

Casings and Other Poems

Casings

These casings we are in:
the book jackets to our complex souls.
We move in them every day,
the rituals of cleansing
 feeding
 flushing
 form habitual ruts.

These casings we are so used to
toting on our backs
that we hardly notice when,
like a favorite boot,
the stitching has frayed,
and the sole is worn through.

We take them for granted
when they are well-oiled and running smoothly
But are so often shocked
when we catch glimpses of them in a
passing mirror sliver:
who is
 that old lady?
 that angry woman?
 that overly painted clown?

That cannot be me.

the daily aches are our background music
and we don't remember when they began

Yet
 the lines get deeper
 the bags get fuller
 the silver spreads
joints swell...backs slump...bellies sag

These casings are wearing thin.

Are they worn ON us or made OF us?

Will WE, (the parts that notice and forget)
grow thin with them?
Or will we be set free: an essence unencumbered?

That favorite boot is reluctantly discarded with a sigh;
to be a nest for mice
a flowerpot
or another piece of trash in the landfill.

Little Boy

Little boy
you carry my heart with you each day
in your grubby hands -
your rarely washed-well-enough hands,
with fingernail nubs and marker stains.
Little boy hands
that dig in the dirt,
press together Legos,
carefully smash pencil lead into backwards letters and misspelled words;
Oversized like puppy paws
They grip and shoot a basketball with more control than I ever had,
They pull bicycle handlebars up into wobbly wheelies;
 but then yank your sister's hair and the cat's tail
 and smear glossy toothpaste messes on mirrors
 and drop stinky socks like a breadcrumb trail in your wake
 as if they spent all day plotting ways to drive me crazy.

Little boy
You melt me with a smile
And enrage me with a sneer.

The fierceness of your love for me
is held delicate by your budding pride,
as your carefree dash into my open arms
is checked halfway by sideways glances to your crew;
Youthful innocence eroding away by the world's expectations of
what it means to be a man.

Still young enough to need kisses to mop tears after skinned knees,
but quick to untangle from my snuggles
when the neighborhood boys come peddling down the street.

My Little Boy
almost 4 feet tall
all arms and legs
and skinny chest
and spikey hedgehog hair
 that never lays the way you want it
 -to look cool -
 to soothe your rising inner critic
 I wish would stay dormant.

You turn and walk away from me daily
with barely a whispered kiss anymore;
Your lion-cub confidence
made small by a backpack
loaded down with the Weight of the World.

Steady

We met sometime my freshman year of high school
you one year older swaggering
with quirky Lloyd Dobbler confidence
full-faced smile and handsome, but with a
90s-era angst that kept you just outside the cliques

when they defaced my student council posters
with bold letters S-L-U-T
scattered loudly across the school halls
you helped me build the bravery of spirit
that got me through those years of bullying
“well, did you do it?” you asked
“no” I sniffled
“then who cares what they say”

we tried kissing a couple of times
but it didn't really suit us
in passing period we'd catch eyes
I'd growl, you'd wink
and it buoyed me

later after you'd graduated
and worked at the Amoco gas station
with John who had the tiger tattoo
we'd sneak Boone's Farm into big soda cups
and sit laughing on the curb
under the glowing parking lot lights
smoking Marlboro Reds and feeling like Kerouac

There was the time I threw myself at you
sad and slurring after my divorce
your dad had just died and
we cried together on your mom's couch
“no, you're too drunk” you told me
“you would regret it
and it's not me you want anyway”

when you came out to the bar
for the after-party at my 10-year-reunion
even though it wasn't your class
you were watching out for me
your tall head peeking up over the
teetering blurry faces
you tried to keep me from giving myself away
again
I didn't listen

in our 40s
distant by years and miles and life
when my guilt and shame from
too much wine for way too long
had finally knocked me down to a terrified admission
I saw your face
now sprinkled with salt and pepper
winking at me again
this time from my Facebook feed
as you announced your 5-year-sobriety date

and there you were
steady
at the other end of Messenger
you buoyed me
and helped me rise

Bangs

When I was fourteen
I begged my mom to let me cut layered bangs
in a thick patch halfway across the top of my head
The goal was to curl, tease, spray, and shellac
these bangs to a gravity-defying puffed-out masterpiece
bearing striking similarities to a mouse nest atop my head

For 45 minutes each morning before school
I would stake claim in front of the bathroom mirror
armed with tools and chemicals
twisting uncooperative strands around the hot metal
pulling and pushing
until my scalp and fingers screamed from the heat
Holding the curling iron handle tight in one hand
I would hoist the half-gallon can of Aqua Net hairspray
and shower my sizzling hair with sticky droplets
smoke and steam billowing towards the ceiling
This act was furtive and quick
because if Mother caught me mixing the flammable spray
with the hot iron she would yell again
But every curling iron owned by a girl in 1989 was textured
with crusted sticky droplets of hair glue
It was the only way
to convince the loops to stay upward all day

With a brush I would rip the hardened strands back towards my head
teasing out a voluminous poof
that never quite satisfied me

Shannon's and Courtney's were always bigger, always taller
Their blonde hair loyally arching and cascading for them daily
ensuring that the boys followed them instead of me
My braces having just been removed that year
I hoped my spiral perm and painfully crafted bangs
would launch me into that level of popularity
guarded by the Shannons and Courtneys
but my rounded cheeks shiny-faced freckles
and awkward missed-beat interruptions
belied my innocence and ignorance
and left me hanging on the other side of the cafeteria