

# **Under My Skirt**

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## Abstract

Under My Skirt  
Poems

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Under My Skirt is a collection of poems in three parts. The introductory section deals with issues of reading, writing, and memory. The middle section contains poems with surreal and dreamlike elements. The final section centers on identity. Overall, the poems are often humorous even as they explore the darker sides of life. Themes of the domestic are addressed, as well as the narrative impulse. While the poems themselves often veer away from straight narrative, the voice works to unite the collection into a unified whole.

## Preface: Creating the Skirt

In his essay “What is American About American Poetry?” Campbell McGrath says, “One defining characteristic of American poetry is its diversity, its inability to be pigeonholed or represented by one or two major figures or models. There is no binding consensus on what is essential in our poetry right now.” The poems in this collection embrace McGrath’s idea of the state of contemporary poetry. My work ranges from playing with traditional forms like sonnets to postmodern arrays of poetic language. There is no one specific aesthetic or historical theme at work here. What I strive to do with my poems is to construct the skirt of the title poem. This skirt is a multilayered affair, long and full of folds, each of which represent an aspect of what I feel is important in my writing. In that poem, the skirt is revealed as a muse of sorts--freeing words onto the page, where I can slowly transform them into poetry.

The title poems reveals a little of my method--scribbling words onto a page, without regard for the final form or construction of the poem. It is though the hem lifts to reveal an idea, not yet formed into a poem. Through revision, I can begin to discover what the poem is doing, where it fits into the continuum of aesthetics, and what form it will finally take.

Regardless of where the poem falls in terms of form, theme, or how traditional/postmodern it is, it is cut from the fabric of my voice. Often described as “quirky,” my poems all have a voice uniquely my own. The quirky voice allows me to filter the world through my eyes and hopefully offer a fresh perspective on life. The quirky style, like that of Denise Duhamel, tries to create a vision of the everyday with details and ideas that readers are familiar with. In her poem “Kinky,” Duhamel uses Barbie and Ken to talk about relationships and identities. But Barbie and Ken in this poem have a somewhat darker lifestyle than we normally expect from children’s toys. Duhamel uses the everyday and defamiliarizes it. Her voice transforms the scene and what happens within the poem. I strive to filter the events of any poem through my unique perspective and voice to create a fresh outlook on even familiar events.

These familiar events and some unexpected events create the subject matter of my poems, the pattern printed on the skirt’s fabric. This collection of poems is divided into three sections--the first dealing with reading, writing, and memory; the second dealing with surreal and dreamlike poems, and the third dealing with identity. The various patterns and themes flow throughout the sections, regardless of where the poem is actually placed. These poems try to deal with the domestic as well as the fantastic. Like James

Schuyler, I like to make a quiet moment into a poem. His poem “Watching You” describes watching someone sleep and describing that person’s reaction in sleep and feeling about sleep and time. Poems can have a subject on more than one level--like Schuyler, whose poem seems to be about a simple domestic event, yet so much more is implied about the sleeping person and the relationship between speaker and sleeper. The actual events of the poem are only the surface material. The white space and background, the “not said”, is often as important as what is said. For example, Schuyler does not come out and say who the “you” of the poem is. As it is not said, it is left to readers to decide--and allows us to become part of the poem. The reader has a role in creating meaning--the backstory or the background of the poem. The “not said” is there between the lines, influencing what the reader decides.

The “not said” is evident in the way words are arranged on the page. Like Schuyler, I often favor shorter lines, creating long, skinny poems. I like the sounds of short lines when the poems are read aloud. Most of my poems are around a page long. A few stretch out onto a second page. There is variety in both line length and poem length, though. There is space for experimentation, depending on what the poem calls for and what the language asks. The length of lines and the way the poems are arranged on the page are like the shape of the skirt. There are skirts for day and for night--a skirt for any occasion.

The style of the skirt is usually somewhat similar and distinctly my own. But that skirt is created from several influences. The skirt on the cover is one I have sewn by combing several patterns to get a shape and length I liked. My poetry comes also from several traditions and influences. Much of my influence comes from the New York school--Schuyler’s long, skinny lines, O’Hara’s lunch poems, Koch’s humor, Tate’s surrealism. I take from the influences what I need to construct poems of the world as I see it. I use details from daily life like a lunch poem, use Schuyler’s guide to way lines sound, add pieces of dream imagery, and a witty tone to create a poem.

Like James Tate, in his poem “A Missed Opportunity” I like to create poems about words and writing. His poem begins “A word sits on the kitchen counter.” The word in this poem is alive; it runs away and refuses to befriend the speaker. The word has a mind of its own, like the occasionally wild imagery in my poems. The images I draw in my writing drive the poems forward, create a tension, or at least a vision. The images connect together to form a narrative of sorts. Unlike a simple straight narrative, the images that make up most of my poems do not always have clear-cut narrative meanings. The reader must sometimes

work to determine the connections between images to create the narrative of the poem. The dream-like qualities of many of the images complicate the process. The everyday items that appear occasionally take on a persona like the word in Tate's poem. The images create a hem for the skirt. In the breeze, the hem blows around and images shift to create a new narrative.

The poems can vary tonally, from the whimsical notes struck by many of the poems in the second section, to the more somber tones of some of the pieces in the third section. Like an elastic waistband, the tone changes to fit the need of the poem and what the images are projecting. Many of the poems have a tonal duality: they are humorous on the surface, but underneath they address serious concerns. Surrealist ideas, like the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' fiction, can mask serious issues with incredible details. My poems do not need to hide their issues from prying censorious eyes, but the technique of fantastic imagery offers an outlet for how to talk about ideas which do not always have words. Defamiliarizing the reader with the events of a poem through surreal images can bring about an unexpected narrative. For example, one of my poems uses German to distance the reader from the speaker and defamiliarize the idea of identity. Through our not-knowing, we stumble through the events of the poem and the events of the day, not really knowing where or who we are.

But all of these elements and influences: voice, image, style, tone, etc. come together to form a skirt. This is a patchwork skirt of sorts, carefully sewn in my own style. It comes from many diverse sources, like the state of contemporary poetry. What I've created from these elements and influences is the skirt of the title poem. My writing is my skirt--I wear it wherever I go. It comes together to form my view of the world.

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One

## Under My Skirt

I hide all the moments under my skirt,  
floor length so none  
will get away. The words  
swish around my legs when I walk.

A skirt this long is more than just surface  
and folds. The underside holds fast  
between toe and sandal, and I trip,  
sprawling books around--  
the sidewalk is littered with words.  
My face is written with the ink  
of seventh-grade girls  
who dot their i's with tiny hearts.  
Quick, force the memory up under the hem.

Then a woman in the parking lot  
says "If she reads that much, clearly  
she isn't doing any writing." I picture  
my shelf, full of books I've digested  
and notebooks, empty. My language  
still gibberish, growing. How long  
will it take to write enough words?

Later, in the office, the hem  
almost slides under the chair leg  
smooth and soundless  
across the floor. In a moment,  
my hand, a paler, graceful version  
gently pulls the skirt as my body  
tilts the chair backward. The words  
float upward and a story  
forms, seduction into  
the notebook. I smooth the skirt  
back down and tuck  
the story into my pocket.

At night, the skirt swishes cat's tail anger  
in the cramped living room,  
trapped words displacing papers from the coffee table,  
magazines from a chair. Whose words  
on papers? Whose words mingle with mine?  
Scattered, I leave them lying, unwritten, unfinished.

## Ghostwriting

He pats the counter in front of him suggestively  
like a lap when all the seats are taken.

This is all from memory, Matthew--  
perhaps it wasn't a lap, but a bench,  
a dark night on a playground.

It's dusty here, these pages--  
and crowded--

Everyone talks of boots  
but no one is wearing them.

Outside, trees appear as if from nowhere  
and no one notices.

Maybe I've imagined that part--  
time-lapse photography to set the scene.

Matthew laughs and laughs:  
"You're the sort of girl who'd say that,  
only with a British accent."

It's cold here by the window.  
I want my ankles warmed,

perhaps the comfort  
of hearing you read, Matthew,

knowing that you haven't written in years and  
that you still believe I need rescuing

from windows and my deliberate inability to shut them.  
Matthew, listen, search through every word

I write--no judgment--  
sometimes it's hard to tell who's talking.

After the applause, the only words left:  
"Where do I put the dishes?"

## Prayer

God bless the souls of fictional characters.  
Encountered at night, I'll toss and turn  
for their plight, their grief invades my dreams.  
I read on, knowing their pain will last forever.

Outside the covers, these people don't exist.  
Yet, each time I turn the pages, they are there,  
dressed in black, mourning wreath on church door, funereal,  
and I cry more for them than those I know are real--

epitaphs on headstones, people dying alone,  
without someone to mourn them. It can't be me.  
They are strangers with no pages devoted  
to a life more real than mine.

God forgive me, do not take away my pain,  
but grant me strength to turn another page.

## On Halloween

Laura becomes Robert,  
sitting at his desk  
as he goes off to class.  
“There is no essence  
of Robert,” he insists.  
“Then you shall be a trace,”  
I tell her and start to read  
furiously from “*Eine Leiche  
Schreit Um Hilfe*” to find out  
why I was in a *Parkplatz  
um drei Uhr*, hiding  
the corpse of my lover’s wife  
in the thicket. “*Ich heisse  
Hannelore Heilmann,  
29 Jahre alt. Ich bin  
grafikerin,*” I think, leaving  
the office. I stick my tongue out  
at Evil, conferencing with a boy  
in her office. She returns the gesture  
and the student doesn’t flinch.  
In the Hodges elevator,  
three people press buttons--  
2, 3, 4---second floor for me,  
a shortcut to avoid the stairs,  
and a long sidewalk past  
wanna be homecoming  
queens, handing out Kit Kats  
and condoms from orange plastic  
jack o’lanterns. “*Danke!*” I say,  
and think, “*Ich mache  
vielen Reisen. Ich fahre  
wohin meinen Aufgaben sind.*”  
I can’t be late for the German-  
class trial, though in the book  
I never made an appearance.  
Sexy Seth says “hey”  
in the doorway of the B & E  
building and I answer,  
in English, for once. Entering  
the classroom, I think, “*Unsere  
Liebe ist gefährlich. Ich schickte  
ihm keinen Liebesbrief--*”  
And maybe I have it all figured out:

my lover, his black Mercedes,  
his wife's shoe, *und meine neue Leben*  
in the Canary Islands *mit Bernd*  
*Herbst*. But only for an hour.

3i

Boys in the Navy masturbate.  
He once had rugburn so bad it bled.  
I heard he used a towel.

But you said--  
That doesn't answer my question.  
The choice at hand: Rational Numbers.

No. I am 3i  
there,  
a spiritnumber  
with you, a mathematician  
who always  
has to redefine the terms.

Remember,  
I am not divisible by 2.

But if I accept the language you argue with  
I have lost already.

Yes, I know you've told me  
5,317.94 times

But I want to say it: what everyone says.  
The woman in the 4th floor hallway  
(the wife) screaming obscenities  
(at the Other Woman)  
isn't Rational.

Other Women, you tell me,  
even the innocent ones  
always say that--

just ask the mailman.

Better to ask the Navy Boy  
found naked under a piano a half-eaten apple  
wrapped in a towel at his side.

Just let me say it--  
I don't think he ever made it to sea.

## Argument with a Storyteller

About what you said last night--

When the old man stepped off the elevator  
he said, "Talk to you later, ok?" like I would  
see him again really soon.

Maybe it's when you said, "I want you to need me--"

He was really interested in my elephant keychain.  
People keep asking me if I collect elephants.

We're both a little immature sometimes--

Everyone agrees that elephants are too big  
to make really good pets.

It's awfully hard to tell a story here--

Do you know that at a wedding once

Please promise me you'll eat something--

someone told him, "Love falls in a pile of shit  
and there it grows." How's that for a toast?

Much better than this conversation--

## The Muse's Dismissal

I've never seen you in the summer.  
And those sandals, a little worn--the philosophy of blisters,  
or a Styrofoam cup of ice left on the roof of the car.  
It spins in a circle and refuses, for miles, to blow off.  
But you won't notice until you're thirsty  
and the shine has melted into the asphalt.

I have stated there will be no more paintings for you,  
but every time I hear your rumored return,  
I prepare the house as though you will see it,  
then look longingly for the bottle--peach schnapps,  
wrapped in black, hidden in the drawer of scarves.  
Any time I see a black scarf...No.

I want a red-haired woman. A poet. A copy of A Tale of Two Cities,  
though it made me suicidal in high school. Perverse desires your scarf  
awakened in me. No more. I won't see you. The picture  
is finished. It's time to giggle and sleep until winter,  
silent, even absent, when you finally come.

## The Story of Dennis

In my purse, two dollars  
and some change before  
Dennis asks me to lend  
him sixty. We're sitting  
in a restaurant, where  
he always asks, though  
he knows I never have  
money and I never trust  
people named Dennis and  
this one won't get my last  
two dollars. When I return  
from the bathroom, Dennis  
is gone and I look in my purse,  
green everywhere, there must be  
a hundred dollars, all in ones,  
tucked somehow behind my  
library card. And Dennis goes  
on upstairs, in a rented hotel  
room making phone calls to  
Afghanistan on my credit  
card. I don't know how  
I know this from a table  
in the restaurant but I swear  
I can hear him saying  
he loves me, in Farsi  
or some other language.  
And suddenly, everyone  
is looking for Dennis but only  
words are left--not even his  
words, but words stolen from  
me. I can't think to leave the  
table, keep writing my breakfast  
menu over and over on a napkin,  
twisting it to show my stomach  
how to digest again. I feel sick,  
like there should be more  
to this story--Dennis is found,  
or I stop writing breakfast menus  
and find words, make the story  
romantic--I'll rescue Dennis  
and we'll live happily until  
I replace him with a cat. He is  
missing for now. He'll turn

up again, unexpected, as I  
read in the library. Dennis  
will ask me for money and  
steal my card and borrow  
more words. He'll bring  
me late fines but leave me  
forty-two dollars, seventeen  
cents in my eyeglass case.  
It will clatter out loud after  
he's gone and I try to find  
him, find something to say.

## Hands, Reading

When Gary returns,  
I'm reading about Australia  
but looking at my hands, nails painted,  
a dark, inhospitable terrain--  
dried blood, full of sparkles  
so people aren't afraid to look.

Poisonous spiders and snakes  
rustle between the lines  
when my hands brush their names.  
I turn the page, hear them whisper--  
*slut* and disappear.

In the background on TV,  
there' a movie with a drug  
dealer, a greasy smooth blonde,  
hair in a ponytail like Gary's,  
only the dealer is strangely cuter.

Gary returns, a criminal closing  
the door, hands holding a box--  
a package of bourbon  
addressed to the naval base  
in Seattle, well across state lines.

The drug dealer lies naked  
on the bed, lines of symmetry  
bisecting his torso. Gary mutters  
*He's too thin* and he means--  
no body hair, no fur to cover  
stretch marks left over  
from ninth grade gauntness.

A memory of Gary's--his  
bowed out elbows, scrawny biceps,  
his tumbles on the sidelines--  
again and again at JV basketball games.

I was home when he played,  
reading the newspaper, my hands  
encased in magic gloves--  
warming in my 54 degree living room,  
a blanket of holes across my lap.

In the newspaper, the team lost again.  
My hands struggle to turn thin pages  
away from the picture--  
gangly Gary, midnight, *slut*,  
post-sex, tangled in the sheets.

I notice Gary's hands around  
the box, strangely unable  
to send away the stolen goods.  
I ask him *Why didn't you lie  
about the bourbon?*

But my answer is stretched out--  
naked, too thin. I look at my hands,  
holding a book, peer at the words  
calling me *slut*.

## Her Return

When she comes back,  
words and phrases creep in  
that belong somewhere else--to someone else.  
When she tries to explain,  
    I am silent.

No imagination could  
put me where I wasn't.  
She makes me want  
to send my language away  
    see if it comes back changed.

Or, if like furniture  
passed down through generations,  
it still holds the spirit  
of the first person  
    who slept there.

She's not new  
to this place. But by the time  
I get adjusted, speak  
her language, understand,  
    she'll be gone again.

## The End of the Meeting

Desperate against windows the butterflies strike,  
a yellow vibrant fluttering, wings against glass,  
though the butterflies cannot see clearly  
through the tint, what they are not getting into.  
Inside, people are distracted at the coffin-shaped table.

One man remembers a rabbit he watched  
hop through the middle of a group of crows  
that hardly seemed to notice  
the rabbit almost taking flight  
before disappearing into a hole.

A woman struggles to control a smile.  
She sees the butterflies, strange as a scream,  
during a long-ago lecture when a squirrel  
fell from the icy limb of a January tree  
with no leaves to slow its fall.

Even Kevin pauses, budget numbers left  
unsaid, senses something, maybe wings  
and maybe, there's no meeting now,  
just wings beating against the glass.

## Rememory

Me, I remember seeing sand on his back  
and reaching to wipe off  
the words written there.  
Strange, he wasn't at the beach,  
just standing by a group of  
kids on the sidewalk  
when a beach ball fell from an open window.  
It had to be a window.

I remember. Not the words, the sand.  
His voice sounds like a wrong number.  
As if the postman had a cold. I dreamed  
he delivered a package with a sneeze inside.  
It sounded fake, like mine, because natural sneezes  
are not feminine, lacking cuteness.  
There's no sand in the package.  
No letter. No name.  
But it came from this man.

I want to touch him, his back,  
his face, I know it. I've seen the place  
where his soft hair ends at the nape of his neck.  
I've brushed that spot, fingertips gentle,  
then harder, during sex. That smell--sandy.  
Sniff. Sand. I think I might sneeze.

They say it's impossible to keep your eyes open  
when you sneeze. That explosion,  
in that moment. There.

## After the Fires

I.

The dog runs away in a repeat performance of last week's car accident. He takes a leap through the window and into the woods for a day.

II.

The siding melts on the front of the house. The next morning, the sobered-up couple wakes surprised to find the truck gone. Not even a smoldering tire remains.

III.

She cleans the ashes out of the sink and wipes the notebooks dry. She'll tear off the charred parts in the morning.

IV.

The wedding invitation is rescinded or lost or maybe ashes in the garden. But it doesn't matter. Anyway, what would she wear?

V.

The mother bans all candles in the house. She still claims the children forgot to blow them out.

VI.

The people stand on the sidewalk shivering even after flames stop shooting from the window.

VII.

Her fiancé is glad it wasn't his stuff.

VIII.

Even the plaid dress isn't considered beastly anymore. Both of them walk to work dressed in borrowed or smoke-scented clothes.

IX.

The dog is always thirsty after he wakes up under a tree.

X.

My charred fingernails still harbor the smell.

TWO

## The Language of Cheese

I stand in the buffet line and count the memories,  
reading the language of cheeses, like Ophelia's flowers--  
Pepperjack for spice, like Jeffrey's salsa chicken  
before an evening at the bar, where everyone  
wears skimpy clothes,  
even the band dressed only in underwear.  
Swiss, for the holes that Jeffrey hates.  
He used to think a mouse had eaten it  
because one is pictured on the package  
in the deli at the grocery store.  
I choose Provolone, for the smoke,  
though Jeffrey hides behind it when we talk.  
Brie, with the soft-centered best part  
that Jeffrey so rarely shows.  
I cough at the excess of cigarette smoke  
mixing with the stale air and dream  
of Harvarti, for Denmark,  
where someday I'll go and eat cheese.  
But I know that when I wake up,  
I'll be in the same place I went to sleep.  
Cheddar for familiarity,  
pale blue walls and a giant poster of flowers.  
Cream cheese for morning,  
when I toast an extra bagel, for Jeffrey,  
after I burn the first one.  
I want Roquefort for darkness.  
The cave where it grows is always cool.  
Then Jeffrey wants to kiss me again.  
I think Limburger, for strong scents,  
morning breath, all other thoughts forgotten.  
They can hide in the folds of my skirt,  
in the pocket with the Pepperoni cheese  
(for eating) I stole from the party.

## Dream Job

I want to be the person who names shoes.  
Imagine something presidential, a “Roosevelt”  
or elegant, like “Sven”  
for a man’s dress shoes, though I wonder  
if clerks laugh in the stockrooms  
finding “Norville” for the old man in the barbershop quartet  
who spends the whole concert seated in a rocking chair.

“I can’t imagine what they pay these people,”  
says Wendy, the shoe manager at Sears,  
but I know she’d enjoy the work,  
the naming, the elegant boxes stacked in rows,  
sizes 5-15, wide width also available.  
Her shoes are “Julia,” simple  
black flats with a tassel. Her feet  
are silent on the carpet, hands assemble  
an array of new choices, including leopard  
“Sheena” boots and pointy-toed “Kestra.”  
Wendy always puts small shoes on display,  
only one price sticker artfully stuck on the sole.  
She says, “No one thinks boat-sized shoes are cute,”  
though I noticed the big-footed customers always choose  
the most preposterously strappy pair.  
My names could help this problem  
Imagine a “Charlotte” espadrille to slim  
even Maura’s size 11 wide widths.  
See her smile as Wendy carries  
the silver box to the cash register.

## We're Watching a Movie

5 equals 6 in her math.  
If she says there are 6 people  
in the room, then surely the last one  
is just offscreen, maybe playing  
“Amazing Grace” on the bagpipe  
in the kitchen. She insists she knows  
She was watching.

So, we're watching and sitting here,  
but there's too much heat  
under this blanket, like someone  
is baking apples here on the couch. I say  
it smells better than a candle but she  
doesn't notice. She says I hear a bagpipe  
lingering, languishing, laboring, some word  
beginning with L.

The tone changes frequently, like the energy level  
of a group of mono patients. Each gets a sudden  
burst and has a task.

1 cleans the fire grate, 2 the dryer filter, 3 stacks  
coins, 4 eats popcorn from between the couch  
cushions, and 5 and 6 are us, offscreen,  
listless, watching a movie.

## Domestic Chattel

The purple bra on the couch,  
the crochet angel hanging from the ceiling fan,  
the upside-down stuffed dog on the shelf  
all have something to report.

I am not from around here.  
Where I'm from, the front door  
is red and the neighbors not so loud.  
Like you care, little miss-  
none-of-this-has-a-point.

In the next room, the sock drawer  
rolls shut with a bang  
and the hairbrush clatters to the floor.  
It's almost resounding.

Maybe you are angry  
and those little everyday noises  
magnify to remind you,  
you really should have some ideas.

You are only aware of the confusion,  
green and lovely, scattered on the carpet,  
spread over the coffee table or  
like the scissors, abandoned on the stairs,  
calling, honey, there's a lot of cutting to be done.

## You, Stranger

Instead you spend eight or so  
hours a day at the mall,  
waving a hot dog on a stick  
at the kids in front of KB Toys.  
You want to teach them to drive a tractor?  
You say, "Even the Amish  
run red lights in my town,  
and the horse at the stop sign  
always has the right of way."  
The kids don't care about your farm.  
If there's no campfire with marshmallows,  
they don't want to be outside. It's not  
going to work. You're what's creepy here,  
tackier than the oversalted popcorn  
the youngest kid holds.  
You long to shake the box,  
let the salt fly around the toy store,  
coating toys and kids with thirst,  
drying out their voices,  
silencing screams until you can't  
take more and gulp down  
the hot dog in one huge bite.

## Sideling Hill Exhibit Center: Great Horned Owl

The stuffed owl says, I don't know what happened.  
Hit twice they said, feathers everywhere. I circled  
low to catch a rat...

According to the ornithologist, sometimes owls  
get hit by cars. It's sad. Their eyes pop out.

And before my eyes a vision--  
a vibrant black, an explosion--a screech.  
I tasted dirt, turned my head back, looked for my rat  
saw only a puddle of gooey feathers,  
a tire track, nothing.

And if they can't see, they can't hunt. It's possible  
for an owl to make it with one eye--like a giant obi  
it circles the trees, wobbling closer, tightening  
around prey.

Now, a shelf. Here, I stand,  
peer through crossed yellow eyes. Children  
laugh and look up.

The blind owls? They are put down, explains  
the ornithologist to a little girl. The girl stands  
with head tilted, almost stuck sideways, staring up, up.

She sees nothing, just stares,  
like me, waiting for her own place on the shelf.  
Somewhere a car is coming.

## Strange As It May Seem

Everything is going well,  
until Kenneth says on the elevator,  
“I wasn’t the man they found  
drowned in the river this morning.”  
Great, Kenneth, but little comfort  
when facing a small group of silent students  
who want only to go home,  
not to hear that one of them  
has been killed by a tropical storm in Florida.  
What to do? I sent them away.

And now I think I just saw  
that student’s head float by  
the window of my house. I didn’t think  
Chris would make it. He couldn’t get  
to class everyday, let alone here,  
dressed in a UPS uniform, with a package.  
It’s 8:30 Tuesday morning. I just woke up,  
confused, kept trying to answer the telephone  
but no one was there--  
and then the pounding started.

In the box are Chris’s essays  
with comments in my handwriting--  
“Where is your title?”  
“What?”  
and “Good example. Maybe expand a little from here?”  
in a patronizing voice,  
like the sewing instructor on public television.

On the elevator at 11, Kenneth, still undrowned today,  
asks, “What’s in the package?”  
“A river,” I tell him. “A river of words returned.”

## Under the Squirrel Tree

The neighbor children gather to hear  
the new clock radio make  
four different nature sounds.  
First is a brook: The dog barks  
at the sound and runs off  
looking for birds.  
Doreen chases after, chanting  
“That tree in our yard  
has still got its leaves  
and it’s snowing, snowing!!”  
I follow them, stumbling over snow,  
holding batteries into the radio,  
and sing as best I can, “Spring  
will come and leaves will go?”  
The dog stops to sniff  
a Kraft cheese wrapper  
poking out of the snow  
and Doreen sings “snowing, snowing!”  
I press the forest button  
and little Charlie comes up  
saying “Frogs don’t belong in the forest”  
The dog lies down with his Kraft pillow.  
I want to say, “Not frogs, owls in the forest,”  
but all I hear is “snowing snowing!”  
and the snoring dog. I say nothing,  
just listen to the children, as silent as the forest.

## On the Couch, July Morning

She purrs across my lap as if to say  
“the adorable are never left behind.”

Why does the bitch start now?

It's so hot here already, but they say  
it's a charming little town.  
And it tries--  
presenting sun to manipulate me to stay  
here with the purring one who does not care  
about a boss, a job, or waiting.

Like the weather, with its own time,  
it pours when I try to mow the grass,  
each drop sighing, “the weak and helpless  
have little choice but to beguile,  
to play damsel in distress.”

And the creature, plaintive, “if you must go  
take me with you,” as she kneads  
my thigh, until I shove her. As always,  
I'll be late.

Damn the weather. Damn the weather.

## Transformation

He says we are all playing something--  
him, a narcissistic but sexy asshole boy  
he's seen in a movie. Me,  
a giant (roughly the size of Quebec) mouse  
I saw in a book. I have little blue streaks  
behind me to represent running.  
There is no such indication in the argument  
we're playing out now, unless you count  
the fire alarm in the background  
that forces him to flee. I'm not worried.  
He'll come back--as an owl kite  
with wings outstretched, a shadow  
driving me over the ground, making me  
plow through snow, through everything in my path.  
I am three blind mice, seeing nothing but red,  
blazing new trails, waiting for the wind to die down.  
Eventually, he'll have to rest when someone  
in the background (maybe Greenland) pulls  
the kite string taut into a tree. As he rests  
comfortably on a bough, I'll pounce,  
become a tiny squirrel appearing from nowhere,  
flailing the air, paws out, claws extended,  
crashing, plunging with revenge  
against a picture of the owl  
who ate my lover.

## And Billy

“And Billy’s eyes aren’t blue,”  
mutters Jason munching popcorn.  
I am surprised, years of thinking  
only blue, the exact shade  
of the macaroni box I dropped  
on the floor when I first  
saw the guy who looks like  
Billy on TV. I didn’t mention  
the macaroni-box eyes of my ex-  
Billy. Maybe Jason knows  
more than I do. He’s seen Billy  
many times in person, though always  
from far away. Or maybe ex-Billy’s eyes  
have cooled to grey, congealed like cold,  
wet macaroni, sticking fast to green carpet.

Tonight, when Kelli calls, blue is all I think.  
She’s single again, on the prowl of clubs  
for a new migrant worker, someone to murmur  
to her in Spanish, entertain her through construction  
season. “This time,” she says, “it will be different.  
I’m not going to fuck him.  
Well, I try to be good, but you know, how it is--  
like microwave popcorn--even after  
the timer dings, the popcorn keeps popping.  
I sit there, aching, wanting him from behind  
the bar, staring into dark eyes, and oh,  
you’ll know someday. After Jason.”

“But Kelli, he’s not like Billy. His eyes a different blue.  
But I saw him. I saw Billy. Just standing outside Krogers.  
I couldn’t look at him. Couldn’t stand his  
macaroni blue. I don’t know if Jason’s right. Billy didn’t  
notice me. He was eating popcorn out of a blue bag,  
singing ‘Ka-vu, Ka-vu’ to a little girl holding  
a grocery sack. He has a child. Her eyes are blue,  
macaroni-box blue.” “And Billy?” “I. I.” I hang up the phone.

## Fever

All I said to him        "I want to go swimming,"  
but he said he lost        airplane parts  
(a wing broken in forty-two places and the bomb hatch)  
   in the Australian Outback  
though we've never been there.        I asked him to change the lightbulb  
and it broke in his hand,  
   pieces of glass        imploding into his skin.  
He says there's a constant  
buzzing when I talk  
   16mm films we watched in grade school  
about animals at the zoo.        He looks at me  
   a mirror watching me backwards  
   a strangely graceful elephant  
throwing peanuts back to zoo visitors who        catch them neatly in lifted hands.  
For a moment,        I am swimming,        wavering behind my eyes,  
   letting        water        surround.

## Convalescence

There are instructions written in furious whispers on the backs of my hands.  
The words chip away like nail polish and I know what to do--  
but I don't, believing like children that cough drops are candy.

These days it doesn't matter whether I pair stripes with a print skirt.  
There is no naked man sprawled on the couch, inconspicuous,  
almost hiding behind the sink, washing dishes. I am alone

with a container of peanut butter fudge, eating  
and eating until my tongue is stuck fast  
to the roof of my mouth. It reminds me of the dog--

a peanut butter thief that snatched  
the empty jar out of the trash can.  
She'd sprawl out with it clamped between paws,

licking the jar clean and then licking the air,  
head moving slowing, jerking to the right, tongue in  
and out, a steady ache to free herself from food.

Me, I drink water from big plastic cups  
and suck cough drops without a doctor's permission  
for more than two days.

At the end, my hair is tangles that a naked man  
can't unravel in an hour, and I glare into the fudge container,  
now empty, and wonder what to do.

## The Next Morning

Even the water from the faucet isn't clear,  
so don't look back and tell me now  
"You shouldn't have been a martyr.  
There are ways to make me stay."  
Listen--if you complain of stomach pain,  
I'm not going to hide your coat,  
tell you, "you won't need that tonight,"  
and climb on your lap.

This isn't the night six years ago  
when it snowed. You looked  
out the window and said, "You're not  
going anywhere tonight." and gave me  
a black T-shirt to sleep in. I don't  
remember if you peeked when  
I flung my fuschia sweater over my head.  
It didn't matter.

Now, even when I fall asleep  
I wake up angry. There's a man  
in the kitchen making breakfast.  
When I enter, you're eating  
his pancakes at my table,  
like it's a restaurant and I  
am just a new customer,  
dressed in a bathrobe.  
I want to order eggs  
over easy, but this is my  
kitchen, and he's a stranger  
holding my spatula. I  
stand there, robe hanging  
open, gaping at the cook,  
unable to look at you,  
clearing your throat  
to say "Good Morning."

## Backwards In the Absence of No

The dog barks next door  
after the car pulls out  
of the driveway. There is  
a sudden absence,  
a vacuum replacing a car  
rrrrrring backwards and  
the voice of a dog. Always  
something better before.  
The scent of soap, a puff  
from the air freshener  
and then, gone is shoulder-smell,  
sweat, neck, scratch of abrasive  
beard against arm, breast, stomach.  
No shoes in the doorway,  
but a circle of light still shines  
from the porch, marking  
invisible footprints on the flowers  
of the welcome mat, minutes  
after the phone startles us awake.  
Dishes no longer dirty in the sink,  
clean in the absence  
of “no” that brings him to my bed.  
In the waiting, before he comes  
the neighbor begins another song--  
“Oh, I’m a man...” and I agree  
to see him this evening.

Three

## Taste Development

Yucky, says the little boy on the TV  
as his mom gives him a potato chip.  
He's already chewed on a remote,  
a couch pillow, a crayon, and his sock  
as cartoons play in the background.

No wonder yucky makes me think  
of Pokemon, or Digimon, or toys I've seen  
on the shelves at Walmart--  
brightly colored monsters that fight each other  
and shout their names--  
little narcissistic soldiers.

What color Pokemon is Yucky?  
Green like Mr. Yuck poison stickers  
stuck on cabinets that hold bleach,  
toilet bowl cleaner, EZ Off Oven cleaner,  
ammonia--yucky stuff. Never looked tasty,  
even to a kid. Who wants to drink bleach?

Now, Mr. Yuck, so tempting,  
I'd sit on the floor by cabinet door  
and lick his face like a kiss.  
I wanted to know what Yucky tasted like--  
not lima beans or cat food, or nasty chemicals.  
I wanted the sweet behind that yucky face,  
the chocolate behind the candy coating,  
a Christmas M+M.

But all I ever tasted, paper,  
unsatisfying, neon green, no matter how many licks,  
till Mom came, horrified. Yucky, she said and she  
was right. That taste, yucky, knowledge yucky--  
take it all in, vibrant green face, yucky, yucky, yucky.

## The Contestant

On Wheel of Fortune tells Pat  
“General Motors Cooperation” sells cars.  
Other game show hosts would laugh at her,  
call her “uncooperative” and suggest  
she get a job with the IRS,  
where no one will notice the confusion.  
Pat simply moves on amid sighs  
and titters from the studio audience.  
I just wonder how she got on TV--  
even my father calls her stupid  
as he lobs a plastic dog toy at the TV.  
I watch it smack Vanna full in the stomach.  
She doesn’t even flinch. Neither  
does uncooperative, and for three seconds  
I have to admire her, poised  
on the brink of stupidity,  
calmly watching the Wheel spin  
into a commercial break. My father  
continues the lecture--”All the letters  
were right there! Lit up!  
All she had to do was read them!”  
I just shake my head and watch a candy bar  
dance across the screen.

## Blur

In this picture of my cousin,  
Chloe looks almost  
pretty, rocking in her tiny  
new chair, but she  
has a blur for a head.  
If I stare long enough,  
I can straighten out her features  
and move her here--  
sitting on the living room floor  
with her flashcards, sorting them,  
answering them, mixing them up  
with a housewife's determination.  
Like me, when the couch  
delivered was a bit too large  
for its designated space.  
I knew if I pushed it  
fast enough, hard enough,  
it would go. Like Chloe  
repeating the wrong answers  
for each math problem, shoving  
numbers randomly into each blank.  
Every space filled with movement.  
When others watch her, they can't see  
every motion in her face,  
a stubborn, willful blur.  
What's left out of the picture,  
an unimportant whisper,  
*slow down breathe.*  
I want to call out, warn her--  
*almost invisible child, what  
do you want? flashcards  
aren't forever and speed  
won't be much help  
when all the answers change  
and every space is filled  
but doesn't quite fit.*

## At the Citgo

I stand,  
in an elf costume,  
through \$10.54  
of gawking  
from pump 2.  
I watch  
his dark hair  
and green eyes  
amble past,  
pausing to stare.  
First to pre-pay,  
then to get change.  
His passing not  
unusual. His  
stares expected.

As an elf,  
my hair is long,  
and uncurls  
in wind.  
He watches me  
close my cloak  
with its Celtic  
design over my  
green dress.  
I am almost  
invisible in house  
or tree, among  
the elves, but  
not here  
at a gas station  
beside a red car.

He watches me  
drive away to  
the edge of  
the forest where  
I can step out  
of the car to  
a party of green  
clad people.  
I imagine myself  
a queen, gracefully

ascending the  
front porch  
steps of the  
costume party.  
I am an elf tonight.  
But I must  
walk through  
the door, a person  
who dwells in a house,  
not a tree.

## Untitled Soup

I'm stirring, stirring  
a thick soup cooking on the stove.  
I've let the wooden spoon fall  
into the fire. The end is charring.

The phone is ringing.  
A voice is asking for Michelle, Martha, Michael.  
All I want to do is sleep. I am not  
Martha, Michelle, or Michael.  
I have a cousin by that name,  
but he lives in Cumberland, I think.

What difference does it make? Not me.  
I'm cooking, burning the spoon. Maybe  
there is no me, though the blonde hair curling  
at my ears is the same shade, perhaps, as hers.  
Only mine isn't natural.

Where do they get the idea for the hair color on the box?  
What if I now look like Martha or Michelle?  
Does a burnt spoon change the flavor of the soup?  
Will I have to answer yes?

## Other Woman I

No wonder her work is never done--  
all the world sees is a shamble  
in the form of a woman  
who steals men and claims  
her life is always stable.  
The wife calls her a reverse chameleon--  
red in front of a green leaf.  
Other woman knows to watch  
how the quietest men in the room  
come to life in her presence.  
Only the colorblind men are left confused--  
maybe something's there, familiar.  
But men flock to her  
and she smiles, chooses one,  
not noticing the circle on his finger.  
The wife tries to concentrate--  
turn the chameleon woman  
yellow, blue, any color, just create  
a house far away and put her in it,  
maybe with a cat for company.  
The wife comes up to them,  
one hand wraps around a glass  
of tea, the other slips around  
the waist of the husband,  
to steer him away, though  
it doesn't matter. She'll  
return destructive, setting fires  
even to herself.  
Other woman's colors change,  
grow vibrant red against the emerald  
lawn she tends in her front yard,  
waiting for the men to pass by.

## Evening at the Busy Bean

Angst Boy got annoyed  
when the two girls  
walked into the coffee shop,  
came over to his seat,  
(ignoring the smoke)  
sat down, and said,  
“We’re wearing hippie pants today.”  
The pants jeans  
with peace signs  
magic markered on--  
safety pins held  
butterfly patches in place,  
a fourteen year old’s art  
project in Angst Boy’s honor.  
Though what he thought,  
at his mature eighteen years was  
“These girls are nothing  
like me at fourteen--”  
he was drunk then, skipping school  
to hang out at Eat ‘N Park  
with the drug dealers  
and slur songs in the bathroom  
before passing out  
and hitting his head on the toilet.  
These girls were already silly.  
They didn’t need Angst Boy’s help.  
What he wanted was to go back  
and finish his poem and coffee.  
He had to concentrate  
to find the darkest words.  
This is why he’s Angst Boy,  
plagued by silly girls  
who never notice his work.  
He looks right through them,  
sighs, blows smoke rings  
over their heads,  
stubs out his cigarette,  
and leaves.

## Angst Boy's Absinthe

He imported it from the UK  
(over the internet)  
for the trip to California  
after he read Diane Di Prima's poems,  
decided he wanted to meet her.  
I scoffed at the idea  
he could just walk up to her  
and "be in her presence"  
where he could ask  
whatever he needed.  
Like she really wants  
to help him just because  
two years ago  
the magic cross he drew  
on Jackie's forehead  
with fingertip idealism  
couldn't keep her from  
aborting someone else's child.  
And tonight, I saw him,  
selling Ecstasy on the corner  
of Carson Street.  
His presence must have meaning.  
If he hasn't gone away, then  
surely he's anxious to leave  
this city with its wall,  
each brick holding the night  
he told me his story.  
But when I looked over  
he just stood there, green  
as absinthe in the cool evening,  
smoking an unfiltered cigarette  
right down to the end,  
leaving only a shower of ash  
falling to the sidewalk.

## Angst Boy Says

There aren't enough freaks in this college town.  
So he goes out of his way to find them--  
hitchhiking with strangers to the closest mall  
twenty-eight miles away.  
Later, in the third row of the theater  
before a World AIDS day drag show,  
Angst Boy leans over, whispers in my ear,  
"Wilford Brimley is an angel."  
"The guy from the Quaker Oats commercial?"  
"Yeah. I met him in a bar. I might be gay."  
It took Angst Boy a week to decide, finally,  
he's not.  
It takes me months to know why.  
Cheryl our waitress friend, calls me up crying,  
she says, "That Vietnam Vet,  
the one that liked teen boys,  
died of a heart attack. It's silly of me.  
I miss the tips, well, and his  
Wilford Brimley smile."  
Angst Boy says it isn't true.  
Cheryl doesn't know  
what she's talking about.  
But I do. I'm afraid to study ethics with him.  
Angst Boy's got a poster now--  
Wilford's freaky smile watches from the wall.

## Photograph of Angst Boy's Nineteenth Birthday

Look, there's Heather from Texas,  
in a white puff coat,  
who slips on the ice  
on the way to the crack whore's house,  
where she finds obsession  
with Angst Boy,  
what Clare already had--  
she's the one with the long dark hair  
and the jealous face because  
his hand is on Heather's shoulder  
and Angst Boy's two black  
dogs seem to hate her.  
This is a picture by the stream  
at the bottom of his driveway.  
Look closely, at the road, covered in ice.  
Heather's Nova couldn't make it  
all the way to the top--  
it's parked right up against that pine.  
It kept sliding backwards  
into (Clare thinks) Angst Boy's arms.  
He's dressed in a bright yellow coat,  
cheeks dotted with pink,  
looking almost normal  
until the picture is taken.  
Then, Heather slips on the ice,  
his hand goes to her shoulder,  
Clare is jealous,  
the dogs are frightened,  
and three months later  
Angst Boy leaves this picture  
(two copies, one for each girl)  
and heads for California.

## Other Woman II

Madam, you live  
the life of a mistress.  
Some days you don't exist.  
Today is one of them,  
a special day, almost,  
if he remembers  
the time you were first together--  
a cave-room in the darkness.  
It was easy to sacrifice  
for love when you were young.  
There was no other route  
and you didn't know how  
to leave. Now you must believe  
this is what you do--  
wait in silence to be received.

Maybe once you loved,  
but not as part of a couple.  
What you loved was the lack  
of honor, and now you've  
traded that for waiting.  
Some days you think  
it's too much and you dream  
of Chinese butterflies, flitting off,  
yellow disappearing into the sky.  
Maybe you should go with them,  
when you tire of waiting.  
Meanwhile, stay, twist the silent circle  
around your finger,  
a common wife, a prisoner.

## Ashland Station and Deer Check-In, Bruceton Mills

Four men stand there when I enter. They wear plaid shirts of various colors and hats advertising lumber companies. They don't bother to acknowledge me. I'm clearly in the wrong place.

When I finally find the line for the bathroom, in the actual Ashland station, five other women ahead of me wait for the one-seat room. At least I am traveling alone. Alex would hate it here--not the wait (only two men in that line) but the way people stare, how they accept the waiting, the way they speak, the sea of plaid. The way City Grandma feels when she goes to the town hardware store, the only woman in the place. She knows exactly where the nails are, what kind she needs. But the men are confused, curious, patronizing.

An Asian woman arrives, saying, "Is this the line for the bathroom?" A \$5.99 bag of beef jerky is knocked to the floor in her hurry. A big-haired blonde towards the back of the line nods, but the woman doesn't stop. She snatches the jerky from the floor and tosses it to a tall balding man in the other line, yelling "Hey, you'll let me go in front of you, right?"

The man chuckles back, "Now, you know thirty years of marriage ain't enough for that." The waiting women shift from foot to foot and sigh. I force a smile, hoping, maybe, soon.

## In the Middle of

Waking up  
you freak out.  
You're late for work,  
as always. There's  
no watch strapped  
to your wrist yet.  
There you stand  
in the middle of  
the kitchen,  
wearing only a robe,  
& start to fuss  
with the coffeepot  
still dirty in the sink.  
You glance at the wall  
clock & think *Damn,*  
*8:30 no time for coffee*  
& then pad back  
to the bedroom  
& yank open  
the underwear drawer.  
The hairbrush falls in,  
followed by a  
bracelet, and a can  
of deodorant &  
you don't care.  
Slam the drawer  
shut anyway.  
You're in a hurry  
in the middle of  
the night (the watch  
you didn't check yet  
says 3:10 AM) &  
don't you know  
it's never this dark  
at 8:30 in the morning?  
There's not a storm.  
Can't you glance out  
a window & don't you  
always wake up at 6  
when the trashman slams  
every door on the dumpster?  
And don't you always  
hide your head in

your pajama top  
& take an extra twelve  
minutes to wait  
for the weather report?  
Not tonight. Instead,  
here you are, so late  
in the middle of early.

## Coffee Activism

Chas, let me explain this to you.  
The girl on the elevator tried to sell me a bicycle.  
She screamed when I let a two pound can  
of coffee fall on her foot. Sometimes  
even store brands are good to the last drop.

Sound vindictive to you? No?

Well, good. Because really  
it was the computer's fault.  
It would not process my request to leave the homepage.  
A pop-up box proclaimed  
"Hash is not an object--line 6."  
It made me so angry, Chas,  
the way you feel when the college president  
made everyone sign a new policy on sexual harassment.

Chas, I know you hate it but this is not a battle,

just a cup of coffee from the honors luncheon  
that you'll carefully place on the edge  
of your tray so it pours out on him  
as you pass by the head table.

Make sure you get the timing just right

and drop your bookbag so it looks like an accident.  
Maybe even hit yourself in the toe with a pencil,  
not a book. Those are heavy,  
but a touch of pity never hurts.

If all else fails, I'll look for you in Sears,

housewears, tonight at seven.  
We'll do a little shopping  
and then grab a cup of coffee.

## Cycles of Pursuit

Sometimes pursuit feels endless  
like the musician practicing the same song for hours  
who then listens to a recording of it and curses  
the one high note still a little flat.

Sometimes you say it's too easy, when answers  
appear at the end of the math book, on homework  
due tomorrow and you are graded  
only on the right sums.

Some days you chase nothing. The prey  
isn't running and you missed the news  
broadcast: "Due to heavy thunderstorms  
and tornado force winds..." You've dashed  
into the gale while the prey stayed home.

Sometimes the road stretches before you, enticing  
and you run off into the horizon like a woman  
in an athletic shoe ad, showing off your prowess,  
taken over by the power of expensive shoes,  
the sense you alone can run like this--  
the drama of taking it way too far.

Once in a while people laugh at you because in a dream  
a monster is chasing you but you're stuck in one spot,  
won't be pursued. But the monster runs  
right past and the bell rings and you  
are still there, naked in the school hallway.

And sometimes the alarm goes off and you leap out of bed,  
dashing to work, where you pretend to be top dog,  
rutting your way through an office of underlings.

Sometimes you keep going even when you don't remember  
what you're supposed to be chasing.

## Cleaning Up

Scrape the egg off the plate before it congeals  
over the picture of blue flowers. Run each plate  
under warm water and place it in the dishwasher.

Scrub the red stains off the wallpaper in the bedroom.  
Watch as it smears into the upholstery of the couch.  
It will never come out of that yellow fabric.

Run the vacuum--no, wait. It's late and the neighbors  
are surely sleeping. No sound comes through the thin walls.

Sweep the broken glass into a pile and throw it away. Pat  
a wet paper towel over the shards too small to see  
so no bare feet will find them in the morning.

Pull the shade down over the screen to deter the moths  
from beating themselves senseless against the mesh.

Lay the pages of the scattered newspaper in order  
and set them on the coffee table  
where they are likely to be read.

Finally, scrub the blue ring out of the bathtub  
and scratch a toothbrush in the rim around the drain  
until it's clean enough to run a bath.  
Climb in weary and relax.

## Winter Garden

Now she has an urge to plant and grow  
but the garden lies frozen, unused  
and only ink pens lie scattered in the yard--

a fallen army.

Besides, no one plants in the frost-filled ground  
and no flowers spring from the tip of a pen

even with her guidance.

She walks here anyway, looking over  
the hardened land, drawing maps on the ice

with abandoned pens:

Maybe the tomatoes here, the peppers  
there, and the pineapple...

No one bothers to stop her.

The garden's safe, walled in and the east gate  
is blocked by a statue.

A man, his body written in hair-like thorns,

vines heavy around the feet, threatening to trip him,  
toppling him over anyone who dares  
to enter or exit the garden of pens.

This girl believes in winter she will make the ivy grow,  
clear away the thorns from the feet of the statue, to free him,  
and with frozen ink inscribe his shoes with ivy, her name,  
and send him away. The garden is hers.