

## Forever Eleven

Using my childhood mind's eye view,  
I now see back in time

to a mirage of youth  
preserved in amber memories

of father, brother, and me  
cocooned in the VW bug Dad uses

to haul his veterinary practice  
from farm to farm.

While we speed along the gravel roads,  
the sound of stones pelting the underbelly

of the Beetle as we fly up and down  
the ancient hills covered by hardwood forest

and careen around the curves that chase  
the valleys and streams carving through

Minnesota's magnificent Driftless Area,  
surrounded but never touched by glaciers,

each and every farm we visit  
recalls reflections of my grandparent's farm

with the scent of silage and manure  
mixed with hay, matted cowhide, and horsehair,

with visions of pigs in mud sharing their slop,  
chickens laying eggs in the hay loft,

and the sound of fresh, warm milk  
hitting the bucket as Grampa pulls on the teats

of the one cow left that will not  
tolerate the milking machine.

Now  
we live in this idyllic state  
my father my brother and me  
speeding and careening  
helping and healing  
hunting and fishing  
joking and laughing  
being and dreaming  
all good things  
and then that  
night:

Saturday, November 19, 1960  
when I am all of eleven years old.

I am  
by chance sitting next to the phone  
when it rings.

I answer with  
"Dr. Norway's home,"  
using the most professional voice  
a kid can muster.

"Is the Doc there?  
My best cow's bleeding bad!"

I stick the phone into my dad's hand,  
then listen to his calm assurances,

"I'll be there in ten minutes, Emil.  
She's going to be ok.  
Just stay with her."

Immediately, I make my plea for a ride along,  
as the approaching dusk offers the possibility

a whitetail buck may appear on the edge of a clearing  
and we bring home a bow hunting trophy.

"Cow cut her udder on a broken fence,"  
Dad says,

"Couple of stitches and I'm done,  
nothing you haven't seen before

so finish your Sunday school lesson now,  
and we'll plan tomorrow's hunt when I come home."

He is my father  
so I acquiesce.

Just past 6:00 pm, I sit at the dining room table,  
the *Holy Bible* open before me.

Mom fixes dinner in the kitchen;  
Richard entertains baby brother Michael  
with a game of coochy-coochy-coo;  
four-year-old Roger loses himself  
in fantasy within the knee-hole of Dad's desk.  
The doorbell rings.

"I'll get it,"  
I call out and skip to the front door.

When I open the door,  
the minister of our church,  
a close family friend,  
stands in that frame  
tears streaming down his face.

Frightened by this unexpected sight  
I run before either of us speaks a word  
to the back of the house  
to find my mother.

"Mom!"  
I cry, fear in my voice,  
my own tears now flooding my face,

"Rev. Hansen is at the door  
—crying!"

I do not yet know why  
I cry

I only sense an unspeakable something  
now draws near.

Mom grabs her kitchen towel to dry her hands.  
With me on her heels, she walks quickly  
to the front of the house  
where we find the Reverend sobbing  
in the center of our living room

shoulders heaving,  
his face a requiem in tears.

Mom begins to cry, to shake uncontrollably  
as the minister gathers her up in his arms  
and guides her to the big overstuffed easy chair.

I kneel beside her as the three of us  
just continue to cry.

Mom keeps saying  
"No!"

No one else says a word.  
Richard continues to care for the baby  
knowing I suppose that he cannot  
abandon tiny Michael to experience  
this grief as it sweeps over the room.

Little Roger comes over, so innocently  
asks why we are crying.

Mom signals Richard to bring the baby over  
and she tries to put her arms around  
all four of her boys.

"There has been a terrible accident,"  
she tells us, although no one has said so out loud.

Richard and I just say,  
"I know. I know."

My mother and Reverend Hansen  
cradle us in their arms.

This moment remains frozen in time.  
I do not know how long it lasted.  
It lasted forever.

The loss of my father's voice  
becomes a raging silence  
with a bewildering vocabulary

The weight of his guiding hand  
as it vanishes from my shoulder  
plunges me into an abyss.

Although surrounded by people now,  
isolation swallows me whole

as our house overflows  
with neighbors and family friends

already delivering food for us  
that we will live on for days.

Women bring us the meals  
they must have prepared for their own families

as there has not been time for them  
to hear our news and cook more food.

I am aware of this community goodwill  
but still spiral in my whirlwind of grief

out of control really,  
when a neighbor woman takes me aside

leans in close to my face  
and whispers,

"Don't cry in front of your mother  
anymore

this is going to be very difficult for her  
so you need to show her  
how strong you can be."

I hate her  
as I turn and walk away without a word.  
I cry myself to sleep for a year.

Later, much later that night,  
lying in bed I stare  
at the darkness that blankets me.

Contemplating our fate,  
I realize my father's fatal crash  
is my fault.

I should insist he let me  
ride with him on his last call

then I prevent  
the accident

scream  
"Look out!"

grab the steering wheel,  
swerve from the path of danger,

or better yet  
perish in the crash with him.

Instead I live in this anguish  
I know not how to escape

alone now  
in my body my blood my bones

my god my fault  
my own.

## Opening Words: A Novel Idea (A Cento\*)

You don't know about me  
The boy with the fair hair

In my younger and more vulnerable years  
Someone must have been telling lies

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces  
A flattened and drying daffodil was dangling

It was a bright cold day in April  
Early in the morning, late in the century

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day  
A screaming comes across the sky

If you really want to hear about it  
It's a dream, but then it isn't

At night I would lie in bed  
In accordance with the law

You know how it is there  
Everywhere there was somewhere

People know me here  
It's on the edge of a canyon

Let me begin again  
How did I find out

God was dead: to begin with  
The honeysuckle was everywhere

If you ask me how I remember  
I look at myself in the mirror

Somewhere beyond my line of sight  
They are watching me

I can feel the heat closing in  
On the human imagination

I don't know why I am writing this  
Under the light of a wide-eyed moon

But, you may say,  
It began as a mistake.

These things I may tell you,  
They're out there.

It is a truth universally acknowledged,  
All this happened, more or less.

\*The cento is a poetic form dating back to the 3rd or 4th century C.E. in which the poet creates lines by using words from other authors, originally Homer or Virgil. For this poem, I devised just a few rules. A line must begin with the very first word of a novel and each word that follows in the line must be in the exact order it appears in the novel. All of the punctuation in the poem is also exactly as it appears in the novels. The line need not be the complete first sentence, though it may be. I chose not to use any line that contained a name. Composing the poem was not so simple as choosing some novels and jotting down the lines. Hundreds of novels had to be consulted in search of lines that would touch or grab me in some way without yet knowing what the final poem might convey. Then began the process of choosing and ordering the lines in some coherent manner, much as I would while employing any other poetic form. Following is a list of the novels and authors in the order they appear.



Novels & Authors Used for "Opening Words: A Novel Idea"

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain

*Lord of the Flies*, William Golding

*The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald

*The Trial*, Franz Kafka

*The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner

*Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell

*White Teeth*, Zadie Smith

*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte

*Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon

*The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger

*There's a Man with a Gun Over There*, R.M. Ryan

*The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd

*Invitation to a Beheading*, Vladimir Nabokov

*To Have and Have Not*, Ernest Hemingway

*The World Is Round*, Gertrude Stein

*A Gesture Life*, Chang-rae Lee

*Fra Keeler*, Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong

*My Son's Story*, Nadine Gordimer

*Winter*, Ali Smith

*The Love Letter*, Cathleen Schine

*Robinson*, Muriel Spark

*If Beale Street Could Talk*, James Baldwin

*When the Thrill Is Gone*, Walter Mosley

*An Unsuitable Attachment*, Barbara Pym

*Naked Lunch*, William Burroughs

*The Deerslayer*, James Fennimore Cooper

*The Silent Patient*, Alex Michaelides

*Red Mountain*, Boo Walker

*A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf

*Post Office*, Charles Bukowski

*East Wind: West Wind*, Pearl S. Buck

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey

*Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut