

**If I Forget to Say
for Gratitude**

You are present
in the plum-wine hue
of autumn leaves,
that final hardy push
of the season,
the labor of harvest
before frost,
the honk of geese
heading home,
the alleluia
of a good night's rest.

You resonate
in beginnings –
the first slap, then cry,
the counting of fingers and toes.
You are first kisses
and fist bumps.
The expectation
of goodness to come...

You wear yourself well
in the everyday –
keys lost
then found,
wayward sunglasses
settled on our heads,
the thrum of the car engine
on cold winter mornings,
green lights all the way.
You thrive in the company of high fives
and revel in the amens.

And yes, your shudder is felt
in the convulsing embrace
of that mother,
but not that one
outside a school
in Newtown or Seattle,
a main street in Minneapolis.
You can be such a fickle bitch!

If I Forget to Say
(new stanza)

Yet, when we lie in bed
unable to sleep
and the phone rings at 3am,
we will sing your praises fully
beyond the margins
of this page...
for a wrong number.

**You say...
for Mom**

your words are disappearing
and I try to imagine how this looks –

Do letters pop
like bubbles in your face?
Or maybe they taunt
teasing just beyond your grasp.
Do they stick out
their tongue
show just the tip
of a vowel
then swallow it whole?

I wish I could give words back to you
whole dictionaries at a time

Apple pie

slip you pages while you sleep
but the doctor says

Blue

your brain is dying
as you too slip away

Coffee

perhaps chasing words
that elude you.

Daughter

Watching Jerry Springer with My Father for Dad

Between a school visit
and dentist appointment
I have some free time
and stop to visit my father.

Sitting on the edge of his bed
I spoon strawberry ice cream
into his mouth, open and waiting
like a young child.

He closes one eye
to look at the clock,
then changes the television station
to Jerry Springer.

Reality tilts
as an over-weight woman
tells the listening audience about the husband
she's leaving for a male stripper.

Her husband has been too busy lately
buying handcuffs
and yes, a vehicle spotlight
to live out his dream of becoming a bounty hunter.

The woman likes lap dances.
The husband likes handguns.
The stripper likes men.
And I look at my father.

He intentionally turned this on
and I can't help but wonder –
what does he relate to
in all this twist.

I try to imagine handcuffs in my parent's bedroom
and my teeth begin to grind
like they did when I was young
and something scared me in the dark.

Yet here we sit, stunned
as the male stripper
pivots around a convenient pole
right there, middle stage.

I wonder if this man's mother is watching
and cannot find a place
in my brain to explain
why my father is.

Watching Jerry Springer with My Father
(new stanza)

Days later, I wait at a stop light.
The doors of a nearby church open.
Out step a bride and groom
into the embrace of a blue spring day.

I see their smiles
as the first picture
of husband and wife
is taken.

And while the driver behind me
honks like a goose on steroids,
the happy couple
turn to look.

I blow them a kiss for luck...

**Caregiver
for Maria**

She lights a cigarette off the stove
folds four sugars into coffee made hours ago
sits at the kitchen table
junk mail and recipes piled at her elbow
amid crumbs from a late night snack.

She stirs and stares into her favorite mug
handmade by a grandson, long ago.
Habit tilts her head
to avoid the spoon she leaves in the cup
as she sips and smokes.

She listens for the squeak of the mailbox closing
the groan of the bed in the next room
the annoying buzz of television.
Watching birds feed outside the parlor window
she worries there won't be enough seed for tomorrow.

Smoke from her cigarette drifts slowly away.
A forgotten pink curler hangs above her shoulder.
Flour sprinkles the sleeve of her sweater.
Dropping the cigarette into her cup
she picks up a cookbook she will read like a novel –

wonders what to make for supper.

Portrait

for Joey

I see them squinting into the sun
because their mother wanted
this Easter morning picture –
brother and sister
dressed up, dirt-less.

No green stains
on the knees of his trousers,
no tears in his shirt
and she wears a new dress,
not pedal-pushers
or hand-me-downs.
Her outfit is white lace,
white tights,
black patent leather shoes
that pinch her toes,
a feathered hat.

“Hold hands,” their mother says.
And the little girl wants to,
for some reason beyond reason
she wants to hold him,
though she knows he’ll punch her
(and he does)
but not before she grabs his hand
and fakes “Cheese”
as the camera shoots.

Years later,
she’ll look at this photo
and wonder if even then
she knew –
the blinding sun,
the too-tight shoes,
the hand of her brother,
pulling away.