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## Last street in town: a collection of poems

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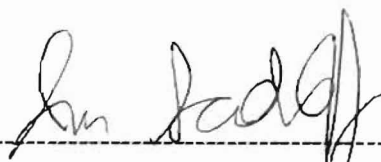
**The Last Street in Town**  
A Collection of Poems

by  
Gillian Kiley

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Scholars'  
Program

COLBY COLLEGE  
1995

APPROVED:

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Ira Sadoff, Tutor

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John Mizner, Chair, Department of English

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Fernando Gouvea", written over a horizontal dashed line.

Fernando Gouvea, Chair, Independent Studies Committee

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## On Santorini

so many dogs lay on their sides,  
legs straight out, slack-eyed,  
I thought they suffered from some malaise of the heat.

Each was fed, and no one tried to move them  
from the sidewalks or doorways of shops  
as I was sitting, standing, walking.

Perhaps it was a torpor of sulphur,  
the smoke rising like a continual dawn  
from the slopes of the volcano in the bay, a vapor

of septic fervor and old eggs. The dogs  
were cinnamon, or black,  
aged uncles with their ears to train tracks;

anemic children with bellies full of milk,  
breathing at the ceiling. They were icons  
on the cobblestones, unpettable,

but so warm, I thought,  
if they moved, the release of heat  
might do them harm.

The square had the topography of commerce,  
solid-banked in small, cut rocks.  
I never stayed long.

I was drawn to the cliffs, high  
and unpracticed in the pragmatic grasp  
of mortar. I could lean over edges,

watch the quick erosions of silt far below  
sliding like sugar into the waves, and succumb  
to giddiness, that desire to follow,

to wither into gravity, my pulse  
like a drone in the swelter and the animal silence  
as dulcet as the languor of sirens.

## Affection

A woman has just touched your neck -  
a friend of your mother, your brother's lover,  
or a mere acquaintance, she put a finger

through a hole in the hammock,  
raising hairs at your nape  
into a thicket; straight up

and attendant to thrill,  
as nurses are attendant  
to the physic

of professional attention  
in close rooms fluorescent  
with unnatural circumstance,

the stethoscope in a cool slide across your back  
as the doctor encourages you to sigh.  
Briskly, she has withdrawn -

to the house or the bushes zealous  
with raspberries - undescribed,  
because you never saw her face.

Lying on your back  
you see how diffuse it is above.  
No mackerel sky, no fleece

of clouds. An unmitigated potentate,  
that blue's elemental  
and broad-ranging.

## The Man in the Pew

I saw him eating pap in a room  
of my provision. He would be alone:  
tray table before a cheap painting,  
plastic icons with exaggerated eyes -

pacific and certain  
his irregular black boots  
with steel straps were loved,  
or overlooked.

I could overlook  
the lumpen profile,  
pink smear of eyelid,  
but that stump of arm

hanging at breast level,  
a penis tendered  
for the sign of the peace, no.

Oh

myself, five fat fingers and a stalk  
of hairy arm, a patent grasp,

and a looseness, too,  
like a fish held by the tail  
and swung out over dark water.

"Peace be with you," he said,  
his puzzle of flesh  
bred up like a talent  
before me, doughy and precocious.

My fingers fell about him  
in a concurrence of skin  
like a pulpy hinge, one body  
at rest for a beat  
in the midst of turning from itself.

The rector had us kneeling, then.  
My elbows hard on the next pew, keen  
with discomposure like knuckles  
grinding against each other,

and the man seated, above,  
his small foot swinging narrowly,  
metal brace ticking  
the wood of the bench.



## Ariel

Quietly, a prodigy lies across  
her mother's lap, a traveling rug  
for a journey. The needle  
stabs quickly through the thickness,

emerges again and again from below,  
bright and silver as if polished each time,  
the thread trailing behind,  
trace exhaust from an airplane.

The child watches the scar  
on her mother's thumb as she works,  
dark pink and shiny where it was split  
by the top of a can torn off quickly.

She sees the light on the crown  
of her head, the small finger,  
bent from a long-ago break: a pivot and guide  
for the swan dive of her mother's wrist.

The child wants to touch  
the cotton and the curved scar,  
so she steps forward and the work stops,  
thread in the hand of the child

in the air above her mother's thighs.

It's spring, and the air is fine

at the top of the drive.

With a sense of urgency,  
a girl stands astride her bicycle,  
front wheel wagging like the neck

of a punchdrunk horse,  
lighting her father's last cigarette.  
His back broad as a mast, she knows  
he is looking

from the screened-in porch,  
pine-boarded and sagging  
from the toll of ingress.  
She covers her mouth to cough

and her hands are crocuses, brilliant  
and early, blooming contusions  
under the dissipating smoke.  
He presses his thumbs

into the dry wood of the doorframe,  
can almost smell  
some kind of flower,  
or imagines he can.

## In Summer

Nothing sticks  
like the humidity  
of sleep these days.  
Eyelids' curve as final  
as a flyball's last arc  
to a field empty  
of players.

They are sick  
of running, their hands swollen  
into leather mitts  
unable to scratch  
their appetites,  
and so return  
to the hazy kind of rest  
low clouds  
give valley towns in July.

But one girl  
worrying the wires  
of the chainlink fence at the diamond  
wants to grind the mound  
cleave the air  
chisel her face  
into the neck of your son, lick away  
the syrup of these days  
toss knots of sheets  
out the window  
and use the mattress  
to break her fall.

## Fugue

There is something peculiar  
about a rental car. At airports or strip malls  
you can get them, interiors blank as the looks  
of your father and the dark-haired girl  
at the small table on the side street  
you did not mean to walk up, the levers smooth  
and responsive as the men  
of hotel lobbies whose lighters always work.

The first time I did it  
I exchanged papers and brief  
intelligence with a woman in a lot whose skirt,  
as she slid into the seat to show me  
how to release the brake,  
slipped up her thigh as easily  
as a curtain pulls across a doorway.

Pressing the pedals was like pouring  
thin honey from a milk jug, and I sensed  
the length of machine behind me  
constantly erasing itself from the pavement  
as I swooned down the highway,  
the route numbers curled at me like fingers, and songs  
about cheating I could sing  
like never before.

On this hill

I want to sprout  
a pelt, black as night in the night,  
or brown, if the day's that way,  
And in winter, white - well,  
that's planning.

I'm not headed for the farthest root,  
the tree near the water hole  
hunters haven't conceived of. I maintain  
a rifle isn't what this hill is made for...  
What I mean is

I know it, the place and fur  
will cover my lips, speaking  
is too hard for something soft as that.

## Turbulence

Pigeons' breasts quiver  
thick as plums, wings beating  
on wings in descent.

Near the bench,  
the woman's face is a handkerchief  
snapping open in a rush of wind.

## Blight

Driving, the snow is like a plague,  
rushing into the windscreen

at such unbelievable angles,  
the glass of course invisible. Your vision

is occluded, inhibited by the motion  
of these white insects riding the air before you,

a spindle and a stinger in every direction.  
Billow and sudden increase,

their surges decline nothing and you are coasting  
into an indistinct and reductive region.

As if you had forfeited something,  
you cannot traverse the distraction

to listen to your friend the driver, deliberate  
in this stunning dusk, the road bathed in dust

from spooling cotton, the bodies  
of a million fallen gulls. Spinning out,

pulling back easy, she turns silence into talk  
of distant things, torsion and gambits,

a photo of a farmer holding up sodden fruit  
after the flood, like a torch, like a way back.

And still, spinning into the windshield  
and all around this surfeit, judgment

or evidence against you.

## Trying to Remember Scripture All Day on the Porch

Tapping open an eggshell  
is dawn, the thinness breaking  
in a near accident of light.

Noon is a bald flash of camera, blindness  
while walking in the shine  
of a place without trees

and sunset is when a brilliant snake  
has molted, an effulgence  
of tatters.

No. Perhaps it is the glare  
of something beyond the visible  
horizon, something magnificent and southerly,  
reflected upward but not toward.



## The Postman

The bearded pines make insulated copses,  
like confessionals. I wonder if the postman  
is drawn to such enclosures.

All day he comes so close to our homes, quickens

to the false ardor of telephones, the receivers  
in their places at a glum distance; an aspect, through glass,  
like modified bone. In one broad driveway,  
careless at this time of day, a child of uncertain age

pedals up and back, while behind a screen  
a woman is indistinct and vigilant.

Not fast, but brisk, the pace of a furtive  
freebooter, a peeper, the postman moves

like a beetle over crumbling clay, awkward  
with too easy a commission. He wishes  
these missives had more heft, required  
more labor than a drop in a slot.

He is transient against this landscape,  
a trespasser charged with handling what is bound  
for appointed disclosure, feckless and longing  
for station, material inscription.

## Homecoming

You walk into the house and it's all  
lilies and basins full of ink.  
Your sister rushes about  
black-handed, trying to die  
white petals black. She works  
for a florist and there's a funeral,  
not a wedding.

Your mother backs a strange car  
into the driveway, removes  
three music stands and a box full of bells.  
She does not want your help.  
She peers into the refrigerator,  
the light comes on instantly,  
like a pure form of anger.  
*Nothing*, she says,  
soon drives away.

On the television, the people  
are slender and professional, no one  
reminds you of anyone,  
and you cannot assemble the features  
of your very best friends.  
Your sister speeds through the room  
with grey flowers, dripping,  
slamming the door so the curtains are sucked  
to the windows and then  
there's a release  
like the distance this blue holiday  
between you and your newfound lover,  
a release like a lapse of muscle.

## In Everything

I once had a professor who found death  
in snowfall, sex  
in everything. A lampshade, a bellpull,  
grass stuttering in the wind, I guess  
it's all in the way you say it:  
*cartwheel, bingo.* Yes,  
passion may be a contortion  
of the tongue; love and other things  
come like that  
though I have never been good  
with anything in my mouth  
but my heart, or my foot.  
Does that sound silly?  
Maybe it's in the way  
you say it,  
Adam.  
*Adam.*

## An Early Elegy

With my eyes closed, you exist less.  
Do you think I'm childish?

I might protect you in a windstorm,  
or a sudden fit of hail. I imagine

I would laugh, because I like that, or I'm like that,  
useless on a day when slender girls sit

under spotted umbrellas. They lift their wrists  
to show dangly bracelets. They sing songs

for each other, pretend to try to remember lyrics.  
They sing for the passersby.

They talk on subjects without authority  
for hours and you watch their lips. It's a theater

of poise, shimmering like spray off the back of a cresting dolphin.  
I like to swim underwater, face up, eyes open,

so the clouds shiver. When my eyes are closed  
I can picture this.

## Potluck

Everyone's lips are full of glass.  
All red, I wish Lucille Ball at least  
had a good time in a wine press for this.  
That time, what was it

she was there for? Some scheme, some  
misunderstanding, sure. Our confusions  
should always end up in bare feet,  
fruit between our toes, not

like this, glasses held to our lips  
against disclosure which might prove  
we have love, and don't know what to do with it.  
What is it? Did the hosts want to steal

our serving dishes? I told the woman in yellow  
I thought the moon used to follow me  
on long car rides, because we were so friendly.  
Not the woman, the moon.

In the back seat, as my sisters slept, there  
was my companion, sousing  
in lakes, farmhouse ponds, protean, grand,  
a floating neon vegetable unchastening

the dark, private silhouettes  
of neighborhoods gone to bed.  
Later my sister would rub the marks  
on my knuckles, hold my hand

like a small animal. What affinity  
did she have for correction, extraction?  
Tonight, you press a glass upon me. I look  
to see if I'm splashing in the bell of the cup.

## You Can't Trust Me, Don't Date Me

I 'd like to say I 'm just walking by this schoolyard  
for inspiration, but I hardly look  
at these children, fenced in, standing on top of the dirt.  
I'd say it's for nostalgia, but they don't remind me  
of my childhood; I was schooled at home.  
I haven't read anything you've read.

I simply go forward. I truly desire to move,  
to live on a farmland  
somewhere south of here  
with a flock of white chickens  
so I may indulge my fascination.

To hold one with two hands,  
under the breast, over the wings,  
would be to hold one large, tender muscle.  
White floss over a warm pulse,  
a good, big Valentine but for the quivering  
of brittle appendages.  
A small panic.

Sometimes I eat as though distressed,  
quickly, like a refugee, though I'm not hungry,  
and my body,  
in company, is like a sound  
defect, something tuned wrong and emitting  
waves of disease. An unpleasant presence.

I displace my familiars and intimates. Fingers  
are so easily tiny legs, elbows are eyelids  
of old, tired mammals, and the fingernails are eerie:  
faces blanched of emotion.

These mothers eye me through car windows,  
though I suspect each  
has contemplated the thick, fruity smack  
of relentless, vindicated adulthood  
against the expanses of flesh of these coddled children.

I am just walking.  
taking care to avoid malfeasance,  
but they say we turn our worst faults outward.  
I think I like chickens for their own sake.  
I think the rapture of those birds is that they don't  
get off the ground.

## Sleepwalking

My friend once spent hours before sunrise  
with the washroom doorknob, saying  
*the grams are all wrong*, over and over,  
touching the knob as if she could fix it,  
the way my mother would touch the lop-eared  
cactus brought from Utah, draped over its pot,  
the one she eventually lashed to a stick  
so it would stand up though it stung her  
with its prickles, as would a wounded raccoon,  
curled up and offended by the forest ranger's daughter.

Fixed on the relation of chemical element  
to atomic mass, the necessity of all things  
adding up cleanly, my friend was found  
by her roommate's boyfriend,  
who entered the bathroom  
stripped to and from the waist and felt  
suddenly small as she failed  
to apprehend his presence.  
She doesn't remember this, she tells me,  
over a holiday and a cup of coffee.

Sonambulants are efficient that way,  
taking their exercise and rest simultaneously.  
I don't walk at night, I talk,  
and I wonder if another person  
in my room or the next  
would know that always I am falling,  
through chimneys or out windows. My fetish  
is so hackneyed, they might think

it's a dream of their own. Many try  
try to know me that way, as a rendition  
of someone else, so when my friend asks me  
if I don't think sleepwalking is the body's longing  
to keep on when we claim we can't,  
I don't want to tell her sleep seems like practice,  
suasion into something more final, and that I enjoy it immensely,  
as much as I do dancing  
in a dark stairwell, or a good story.