

The First Frontier

A rare chilled Hawaiian late afternoon
I wore my father's sweater, thick sleeves
pooling at my wrists, hammer
from an old tool box concealed
by both sweater and child lie-logic
as I made my way to the backyard tree
followed by the nuisance of myna birds
island girls learn to accept,
that familiar brown pecking rush
swirling around bare feet,

Saturday afternoon *Star Trek* reruns
leaving all neighbor kids
bereft with extra-terrestrial ennui
as mothers washed and set their hair
and fathers kept track of both Captain Kirk
and children as they zoned out
with beer and TV, the captain's earnest
American exploration of both other galaxies
and assonance carrying us past
the perpetual military housing upheaval
to a world where I began to believe
our backyard tree was an alien, known

yet unknown, friend, foe, something
in between as I clawed the trunk
that held the neighborhood tire swing,
tearing away strands of weathered bark
to reveal pink flesh, the pulp and heart
of the only yard with shade, a color
as shocking as the pink of little girl bubblegum
until I gouged past the pink to a dark,
wet shade close enough to blood to alert me
of this explicit terrestrial suffering,
this soft secret I exposed
in the beginning violence of girlhood
no one ever sees coming.

Childhood

That afternoon the neighbor drained
his pond, half the size of a hula hoop
the half-dozen of us had only ever seen
full of what looked like a spill
of dark green ink.

In a line after lunch,
our leader the oldest at eight,
a summer afternoon stretched before us
longer than a winter trek through Narnia,
sneaked us past the backyard landmarks.

The tree where he showed us
the dead baby mouse, a smooth
pink thing smaller than my thumb,
the abandoned end table under a tree
that opened to reveal a stack
of rotten romance novels,
the rusted swing set overtaken
by the industry of mud wasps.

We reached the pool, drained of ink,
scrubbed clean to reveal a red rubber ball
waiting like a navel at its center,
an outie someone said,
the prized flesh button none of us carried
in the middle of our stomachs,
this red rubber ball so red in its redness,
a beacon of childhood fixation
we all longed to touch.

One by one we grabbed with eager hands,
kicked with sandaled, emphatic foot,
half boys, half girls in the half-dozen
backyard pack, the gang of Navy brats
who never knew each other long
enough to make real friends. With less
to lose came more to risk.

Our leader soon left for Georgia
along with his collection
of foreign Coke cans Navy kids,
replaced by a girl whose father let us

watch Twilight Zone reruns and drink
chocolate milk without supervision.

Soon he would move, too, taking
with him a daughter and a pink canopy bed
I always imagined in my bedroom,
our rooms the same, our houses the same,
so every kid knew where to find the bathroom
and the kitchen in every other house

except no one knew the neighbor
with the pond as anyone but a man
down the street who maybe worked
with someone's father, all fathers
leaving the house each morning
at the same time in the same brown uniform,
even in summer,
while we hunted the red rubber ball

until we gave up the quest to pull the pearl
from its shell, overly defeated
until someone else told the story
of the bullfrog who lived behind
the second biggest tree
who would give you warts if you dared
to touch,

lead us through the tropical light
of another intrepid late afternoon
with hours before the sun
began to set and the TV turn on,
the voices of what sounded like
everyone's mother beginning
to call them home.

Mango

We held a rotating vigil
the week we found you fallen
off the tree to land on our back deck.
In Navy housing, what they called
a lanai, that small, cool pad
of concrete that attracted toads,
lizards, the neighborhood kids
with a preternatural ability to know
when some great childhood interest
made first contact with one of our yards.

In the necessary erasings of childhood
I don't remember a mango tree.
We were the house on the corner lot
with a small banana tree forest—
three trees I never saw bear fruit,
but where did the mango come from?

Sisters rotated their boyfriends
in and out of the house and yard
but they weren't the kind of suitors
who brought flowers or fruit
but one did leave behind
a stick we used to poke the mango

The gift of a weapon to stab, prod, thrust
at the alien fruit ripening
from green to orange as our games
stretched our childhood patience past
its limits as we touched gently stick
to bruised and rotting fruit without
making first contact with the flesh beneath.

By day four the dam broke, the sweat
blotched being no match for stick
and occasional thrown stone,
the fruit revealing its soft insides
as we marveled at the hidden
vulnerability we somehow knew
waited just beneath the skin
of all things, our fascination
with the unknown inside each of us,
just waiting for that first person
to come along with their own sharp stick.

A Pack of Cigarettes

They found your gold necklace in Tennessee,
2,500 miles from your afternoon walk
along the Oregon river William Stafford
turned into a muse, the way he could fold up
the state like a child's finger painting,
a slipknot unraveled to reveal
a masterpiece laid out to dry by the edge
of the river where other walkers knew you,
the ones walking for peace of mind, walking
off weight, walking their dogs.

My friend Jack found you, our old neighbor.
Neighbor, which meant after you
we chose not to meet new neighbors.
Friend, which also meant, after you, we tore
the canvas off the wagon
and rolled our welcomes back inside.

The police suspected your husband,
the favorite neighbor who once offered
to shoot the dog who killed our cat.
That's what Oregon neighbors did back then.
Check on each other after heavy snow, keep
the cats in the yard and the dogs out.

The necklace landed a man in jail
for your murder. For life.
Your life fighting for the purse he wanted, gone,
the person who taught you to fight
the same person who forgot to tell you
a purse is only ever a purse,
your photograph taking up space in the hallway
years after the night you never came home,

a black and white reminder to fear
long walks by Oregon rivers,
being strangled for a simple gold chain
I never saw you wear, pawned
for a pack of cigarettes worth
just enough for him to smoke one or two
some afternoon along a Tennessee river with no fear
of who was coming around the next bend.

Dummy

We all stared at you, small man
who arrived in someone's overnight bag
and sat next to the build-your-own sundae bar
the night a girl in our group turned thirteen,
the only girl with sort-of breasts
and sort-of good hair who fondled you,
a ventriloquist dummy, in a way
that made the parent chaperone
pull you from her hands,
the red bow tie she flicked her fingers across
as if touching some illicit bit of flesh
we didn't know the name of.

Buddy the dummy the girls took turns
posing on their eager laps, so familiar
with our perpetual body loneliness
the weight of you, a perfectly formed,
miniature man, passed a bolt of charged air
around the circle of giggles
that escaped the barrier
of braces and bubblegum.

What secrets could your mouth reveal
if we knew how to make you speak,
none of us daring to push
our arm up your body, such a crude act
for such a little gentleman,
so we unbuckled your pants instead.
Poor Buddy with fabric legs
and mismatched plastic, toeless feet,
your perfection faltering upon
the ruthless slumber party inspection.

Fingers but no toes, hard wooden hands
but soft legs. The girl with good hair
and a wandering hand poked
the sharp edge of an earring into your crotch
as if you were the effigy
as we lost our appetite for pizza, music, gossip
anything other than getting to the core
of the man she swore judged us
with his perpetual grin. Buddy
whose secrets she tried to expose by digging
into the soft black V between your legs

until a fluff of stuffing popped from a seam,
the good haired girl laughing at the destruction
as her fingers ripped your jacket, cackled
at the split of bowtie,
satin red as a tongue silenced
from speaking the same way she stopped
talking the next morning
when her father picked her up,
the outspoken assassin who, head down, mouth shut
drove back into a life we could only guess.