepping them, as their arms pulled wrinkled papers from the trash.

Tonight I am out in the cold. Flames have uncurled the edges of my calendar, loveletters, blouses, turned them into vapor. We never see our own bodies unpacked, falling out of the outfit.

Later there’s stripping and doing things for money. Later the sidewalks begin to burn away. I sit on a stone wall, kicking trash can lids with my feet, decide to sidle up to a city that doesn’t glimmer. The streets fall away like loose strands of hair.
Why I'm not a Construction Worker

*after Frank O'Hara*

Today men
crude orange hats
stand in conference
near a bulldozer.
All of them
throw cigars into the circle
yank at their sagging jeans,
tilt their heads
to squint at clouds.
They debate
whether or not
to begin construction.
Already one man's hands
securely thaw,
impatient to finish
snacks and beer.
His left hand
already grips the wheel.
His right moves beyond
the snag of teeth, settles
inside his unzipped jeans.
Pausing on a Photo of a Girls Basketball Game

The photographer forced his lens on them
and drove home the shutter like a knife through frosting.
Two girls, thirteen, concentrating, are frozen:

The chunky one with the perm has the ball,
and the girl with breasts stretches out her lanky arms.
Obviously they struggle properly against one another
as an older boy aims a whistle between their legs
and ends the play, and since the chunky one
hasn't moved fast enough in the key,
the scrawny one will smile
because she'll think she gets some free throws.

What happens after the photo, after the hard game ends,
but before the fathers drive their wagons around?
...but no one has touched anyone yet.
The photographer will miss this shot.
Home, watching T.V., he'd be the first to tell you,
"My pictures are non-controversial."
The two girls, who will be held and thrown and scored upon,
won't ever unite, even in the locker room
when an older boy whispers, "Sweaty, girls?"
The hard ground puckers with crocus and soft, wet soil. It is mother's garden and unlike a park.

No maze of subway or sewage system hides below the surface. But sometimes, as children

we'd work at the farthest edge of our folks property, hammering branches together for ladders. We'd work to escape the earth. Nothing so elaborate as a skyscraper apartment, no job at a soaring radio tower,

just a tree fort. At best, a connection between two trees by way of plank,

a place to hide from our parent's eyes. We'd step away from our industry

when our mother called us down to dinner. I think of haggling with my mother

as if I were just her daughter. 

Going home splits me in two.
At Dawn

I know the man I want to love
slept with another woman last night.
This morning I'm in braids and a nightgown
with mist from my teacup. Bolts of sun
break the chill in the wind, and two bluejays
squeal near the horizon. The male swoops
and circles, lands on a limb, struts,
then takes off in an exhausting whir
only a gymnast or a female could appreciate.
I look over my shoulder and think of the river,
and the forest that looms past my yard,
of crumpled leaves, and fallen trees,
the inward turn: red exposed limbs,
torn brown bark.
Image

I look down and there's hands on my thighs.
I hear this man tell another, "She's beautiful."
The other replies, "You're just drunk. She's a dog."

Before I know it, I'm smoothing my skirt flat
before I enter my parents' house. A' O.K.
What if I could live without their grades.

Last week I bought a six pack, floated the pack in the ocean,
Naked, I treaded water without making waves.
But something fundamental was missing, like my legs.

I wrapped myself in a towel. At home
I face the over-lit mirror and see breasts and thighs.
I react favorably, knowing the comments I will gather.
To Susan

When you wake and don a sari,
already kanga's and sitars
float down mountain paths.
You eat fruit I've never seen in pictures.

When you climb up mountains in sandals,
bells jingling from your gown,
the alarm clock picks through my house.
Every day heavy snow falls here.

Mornings my hands oblige
and dry each fork, each spoon.
But imagine handling a golden Shiva
at open market!

When you dream in distant languages,
dreams of wandering the Himalaya's,
I await your dove colored letters
in the stillness that accompanies winter.
Mothers

Beyond the call of duty I'm obliged to watch women skip towards home with their children and I refuse to bear it. I'd rather read a book.

I think of reading in the lifeguard chair, when duty required me to learn to deliver babies on beach boardwalks.

Obliged to watch a film strip, to take a test, I remember jeering at the afterbirth, rolling my eyes, then lolling my head away.

I used to read all day, avoiding mothers who'd ask, "Where's my child; can you scan the water?" Mothers are frightening. You've got to love their attachment to "a little snacky pooh" and matching mommy-kiddy clothes, their interior life forced out the birth canal.
When I Got Back On Sunday

He's been gone since I got back.
It's been a week of Mondays
but now he's back. And going. Moving
on me. So, now that I know, I go
for a ride in the car
my parents lent me. I see five cars
with streamers, honking,
then a little boy on a bike
cuts me off and all I see
is spokes revolving.
I cross the tracks,
look down them as I pass
and now that I'm back
to the place where I pay rent,
there's cardboard boxes in the middle of our bed.
Splitting Green Wood with an Electric Log Splitter

At eleven we awake to the magically warm day
and the dome of green wood waiting on the grass.
Now, feeling like true workers, we lean over

the shiny red levers. The cold tickles our backs.
One time a knot, smooth as our palms, comes clear!
Our neighbor says, "Already there's frost on your screens."

We load the logs into a marvelous antique wheelbarrow.
We break for lunch. We understand the terror of old age,
of sitting near the opened oven door, of December's unmet bill.

It just doesn't apply to us.
We'll cling to falling, easy as birds from the nest,
offering ourselves to la terre ferme—

either earth or upper middle-class turf.
For us, the grass will shimmer with dandelion fluff,
floating milkweed seeds, and red, heart-shaped leaves.

Our wood, when stacked, will form a perfect pyramid—
our memory of the engine rolling its French R's,
soprano to the rude noise of split log striking split log.
In Alaska

A grizzly, on the stream bed,
lifts his head and I freeze
so I won't effect more stone to slide.
I push on, slowly, loosening rock
that plunges to a glacial pond.
When the ledge I grip
breaks clear, I'm saved
by the arc of my own body
as it twists flailing against disaster,
guides itself back, my hands
take a tight hold; one foot drags up water
so cold I'd have had five seconds
for my heart. Highpoint of my life.
Today

Rain. A slow drip through the roof,
Soaks the rug, soaks my slippers.
Garbage man fingers my trash.
Beyond, there's a distant gunshot—

Tomorrow they will layer my house
With shingles, like clothes. Cover over rot.
My mother once said, "What an ugly house!"
But too many people still enter and then leave.

Not today, though, not unless Jay, the vandal,
Has skipped a day of Junior High
Or the two townie wood deliverers
Have a drop in town and come
Over to rape me. No one should drop by.

It's raining and I alone am home to haunt
The space inside my nightgown, lift the collar
Enough away to see my body's breasts.
To go outside today would be too much
With its knotted trees and curvy thruways.

For once, the dogs stop their antics
And lie in front of the stove.
The cat comes in, sniffs, and looks around.
The dogs don't jump her for once.
She lays under a chair. I join her.
Tattoo

It won't be like a list of lost articles for the insurance man to assign a monetary value
to and it won't be like the green laid out for yet another outfit to outgrow. It will
never wilt.
I think it was Bill Mello's house that had plants everywhere. Branded, the day after
he took me to a garden party, my fame lasted a day. Lenny what's-his-name, the
other quarterback everyone will always want, told everyone I didn't and I hadn't.
I use the phone my grandfather gave me over a decade ago, after grandma died and
grandpa got a girlfriend and began the moves and I call Carolyn. Before I leave
town, she comes over my new house. When she, easing the button on her old
'fashion' jeans, tells me what the others are doing, I can't picture the others so I
defer to her memory in nods and fly away on the slightest breezy cross-wind the
open doors provide.
Children

Today I wake up and know
I won't leave this house
to haunt the places
mothers take their children.

Crammed with wood
the stove belly shines.
I'm so hot in the kitchen
I can barely continue to bake.

I have eaten
four batches of cookies
because I want to get fat.
So fat and full.
I want last night to count.

So many empty shoeboxes
line the closet. If I hadn't
eaten all the cookies,
I would have lain' them
in a shoebox to rest.
Poem in Three Parts

1
When light streams down on the earth, my neighbor's child explodes into the morning. She lifts a finger and rolls the doll's eye into its brain. To the child, "towering" simply means something overwhelming—like a bus. And she's right, and the daily ride will make her wet her pants; and the bus, as always, will bring her to a whole new jumbled land—a place to look forward to shoving matches and a little freeze tag after lunch.

2
In my kitchen a friend tells me he's learned to kill. For now just a time-killer, but when the world divides and he survives, he can protect and save us. His words splay like shrapnel in my ears. I shuffle a new deck of cards, ordered by suit. Save me? No one can save me unless they shoot me blamelessly out of the pack of days—March third, March second, March

3
Reagan's words burst out of static and part it. Hearing his speech makes me sit up in bed, shivering. I discuss the issues with our President. —I don't really think that—I scream at our President. He speaks right through my racket in that glossing tone. If only I could be a child, or a man with a gun I too would know I held the world in my hands.
Skiing the Swiss Alps, 1975

The tram ascends backwards through a darkness that winds away from the distant sun I know. I pull the drawstring on my pack.

Automatic like the choke on our lawn mower back home,

I get lost in their language and the mountains take all day to flatten.

I pole myself and veer and lurch. The cliff edges support views so clear and vast. Claustrophobic, the snow, like hands over my face muffles my shouts, and just ahead, there's a clearing open as the Atlantic I left behind.

It carries me to town, a single dot on my bedroom wall map. At home, summers,

I picture my mother rubbing lotion on my face, while my father led the mower back, guided it forth.

Alone on the Swiss street, I stammer my name; I'm cold as when I first lost the group.

The hotel around the corner could be as far as America. While toy-like children play hide and seek, I wait for my Italian grandfather who will miss me as the day deepens into darkness and will rescue me with his arms, passports to the place I come from, the place I can sleep, tucked in, and transported, dream of this.
Yeagsa

I
Great great grandmother Yeagsa lived ninety nine years and all I remember
of Armenia is our dark eyes
trying to solve one another
and her squared shoulders
and the Canada mints
we'd bring.

II
I think I remember my mother saying "Inch besses!" to her. My father telling me
she'd tell my mother, in Armenian,
"Zabelle, I'll wait for the baby.
Then I will die."

III
This century-old Armenian, became pleased each new time she realized, "Zabelle's
children!"
Two million were murdered by Turks,
I realize my Turkish friend
says only a thousand.
In school, I took French.

IV
On vacation, I take the Armenian recipe book out, just to try. It says "prepare
your usual dough, add..."
What confidence
as if no one
could forget.

V
Some American from Utah wasted postage to beg my money to trace my family tree.
What would names matter? Only around a table
did I learn about the ships...
one Russian, one American.

VI
Yeagsa's five daughters waved to one another from the decks. The two sisters held
my mother's mother above the crowd,
showed their other sisters
in the late afternoon light.

(cont.)
VII
One day, my mother took me to an Armenian Photography exhibit. She recalls some names...then said, "what's her name... I can't remember anymore."
To me, the prints looked like relic oil paintings.

VIII
When I leave home, I bring Armenian Cracker Bread back to college, share it with the mutt.
A Cold Winter

In Spring, I cradled
a wicker basket,
spread seeds.
A high tent
of clouds kept
the sun off me.
My skirt stuck to my thighs.

I sat on my porch,
dog licking my ear;
the only child
for miles
did motorbike wheelies
in the stripped cornfield.

I fell asleep
on the stoop, waiting
for my husband
who called my name
as he pushed aside
the door to go to bed.

My husband
slept clothed.
He rose early
to make sure
nothing else
was left growing.

I'm still
lying down.
The silo's bursting
full. I'm expecting
a cold winter.
The man and woman who had to make love to make me visited for dinner. For the few simple hours, ordered by scooping and stabbing and chewing I had stoked the stove belly for hours, arranged spices alphabetically. He arrived in a grey suit. She in a bronze skirt. My housemates who had cooked rice and vegetables rather than linguini and sausage waved hello from their counter and floor perches. They sat perspiring, in t-shirts. My father ate behind the drum set, pedalled the base drum. He never took off his suitcoat. Neither did my mother. But then, she didn’t ask for a cloth or paper napkin: I saw her use her hem.
In Passing

If I step past my porch tonight,
I will lose myself.
Cautious in the light of coming snow
I picked the green tomatoes
and carted cows to a barn.
The electric fence now lies folded in the cellar.
Open grasses, tonight roll away,
flatten like a dream of a scent.
I can almost smell overripe tomatoes,
and next spring’s grass. I already
picture you trudging in from milking.

Tonight you walk your dog past my house
so you stop by. You sit and I join you
and I shift my focus from the baked sky,
over the laces in your shoes,
the creases in your jacket, your half-moon chin,
and I want to be contained in your memory,
as permanent as the overwhelming night sky.
I know this moment can not be arranged.
A star drops and disappears,
each of us stare to penetrate the distance—
You, next to your dog, next to me.
Treasure

*after Trakl*

A woman who runs in the white sand; the wet rocks
suck the rip tide musically down
the stiff jetty. Light sparks off her lively body.
In the cool green ripples: driftwood, a fish, fin off,
atrophied. The current cuts these secrets
loose from crystal horizons.

A woman who is full, kisses her husband
and gets up from a table.
They float away from one another.
She keeps the house a flourish of color
and the garden about the house rises up.
The scent overwhelms them with its sweetness.
Inside the man she treasures. Inside, the man,
his dead shift of an arm,
a half wave. She sees the way he waits
to suck her salty body; he sees through her.

Already outside, a star and the moon are glued
into the scene and the couple gaze upward.
Below the forming clouds, seagulls possessed with the ache
of distance arch away from the shore.
The wind mounts in the accumulated dunes. The couple
willfully gaze above these forces,
while the belt of pines decay to the brown beyond green
and bar the unreachable span like a gateway
to eternity.
Apple Picking

Shiny and preserved by chemical spray,
the leaves curve against their green veneer,
leaves that reflect the setting sun in fragments.
A cold breeze sends the old cat into a crate.

I climb a ladder. My mother chooses an apple,
rubs it on her shirt, bites. A simple garden snake
scares her. I laugh. She who expects
nothing more than fallen leaves and worms
extends her hand to a branch that snaps under the pressure.
She whispers, "Joe" to my dad, and coughs. She is choking.
Her eyes are separate warnings. I see the orchard—
lush in the center—wrinkled fruit in the ditch
that marks the orchard's bounds. Surprised, I see her hand
shrivelfrom his grip. I hold my breath.
My father punches her in the back. She swallows.
She exhales. She inhales.

We reach the barn and stand in line for a bushel.
My father tests a marble rolling pin.
My mother cups her hands around an apple,
and there's an overpriced painting of apples,
perfect apples. I love the even brushwork
of the brilliant young artist.
The moment is round, ripe, within reach.
Out the Window

Your eyes, distant continents
under a rim of hair and hat,
remind me of the tire swing
hanging off the oak submerged in snow.

I imagine your arms
lift and fold gently around me;
arms, when opened, exceed an eagle's span—
But you! Your arms are grounded in your pockets.

Like the little girl who wants,
who neglects her domestic cat that mews,
who stands facing the backyard snowman
I wish you would reach out,

would show me sensational new lands.
Walk me through horizonless fields.
Offer me that fantastic top hat!
Poem

Boyfriends are confident
with a hand between my breasts,
resting on sagless, reachable bone.
The CPR recipe for saving drowning victims
says: Measure three fingers from the sternum,
lay your palm there and push.
So easily do we reach for another comfort,
a niche in someone else to find our breath.
Still, the sternum collapses under pressure.

I've had meaningful relationships and sex
until I could no longer stand. Possessed
by the terror of freedom, it was easiest to open up
my arms and legs. You who never once touched me,
these years, reach into your bag, this time for Trakl.
You sometimes smile, but the jesture is not
a matter of life and death. You've given me poetry
to live my life by. The spent body begins to quake,
then, a cough. My insides make this rib-cage dance.
Beginnings

*aft* *her McHugh’s poem “In Praise of Cunt”*

When I was younger, I spotted what I wanted
the day I brought my mother to the Combat Zone
to see the Apple Dumpling Gang, rated G.
In the dark, a man used his hands on her purse;
that’s all. The near loss, she believed,
outweighed my desire. She drove me home.

A boy said orgasm instead of organism in biology
and the teacher covered up the slip with a lecture.
Under the desk my legs dangled off the chair.
I wanted him to corner me after class.

After my cousin raped me a couple times at home
and I kneeled against the hardwood floor
to restore my little outfit, I went down to dinner.
Because it mattered so much, I told no one.

By men I live my life and always will.
Men who give the throttle a little nudge.
I lie freely under men as the final sparks
of sunlight glitter on top of the ocean.

But I’m lying! And what if tonight I sit alone in a dark room,
staring under the double locked door for shadows?
They will come for me, and I will desire some of them,
and I will think “I should have,” and “I shouldn’t have.”