



1993

Dust

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DUST

by

KRISTIN J. WINKLER

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

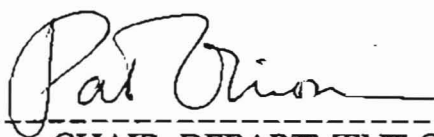
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1993

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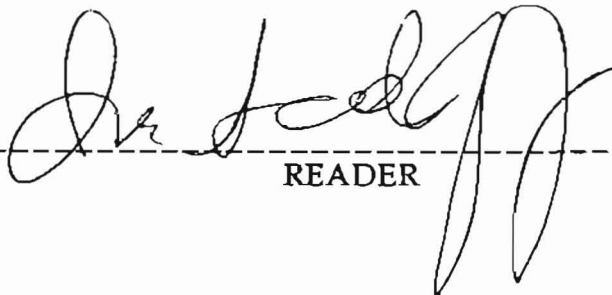
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. UNDER THE CARPET

Running Away

Call Me Sinner

Behind the Wheel

How It Is

Graffiti

The Father

On My Street

II. WINDSTORM

The Match

The Thunderstorm

Cedaredge Locker Plant

It's All Life

Something In Beige

A Wish

Peeling

Praying

PART ONE:
UNDER THE CARPET

—

Running Away

I wonder what it would be like
to just give up on all the crap
and forget the things due on Wednesday
and forget my friend who asks
but doesn't want me to tell her
she's being a two-timing, selfish whore
and forget that I have to find a life
to fall into six months from
today I am teetering on the edge
waiting for the fateful feather
to knock me over like a suitcase
at the open door of an airplane
and I'm afraid of falls,
of crashes and breaking open
I'd like to avoid a Humpty-Dumpty
scenario and just use the stairs
dash into the biting air
hitch a ride to the car repair shop
steal my car out of their clutches
(since I can't pay them anyway)
and roar down the highway
with my road atlas to decide
where I'd be most able
to put my feet up on the table
shoes or no shoes
and then find all
the back roads to get there
because why bother hurrying
when you're running away
from your life?

Call Me Sinner

One night in Puritan New England, I slipped
quietly into the minister's candlelit room,
where he sat at the desk, dipping
the point of his pen into a blackened
inkwell and scratching out a sermon.
Seeing how much the back of his neck
curved like a child's, I craved to press
my lips against the fine hair behind his ear.
He worked as if a stone wall surrounded him
and no little breeze carried my scent.
My fingers itched to trace the scars I knew
covered the skin of his back;
it was as if I could see the raised welts writhing
like serpents. When he sensed me,
he turned, and a split second flash of desire
flickered bright as the candle's flame in his eyes.
I undid buttons and slipped grey wool
off my shoulders while he watched
like cold stone from across the room.
I wanted him to kneel and pray,
to feel my hands salving
the raw skin of his back, and still deny
the human hungers of his flesh.
I wanted to make him deaf
to the words of his God,
as they hissed on the hearth.

Behind the Wheel

I'll leave the house keys
tucked under the backdoor mat,
along with the perfect daughter
in her tidy photo album.
It will be good to push the stern
smiles, the small hands gripped
too tightly in large father hands
into the fine cool dust.
Don't bother asking me
where that little girl has gone —
I suppose she has slipped
into hiding or perhaps
your prophecies have come true
and some long-haired hood in leather
has roared her away to tomorrow
on his black and silver Harley.
Wouldn't *that* be a day!
I'll tell you this, though —
I'm not going to chase after her.
I want to see the world through
my own clear glasses,
roll wine around in my mouth,
dance until my heartbeat
percusses in my throat.
The hand-holding daughter is extinct.
This woman is just stepping out;
she keeps her own hands, these days.
Her car is parked right out front.
She'll be climbing in, now;
just slipping behind the wheel
and driving away.

How It Is

You rumble into the mobile home park
on your motorcycle, chrome
amplifying the white afternoon sun;
you in jeans and black leather,
the curls blown off your forehead.

Here I sit on the porch steps,
the right corner of my mouth cocked
in a half-smile, listening to you slow down
to take the corner. The bike stops.
You put your feet on the ground and grin.
"You smiling for a reason?"
I throw down at you, standing up
and slapping dust off the back of my jeans.
You hold the bike steady and raise
your eyebrows, as if you're certain
I'll lose heart at the last minute.
I slide on behind you, slip my arms as coolly
as I can around your waist and casually point
out the plants I need to water
when we get back this evening.
You laugh and turn your head, and the sun
shines through your eyes,
making shards of amber sea glass.
"All set?" and when I nod and tighten
my arms around your stomach,
the engine bursts and we leave dust behind,
mixing with the scent of orange blossoms.

Just like you promised, you squirrel
through Tucson traffic at sixty-five,
past the University hospital,
past the little Mexican restaurant
that makes good chimichangas,
past the white stucco church
still standing from Escalante's
expedition north from Mexico.
We speed out into the desert,
where sun and land and hot wind
are so elemental we don't even
consciously think about them.
I realize how tightly my hands are clenching
the front of your jacket, and then let loose
my arms, shaking them out to the side,

one at a time. I hook a few fingers casually
through your belt loops, drinking in
the dusty wash of the Sonora, where saguaros grow
thick as trees among the sage on the hillsides,
and the barrel cacti bloom yellow and fuchsia.
Strands of hair whip my cheeks and I squint,
trying to keep the wind from slapping my eyes.
For a moment, I duck behind your shoulders,
out of the wind, and smell the dust
caught in the stiff leather of your jacket.
I feel your body start to shift right
and throw my face into the wind,
leaning with you around the curve.
We head west toward the sun;
whatever it is that is carrying us
just keeps rolling.

graffiti

On the inside stall door
of the unisex bathroom
at the Sunoco on I-95 heading north,
a woman painted, in sassy nail polish
the color of wet blood,
three small words

MEN ARE SCUM

and men from all over
have sought revenge
with ballpoint pens,
penknives, stubs of lead
pencils and even a green crayon.
One was naive enough
to ask why, as if the woman
would ever want to come
back to tell her story.
He began to scribble a note
and paste it to the wall,
but didn't, and somewhere,
the woman felt an odd sense of relief.
She doesn't often think, anymore,
about how her man used to dip
a french fry 'just so' in ketchup
before offering it to her.
But the letters are red-hot
for a reason—she loved him
enough to hate him.
She sometimes wishes she had followed
the inscription with a post-script,
if this makes you angry,
it applies.

The Father

When my brain finally catches up
with my sight, I wonder
what the hell I'm doing
out here driving around
on a cold November evening
when I could be tucked inside my house
like any sane family man,
behind yellow windows that brave
the blue cold of the evening,
tumbling with my children
on a woven rag rug that's been
in front of the fireplace ever since
my wife refinished the pine boards
that glow in the warm light.

I suppose, then, my uncertainty
presents several options.
Maybe I'm not sane,
which might explain why
I suddenly don't recognize this road
or the car I'm driving.
Maybe I don't really belong to a family,
even though I know my children's faces
are swallowed in the wallet
folded in my back pocket. Maybe
I don't know what makes me the man
I am—then this lost driving
wouldn't be so absurd.

The tail pipe of the car ahead of me drags
and spits hot orange sparks onto the pavement.
They dance around like little devils
in the winter dusk,
and I drive right over them,
to snuff them out.

On My Street

This afternoon I looked up from my ironing
to see a Victorian house being towed past
my living room window. I understood then
why the trees were trimmed earlier this week
and mailboxes removed from the roadside;
it reminds me of what I imagine it's like, living
in towns like Salem, where historic streets
are renovated, recreated to accommodate
parades of visitors who don't think about
what it's like to live there. I looked down
the road and saw my neighbors behind fences,
just watching this three story legend crawl past.

Potted plants swung in macrame hangers
in the windows, the blue back door slammed
and then jerked open again with a bang;
lace curtains waved nervously
as the crowd slid slowly by. I almost expected
a dog to bark from the back porch step.

What could be so priceless about a home
that the house had to move with it, furnishings intact?
Is it the spacious rooms, through which summer
breathes coolly, their sizes just right for this family?
Or the way the rug on the stairs is fraying
because the dog used to gnaw and tug
on the vinyl-coated strands? Or the chip
at the corner of the formica kitchen counter,
where visitors always bruise a hip?
Perhaps the blue lines of the living room wallpaper
are an antidote for someone's headaches,
some sixty year old man with bad eyes
and the body of a pear. I can just picture
my own father, balding and sweaty,
frantically stopping every workman to ask
whether they made certain to tie the bedroom doors
open—his foolish solution to preventing secrets.
I admired the solid strength in this moving house,
the way it seemed to trust that floorboards
wouldn't crack, nor windows shatter
as it traveled over bumps in the road.

PART TWO:

WINDSTORM

The Match

for Audre Lorde

The flame stretches slowly
and curls down the matchstick,
dimly lighting my fingers in the dark room.
I allow my eyelids to close
against sharp strands of smoke.
It's like the steam, Audre,
when you poured boiling
water for tea deliberately over
your left hand, a gesture of need
to your leaving lover. Was it just
steam that shaded your eyes from watching,
or did your brown irises swim then,
in a sea of stinging saltwater?

I start to smell scorched fingernail
like the scent of chickens
freshly plucked and seared.
The blackened match
bends like a broken wing,
its burnt half pointing at my lap,
while the tips of my fingers
want to shrivel from the heat.

How did you do it, Audre?
I watch as the flame
flirts with my skin,
then lick, at the last minute,
my left index finger and thumb,
and pinch the flame to death.

The Thunderstorm

Between the woman's wrinkled hands,
the shuttle skims back and forth
across the strings of the loom,
weaving a sand painting of muted colors.
She sings under her breath,
her voice cracked and dry as the earth
during that summer of drought.
Her song is the tale of the child who watched
a warrior ride away from the village,
head lowered on his chest,
afraid to look back at his lover,
who knelt outside their teepee,
grinding kernels in her smooth bowl
and picking out the stones.

First the gold yarn flies across,
like brittle prairie grass in a storm wind
and the smooth wood of the courting flute;
then the silvery blue shade the sky wore,
shimmering, pale as dusty sage.
A few tired men, splashes of rust,
straggle back to the village, under
the black threads, angry faces blowing
across the sky, bringing shade, not rain.

The woman runs her hands over the ridges of her work.
The warm brown background is the swallowing land;
her fingers rest there and blend in.
The warrior's face swims among the reds and browns,
his angry black brows gathered just the way
her mother had always described them.
She rises from her stool at the loom
and stands at the window, listening
while the thunder continues its legend.

Cedaredge Locker Plant

My father has a way of remembering births
by events. So, since my early childhood, I have known
that I was born the year he bought the blue Jeep,
the one with the flat paint the color of a summer sky
at noon with high humidity. I remember
the painful stick of hot vinyl to the backs of my knees
and the way, in winter, the cold drafted right in
through the metal body. It was a no-frills year.
There were autumn mornings I used to love,
I think, when we got up in the chill light
of an early Saturday, and drove the thirty miles
of winding road, like a scar, onto the hump
of Grand Mesa. A turn onto a dusty side street
and Dad would back the Jeep up so the tailgate
was a tongue to bridge the drop between
the loading porch and the open back of the car.
Inside the building was dark, green-tinted,
and the air was cool, sharp with a scent I now know
as raw meat, but then, it was only pungent,
mixed with the rich seasoning of sausage.
I'd stay by my mother's side until we could
go back out to the light, following the man
with the dolly. We loaded wrapped packets of meat,
frozen, into the cardboard boxes brought from home,
and slid them into the gaping blue mouth.
On the way home, Mother always suggested we stop
at the bakery on the corner for doughnuts;
my stomach usually revolted at the thought
of that heavy sweetness, the hint of grease.
I don't remember which year
we stopped the drives to Cedaredge;
perhaps it was the year the whole family watched
the birth of Arnie, a clumsy black calf,
the first to be born in the pasture behind our garage.
If I remember correctly, that was the year
Dad traded in the blue Jeep, in favor
of a shining new Dodge pickup, red.

It's All Life

"Be ahead of all partings, as if they were
behind you, like the winter that's just past." — Rainer Marie Rilke

Last week, I turned my Swedish ivy plant away from the sun,
so its leaves, instead of reaching toward the window,
reached into the center of my room,
toward the desk smothered with loose papers,
books splayed open, a few stray buttons,
and empty tea bag wrappers with gum folded in their flaps;
toward the bed, sheets pulled tight and smooth,
so cold on my legs at night.

I watched as the week passed;
each day more branches turned and curled
as if the light coming in
had the pull of a magnet.

But the window plays fickle as a lover;
it filters the rays of sun, allowing
only the purest of light to enter.
It is inevitable, though, that some days
the honey light fades, lost behind cold gray marble.

These are the days in late February,
when winter still stretches its fingers
long and menacing across the sky;
the craving to be held is terrible,
like a sundown when the last warmth
is hidden by bitter storm clouds.

Something In Beige

I sit casually at my small round table in the corner,
sipping an amaretto sour, black-hosed legs
crossed the way I've seen models do, dangling
a graceful foot arched steeply in suede pumps.
My eyes wander from the melting lycra-and-silk-clad
couples on the dance floor, up to the jumping
colored lights and then to the basketball game
on the televisions hung over the bar, where single men
sit, eyes flitting from the shining bodies on the screen
to the women who stroll past in short skirts.
A cocktail waitress rushes past my table,
then hurries back with a sympathetic look,
like she's wishing she could bring me
something more than a single drink.

This week, my therapist told me
I must be sending signals to men
I am not interested. My mother tells me
every time I see her I need to give up
some of my independence, make myself
the kind of woman she says can *find* a husband
by always sitting like a lady,
and of course, biting my tongue
to keep my opinions to myself.
My roommates tell me nothing
is wrong, that I should have confidence,
it's men who are the problem.

I suppose these are the reasons I'm sitting this way
in this bar, thinking about housepaint;
do I want a neutral shade,
antique parchment, perhaps?
Then all anyone would have to do
is mix in their blues or their sugar-
coated shades of lacquer
and brush a thick layer of me
on the surface of their choice.

A Wish

I always used to want to show you ancient
Anasazi ruins, hidden in the sandstone canyons

of southwestern Colorado. I hoped you
would marvel at the shards of handpainted pottery

still scattered near yellow adobe walls.
Eight hundred years ago, squat hands placed

one brick upon a specific other, the two shaped
to fit like a body held in the curve of another.

Eight hundred years, sand in the wind, and blizzards
have widened the thin spaces between bricks

into irregular latticework; now some no longer fit
the tailored sides of others. I wanted you to see this

in summer, when the dry heat settles so tightly
on the floor of the canyon that the lines

between bricks hover, detached from the stone,
and the scent of sage seems to pound against you.

Peeling

This morning in my mailbox I found a letter
from my mother, and slipped inside the envelope,
a Polaroid of my brothers and I standing
like steps by the hedge at my grandparents' home.
Pencilled in the white space below the photo
in my mother's script is a question,
"Remember these days?" I am angry
when I look at the girl in the picture,
at her sharp jaw and slender wrists dangling
from their sleeves; angry that her mother
didn't force her to stop wanting perfection,
didn't stop her from starting the endless cycle
of hating herself and eating and hating some more.
I think back to the conversation I had
at breakfast with a friend, about how we're taught
to be critical of our images in mirrors
and in the miniature reflections in the eyes of others.
It's somewhat like hearing your voice recorded
after years of only knowing the way it sounds
inside your head. I was surprised
he understood. While we talked,
I watched his fingers peel an orange,
the dimpled fruit deceptive in its tough jacket.
How often I have bitten into the fruit
and caught the taste of rind,
always surprised by its bitterness.

Praying

I am on my knees
as if I am praying in my garden
and the sweat is making curls
around my face, an occasional
trickle down my back.
My hands and forearms
are like a man's—the clinging
grit defines each damp hair
as dark and masculine.
In the heat of the sun,
the scent of warm dirt
seems as strong as incense
in a censer, but cleaner.
I dig with my fingers,
the tendons in the back of my hand
pulling taut like cables on a pulley.
The solid earth breaks
apart in my palms, becoming
tiny dull crystals I can dissolve
between my index finger and thumb. Yet,
were I to lay my body down fully,
I would not fall through, slip under,
lose myself; this moist earth
would simply hold me in its hand,
mold itself to fit the curves of my body.

And so, I must use my hands to dig,
to mold the soil of my garden,
shaping it to curve around the base
of each head of lettuce,
around the crowns of carrots.
In a way, it's like baptism.
I cup fine soil in my hands
and pour it softly over the young
heads in my garden,
to nurture these delicate
lives.