

Five Poems about a Family

Cousins

The cousins wriggle and twist as the hands of mothers and aunts
spread cold sunscreen over their tanned backs and shoulders--
the song of the ocean already a piper to their eager ears.
They tumble through the door, bright towels waving goodbye
as they run across molten sand.

Blonde hair bleached white in the light,
brown hair curled and bouncing.
Like lemmings, they plunge past the edge of the earth.

The youngest lingers at the shoreline
where the others taunt and tease him.
He considers crying,
but then his mother appears and takes his hand,
See, it's okay,
and together they wade into the shallow surf.

An hour later, and they're hungry.
Flesh and sand pour into the rented kitchenette.
Here, sit on the floor, Aunt Barbara scolds,
and bare feet slide and slip between peanut butter, jelly,
and potato chips.

Adult war cries issue from the living room.
Todd, I can't believe you sat on that, you fat . . .
and the cousins look at each other with round eyes
as they hear Uncle Steve use a word that means your bum.
*Children, why don't you go upstairs--*Aunt Ella whispers,
her hands fluttering as she coaxes them through the door.

Night falls, and order reigns.
Uncle Steve and Uncle Todd play video games.
With mother-scrubbed faces,
the cousins pile giggling onto a large makeshift bed
made out of blankets on the floor.
Pipe down! yells Uncle Ben,
and they giggle only more.
The moon climbs and dark deepens,
and Aunt Molly peeks in
to find them all asleep,
limbs shipwrecked
in a tangled heap.
They murmur *Move over,*
No, you,

then fall silent and rest,
the rise and fall of the ocean
still tugging at their breasts.

Bubba

In family photos,
he's ten years old and she's still in diapers.
He holds her proudly for the camera,
his black and red baseball cap
turned brim 'round.

Eleven, he sometimes pushes her away,
No, Emma!,
protecting his warrior toys lined up
in perfect precision on the carpet,
while she, a two-year-old giant wrecking crew,
tries to stomp them.

At three, she wanders the house
in a pink tutu skirt
until he comes home from school
and watches tv with her,
making her laugh by singing their
favorite shocking parody
I love you. You love me. Let's go out and kill Bar-nee . . .

In her baby lisp she says,
I'm tsoo cold, Jesse,
and he wraps her in his batman blanket,
his arms forming a circle around her
where she is safe.

By Definition

Once in a blue moon
means *rarely*
but, still, often enough--

like the way a parent
comes to comfort a child
after a bad dream,
and the child feels safe and warm
beneath a gaze of love and

a warm blanket,
protected against the night
and its darkening shade of blue;

like the way a friend
comes to help you in the middle of the night
when you've had a flat tire,
and you feel really bad and want to offer him
money as compensation,
but he laughs and says he was glad to do it
and then drives off
into the mist
and a midnight shade of blue;

like grandparents
who've left so many wonderful memories
that their grandchildren still smile
through eyes clouded with tears
in a peaceful shade of blue.

Ocean Front

She watched her son,
still young and in a stage
of hero worship,
as he fought the ocean waves with
kicks and jabs
learned in
Wednesday afternoon karate class.

She knew what he imagined,
how he was saving the world
dressed in some colorful garb
(probably the green, helmeted costume
of a Power Ranger)
rather than his swimsuit.

The waves were merciless;
they never stopped coming.
He fought them relentlessly
until the sun set
and his father called him home.

Exitus

I walked up a treeless mountain
and walked back down again.
The way was dark and frightening,
though I held my sister's hand.

Sometimes the mountain calls now,
even though we are far away,
blowing winds of putrid fever.
Remember, remember—they say.

I won't look back at the mountain.
I won't hear its soul-thirsty whine.
I'll remember my sister beside me
and the warmth of her hand in mine.