

The Scythe

It maims before it slashes to kill.
Its reaper is patient slowly hacking
At knuckles, to gnarl, at knees, to swell,
At hips, to weaken, at shoulders, to freeze,
At the back, to rack with pain--and even
Taking random whacks at the brain.

The scythe sneaks up from behind and hacks
All who trod through years ungolden
To gates unopened and unpearled.

Some crouch in the shadow of the cloak,
A stupid stare to await the blow,
Some flail back at the darkness in futile rage,
Others ply their whetstone to the blade.

And still more stare down that toothy grin
Jugular chugging, pain ignored
At cliff's edge, aside the IV drip,
And the beep, beep that checks the heart.

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Fingers

My father

Whose mother hid his violin

When he at ten forgot to practice,

Who sneaked to the attic to play

And caused my Grandma to cry,

Who commanded “allegro” to my clumsy

ten-year-old fingers,

Who fiddled while waltzing around the living room

An obligato to the Bell Telephone Hour,

Or stood rigidly to perform at church

Died with fingers too stiff to bend.

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Smocking

The tiny smocked dress, the last stitch pulled as labor began
Then the tucked white batiste for the church dedication
The pink organza with ruffled sleeves
The Shirley Temple tap dancing frock
Home-made depression dresses, faded hand-me-downs
With rickrack braid masking an earlier hemline
Then the World War II outfits--big shoulder pads and short skirts
Ah, that Alice blue gown of satin shiny enough for a significant date!
A yellow net prom dress torn at the hem by Reuben's jitter-bugging
An off-the-shoulder sexy black lace creation from Mexico
A mauve matched sweater set for college
A cousin's elegant tucked antique ivory satin wedding gown
A Gibson girl black and pink taffeta going-away outfit
Nylon trousseau lingerie for the wonder of intimacy
That blue voile bridesmaid's dress that launched the marriage that didn't last
A modest brown wool teaching dress
Then serviceable cotton shirtwaists for burping babies
Ruffled bib aprons for frying chicken
An obligatory little black dress for hosting cocktail parties
A stately doctoral hood and gown for academic processions
A beribboned blue rayon bed jacket for cancer recovery
Next, starched blouses and tailored serge for a professor's career
Cotton turtlenecks and sweaters for carefree retirement
A heavy dark cloak for final farewells on Lethe's bank
Velcroed closings for arthritic fingers
Practical shoulder snaps for nurses.

An angel somewhere smocking?

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Culling Old Slides

Dump the Evanston Lighthouse
For our children
Building their sandcastle
On the Michigan shore,
Keep the picnic in the rain
At the gazebo by the beach.

And bald-headed babies, now graying,
Kendra's snapped in a cartwheel,
Velma's wary look
Astride her first pony,
And Anna at three gripping her pole
Intent on catching a fish.

Not the new Ferris wheel
But Gordon awobble
On his unicycle.
Toss the Alice Millar Chapel
For Velma, net stockings, top hat,
Tap dancing on the stage at the Y.

Not the Dawes House
But groceries on the sled
In the '67 snow.
Pitch Picasso's lips
And keep that kiss with Santa
Under the mistletoe.

Not the Arc d' Triomphe,
But every exultant face
Beneath a mortar board.
Discard Chitzen Itza
Keep me teaching cat's cradle
To wide-eyed Mexican kids.

Not the canyon walls.
Replete with petroglyphs
Of ancient Anasazis
But the power of Durrett's shoulders
Paddling the San Juan
And setting up our tent in the wind.

Nix on the North Church Tower
For Kendra, soaked with sweat,
Certificate in her teeth
At the end of the marathon.
Keep the frolic in the spray
Of the water sprinkler.

Not the Buckingham Fountain,
But Gordon cradling his Anna
Ten minutes after her birth.
At Bahai, it's not the Temple
But Grandma standing
Beside the purple tulips.

Words

Words on the tongue have timbre and tone,
Breath gives them volume and edges to hone.
Voice soothes angry ears or screams out with ire,
Crackles with ice or leaps up with fire.

Words on the page are flabby to sight
Gummy with ink, mired in trite
Till a piped up-cobra hooded and taut
Startles the senses, stands up unsought,
And

While I'm staring at the loose balloons
Of ivory sultan pantaloons
And soft red shoes turned up at the tips
Pulsing in rhythm and smiling like lips
And the conjurer's turban wound and white
Like his plaintive tune, thin and tight,

STRIKES!