

## **Rocket Ship and Four Other Poems**

## Rocket Ship

Emery Park had a pretend rocket ship.  
We walked there in the afternoon, and I,  
legs straight, palms flat, dropped down  
the metal slide onto the cold sand.  
My mother made me wear dresses;  
they fluttered up like frightened birds.  
I wanted to walk by myself, but I was seven.  
One man in a torn jacket stood by the fountain,  
hands in his pockets, eyeing the merry-go-round.  
“Don’t talk to him,” my mother said.  
I wouldn’t even talk to the girl my age,  
who held a sucker in her mouth as she  
slid down after me. That was dangerous.

Later, we walked across the street  
to Crawford’s Market. I stuck my hot, dry  
hand deep into the barrel of hard candy.  
The store clerk glowered over her counter.  
*Watch your children*, a sign shaped like  
a pointing finger warned.  
I unwrapped the candy Mother bought me  
one by one, placed each on my tongue,  
and moved so the wrappers in my sweater  
pocket rustled. A red disk burned my mouth.  
I spat it on the sidewalk. That was wrong.  
We walked home past the park, and my mother  
grabbed my hand.. The rocket ship  
exploded with boys, yelling and hitting.

## Be Good

I once was pointed to the corner  
of a room where the curtains swooned.  
Red-eyed, hands tight as buds, I held  
the pink tissue mother gave me.  
She and father agreed, I was bad.  
Dust motes drifting through daylight  
fell on my head.

Puzzle box unlocked and smashed,  
I moved into a fragment of myself.  
Later they allowed me to set foot  
where the lamps shone upon doilies  
bright as lilies. *Be good*, they said.  
The dark boughs of my woods still  
thrash upon themselves.

## Pockets

My mother sewed the pockets  
of coats. She called it piecework.  
After her shift, she slept on top  
of the bedspread in her clothes  
so as not to mess the covers.  
Then the bed was straightened.  
We went to a coffee shop called Earl's.  
The meals came with cake or rice  
pudding. She wore bright lipstick,  
hairdo arrowed with bobby pins,  
an ironed blouse with the dime store  
brooch like a medal on her chest.

Practical daylight fell upon her things—  
the nylon scarf, the curlers and the pins,  
the pennies saved inside a jelly jar—  
but it was the beige slip that slid  
like a rattlesnake off the chair  
onto the floor that scared me. She said  
a slip stopped boys from looking  
at the outline between your legs.  
Smooth and supple as flayed skin,  
the beige slip told me how my mother  
became the red-lipped ghost. Listen,  
she'd say, here's a coupon, a hairnet,  
a pad, a needle and some thread.

The dresser and the nightstand  
each adorned with scarves depicting  
rosebuds, bluebirds, a shepherdess,  
and a leering doe with red lips.  
Where was the interior life?  
So many pockets, and nothing  
but bare hands to hide. I was told  
to never touch the sharp scissors  
she had honed. She wore dresses  
with no sleeves in summer, arms freckled,  
warm, and fat as rising loaves.

The change on the dresser  
never added up. The nylon briefs  
and bras lay cool and folded  
in a narrow drawer that stuck.  
She smiled at me as if her mouth

held straight pins. Here's a hanky,  
a spare key, a dime for emergencies.  
Stop eating cookies or you won't eat  
your dinner. There's no one  
now to accuse or defend her,  
except me—her most loyal prisoner.

## **It Surprises You**

It could be a cold Wednesday.  
Moving your feet along the ground,  
shouldering through the air  
is pleasure. Your heart fastens  
on a house you always pass  
that now needs looking at.  
You love the nape of your own neck.

When you were seven and wandered  
from your parents' sight,  
this was how you saw the world:  
every edge hardened with reality.  
That's why you drew lines  
around the pictures before you filled  
them in in your coloring book.

You begged for a pet, even a fish  
or a bird, because you loved the world  
and needed a body to put that in.  
One day you stared out your bedroom  
window: roofs, stars, moon,  
the crowns of trees reached for you.  
You were already falling.

The days dream us and the nights  
wake in our ears. Today, sitting  
at a desk or driving a car,  
you wonder, what was all that childhood  
longing about? When you enter  
the black room of your aloneness,  
nothing bad happens after all.

Nobody walks more solitary  
than a child. You could ask now  
for a piece of that slow waiting  
that married you to your hunger.  
An hour might spring on you with  
a daydream hidden in its claws,  
your old loneliness in its mouth.

## **Fireworks over Chain Lake**

One July 4th I stayed at your house  
on Chain Lake. We opened  
two bottles of pinot noir and put  
swimsuits on. Across the water,  
fireworks exploded like cannons  
aimed upon us. I woke at 3 AM  
to rain splashing against the house.  
You were asleep downstairs  
in your wet swimsuit with the TV on.

When the first bursts exploded,  
light fell like pollen on our heads.  
We jumped up and down on the dock,  
drunk and shouting. Why have we  
waited so long to be found good enough?  
As children we loved any tree,  
any mountain, any sky.  
Others appeared. They yelled for us.  
We hid. We went hungry.