

On the Rocks

It is a rare snapshot. For one thing
We are together; I am so small,
No more than four or five,
Perched on the ledge of a rock face
Below you, and I would be afraid
If it weren't for the single loop

Of rope you secured around my waist,
If it weren't for you, standing
A few feet diagonally above me,
Holding the rope that wraps
Around your back and spools
Out into your ready hands.

Even though you aren't looking
At me, even though your gaze
Stretches into the distance,
Like a man haunted by vistas
That would lure you away for half
A lifetime, even though I cannot foresee

The years ahead when I would still climb,
Roped up and hoping you would return
To hold the other end flapping
Free somewhere above me,
Even though standing there dwarfed
By the cliff face and by you,

I could not know that finally
The son would find a way
To reach the end of the abandoned
Rope and dangle it gingerly down
To the father who had fallen
So far away, and hoist him up,

At this particular moment,
Four or five and high up
On the sunlit rocks, linked
To no one else but you,
I know that I feel safer
Than I have ever felt since.

Skidmarks

The accident itself was almost a relief,
the tumor that blooms benignly,

a blighted elm that finally falls beside—
not through—the roof. No gasoline-fed flames,

no glass-imbedded bodies stuffed head-down
into a crumpled car, no blood pooling on pavement.

One son escaped with a twisted back,
one with a lacerated cheek and a few days

of jittery dreams. My brother hobbled away
on an ankle that swelled like a snakebite

when he slammed down the imaginary brake
on the passenger side right before impact.

Just after midnight the call came that every parent
dreads and half expects. I outwardly grieved

for the car and the boys' shaking voices,
but privately, knowing we had once again cheated

the bringer of plagues and curses, I exulted
with the gratitude of the undeserving—uneasily—

as one who dreams himself awake lying
on a dark road, squealing tires an overture.

Blanket Indictment

My parents gave me Indian names—*Thumb-in-mouth*
and *Blue-blanket-boy*, but I couldn't stop, dragged it
everywhere, nuzzled silky edges against my cheek
so I could breathe in trapped scents
of my six-year-old world: Rocky's
wet fur, apple cake and cocoa,
eucalyptus, lavender.
My blanket got soggy

when I draped it over baby's face in the tub.
He turned a shade of blue and churned
water everywhere. It hid with me
under the bed when I heard
high heels clicking down
the hall for a spanking
I always deserved.

They would try to yank it away for the wash,
but I would wail and fist it as if it were
my own skin. They marveled
at my banshee strength,
bought another I left
untouched. At night

I swaddled myself to prevent sneak attacks.
Sometimes in the layered dark it would
shield me from graveyard sounds
of scraping shovels. I thought
they had given up.

I never heard the nightly shear of scissors,
one shred at a time, never suspected,
as it dwindled, first to the size
of a hand towel,

then a dollar, that early on I
would learn how,
imperceptibly,

everything is snipped away,
down to the nothing

I still clutch.

What Matters

Does it matter that I never intended to stay,
never wanted to enter, touch, upset her?
But there's no rest from the doling out of pain.

The necklace she wore when we first met that day
invited a twisting. Her throat was a delicate bird.
No matter, because I never intended to stay.

My hands itched to hold her, not to betray
the whiteness, only to feel the flutter, the purr.
Can nothing arrest the doling out of pain?

She praised my hands, believed that I could play
the cello, read Rilke, caressed the words.
I mattered, and she intended for me to stay.

I patted her soft-sweatered back, tried to pray,
heard myself say *not too hard, too hard*—
but nothing could arrest the doling out of pain

For a moment under bruise-colored skies we lay
serenely. It passed—Oh, the voices I heard.
She's just matter now. I never intended to stay.
No arrest will ever end this doling out of pain.

Fathers' Hands

Carving a bow for my son, who wants
a weapon to terrorize squirrels
and deliver the world, I snag the blade,
fumble the whittle stroke and slice my finger.
The cut oozes. My hand is sturdy,
scarred, nothing like my father's—
unmarked, maple-colored.

His hands stitched gashes without a flinch.
They mortared rock walls to hold a hillside up.
On the violin, his fingers flew like wingtips.
Once as a child I saw sparks spray
from that smoking bow. He tried to teach
my hands how to drive a nail straight,
which spans would bear a load
and which would snap, how to follow
the grain of things, how to hear notes first,
then pluck them as if out of a peach tree.

A single feather in his hair, my son stalks
the squirrel, holds the bow steady,
draws back the shaft, aims, lets fly.
Target and archer are unruffled by the miss.
He bounds over to the arrow, takes it
in his nimble fingers, so like his father's
father's, and nocks the end,
eager to aim, miss and aim again.