

Tornados

The first one took the roof off
The Piggly Wiggly not five
Football fields from my uncle's house
When I was almost six.
The night before, a late tornado siren
Had awoken me from my long-awaited, forehead-kissed sleep
(I was plagued with insomnia as a child),
Sent us trooping downstairs to stand
Shivering on the cold cement
In the southwest corner, next to the washer,
With its hand-catching wringer sound asleep
In the dark, as I wanted to be.

Sometimes, late in a summer's day,
The sky grew gray-green and little
Dust devils kicked up lonely Dixie cups and
Torn Fudgsicle wrappers in the path of
Our bike tires as we pushed home,
Drawn by mom's shouts on the edges
Of the wind. As the sirens amped up,
I threw my stuffed animals down the stairs
And rescued my pet rabbit from his chicken wire cage
Outside, his early warning thumps
Bouncing off my tight, empty stomach.

Other times I'd rush to wash the supper dishes,
Put the plastic wrap on the leftovers and
Tuck them into the refrigerator
As the weatherman interrupted with his watches
And warnings. I'd fold and stack
The laundry in chests of drawers, as if their
Containment
Would ensure mine.

Years later, living on my own in my brick
Bunker, a house built into a hill
With the roof on the west side
Just three feet off the ground,
I was finally caught by an EF2 on a Thursday afternoon.
I thought I was ready:
Shoes on, standing in the southwest corner,

Poems for a December Day

Watching the sky turn a sickly sage and the rain
Come down hard. When the power went and the TV
Weather map with its red cell hovering over my house
Disappeared, I fled to the innermost room, a walk-in closet,
And watched the rain swirl past my bedroom window,
The tall grass just yards away swaying like seaweed in a muffled eddy,
And I knew what it must be like
Inside the guts of a washing machine
During the spin cycle, down on my knees
Where my offered prayers alternated, Oh god, Oh
Shit,
And my trusting dog trembled beneath
My arched stomach.
There was no howling, no rush of train
Noise, no wolf huffing and puffing
To blow my brick house down.
A single thump announced the roof's removal
As the tornado tenderly tipped over the open
Porch roof and took the main peak with it.

Once the rain became just a summer shower and a rainbow
Threaded the eastern cloud curtain,
I discovered the newly excised roof,
The missing pole barn up the driveway tossed against
The tree line like a Frank Gehry sculpture,
And my car, still standing where the barn had been,
Turned 7/8 of a circle,
As if a cat had given it a
Playful shove.

Dead Ants

Swiftly the broom descends from
The cobweb high near the ceiling
To the floor, the corner where the dead ants halted
After a shower of poison fell,
And the spiders, with their strand or two stretching from
The wall to the cabinet, scuttle away from the
Disturbance, displaced they know not why,
Perhaps because their arachnid gods are
Displeased with their small efforts at design or
Because nature is sudden and unforgiving, much like
A tornado drifting down from a tendril of cloud
To disrupt the tenuous connection
Of neighborhoods, a once neat row of house after
House after house,
Leaving their inhabitants to question
What displeasure, what disobedience,
What kind of god, nature, or chance brought forth such sweeping power
And reduced them all to so many dead
Ants.

Poems for a December Day

The Nineteenth Idea

I watch your hand
As it washes a line across the canvas,
A line that is one of the eighteen ideas of me
You keep in your brush.

I want your hand
To draw (apart) my blank skin,
Outline my secrets
With a few quick pencil strokes.

Watch me as I wait unspeaking
For your hand to pause --
You will find in my silence
The nineteenth idea.

Uncle Paul

In the late spring, he counts the bluebird fledglings
that fill the rectangular boxes nailed to the fence posts
just on the other side of the machine shed,
waiting for the day
they'll litter the fence
like bright sapphires on driftwood,
joining up to learn the commerce of flying.

He lays the simple traps for moles and sparrows that threaten
the tender balance of the farm,
stacks cords of wood on the southeast corner of the last stand of trees,
mapping out with his eye
the land left to be cleared,
the soil to be seamed and stitched,
his vision of one crop folding into another.

In the late summer, he cranks the line on his fishing pole,
peering into a pond he scooped out with a backhoe
during a lull after the spring planting,
a low stump his captain's chair, the pond
his wide Sargasso Sea.

He throws a few ears of corn into wire baskets
spread out around the farm, under trees, behind the shed,
at the head of the path into the woods, the temptation
of easy food luring even
the most industrious intruder from his silos.

In the late fall, he begins gathering up the scattered
hickory nuts, busheling them
for sunless winter afternoons and lamp lit nights
on the couch next to his wife, where,
methodically releasing the captive meat from its shell,
he will labor hour after hour,
turning happenstance into profit,
chance into beneficence.

Gray Shavings

Yesterday, I burned your letters.
I threw them atop the pile of
Last fall's fetid leaves
Dumped on top of dog shit
Flicked into the weeds and caught
In among the gathered up
Twigs that had littered the yard
And the tattered branches the storm
Had wrested from the trees.

The leaves caught fire quickly,
Folding in on themselves,
And the twigs made a kindred kindling,
The thicker branches a sturdy funeral pyre
For your earnest epistles.

I watched each sheaf of paper warm itself on the fire,
Go brown, then black with char, sometimes at
The corners first, sometimes from the midpage outward,
Briefly purified to a burnished bronze,
Momentarily alive,
Twirling, lifting like small dizzy bats into the sky,
Then drifting down,
Gray shavings tumbling to the yard.

I watched the fire eat each and every last one of your words,
Unloop your l's,
Uncross your t's,
Undot your i's.
I watched it travel across each page, right to left,
Unwriting your words, uncoupling your clauses,
Divorcing your phrases, discombobulating
Your syntax.

I watched it take back your salutations ("My lov—"),
Renege on your promises ("to grow old tog—"),
And deafen your pleas ("Be patien—")
In the wreckage of its righteous roaring.