

## Lois Gibbs Leaves Love Canal

Give Me Liberty. I've Already Got Death.  
*(sign displayed by a Love Canal resident, 1978)*

Pushes out the door, a worn-out bag  
For lunch and road tolls, feet untied,  
Taste of melon in her mouth, time unnoted.  
She fumbles the key,  
Scratches her freckles, as if to track  
The ragged path she'll leave.  
Her skin leads and she, its bride  
In a sweater of eggwhite, follows.

No one hears her skin moan. She makes  
Her own descent from last night's battle –  
Fueled by fever, backtalk, prods, the clatter  
Of his jaw while she slept on the sofa.  
This morning, the only things she'll take  
Are two kids and a photograph. Even her nose  
Turns a new direction, as if to drag her  
Past the brink of turning back.

Niagara's ragged shoreline maps  
The distance, its hem's horizon flicks  
Her focus east. And south. She licks  
A finger (salted compass) indicating  
What she thinks of this place, takes a step,  
Has to stop and tie Mike's shoe, delayed  
Again – or goaded? – by a kid who's sick.  
He coughs and wracks; it pounds like jackboots

On her heart. They're both awake now, and  
Hungry -- lack of lunch telescopes  
The baby's cry from the backseat  
Of the Plymouth. Her skirt snaps wildly,  
Snarled in the car door, beating its thousand  
Tattoos down 83rd where neighbors' guileless  
Gardens drop black cantaloupes,  
Where the three-eared Hooker child retreats

To kick cans along Black Creek.  
Her heart grinds along Wheatfield Avenue.  
Up the block, the public pool  
Stinks of chlorine and rotted fruit.

It will be drained and scraped next week  
Clean, but never white again. Inverted skull, a mute  
Maw gaping, each tile a chipped tooth  
Grinning its reflection in her rearview.

Its ghost recedes as she leaves the street  
For the Expressway. Now – what? Her spine  
Crimps its question mark. (Loretta on WGRF:  
*Stand By Your Man.*) She won't miss  
The silence that abets the toxins' leach  
In the choking, stale-boned stupors of her kids.  
She pulls the map, smooths its crooked lines  
Across her lap: paper skirt that slides against her dress.

Now shadows clutch and shift, carboning  
The children's breath, steady and still, again  
Asleep, a pile of hair and sinew spilled  
On the backseat. No accident. A gamble, yes,  
A fateful pulling at the chromosomal string:  
Love's spawn and metamorphosis.  
Through the rear window, limned above the hills  
A cloud glints like a chrysalis.

## The Butcher's Secret Crush

“Hi, baby. They got rib eye and tenderloin – whatta *you* want tonight?”  
Her hand spreads over my glass case, five drops of oxblood; the other hand

holds her lover to her ear, as if he stood here, as if...”Yeah. It looks nice,  
good color, pretty piece of meat but pricey, Hon.” It’s the loin she wants,

sliced from the muscle, meat that grappled from back to belly of the beast,  
the most desired – marbled, red, heavy... but now she points to the rib eye,

arcs a brow, asks, “How will this one grill?” A cut farther forward, lean,  
sliced cross-grain from the rib, a meaty bias skirt. I give a nod sidewise,

mirroring the arc of her neck cradling the phone – the exposed ridge, white  
and pearl-smooth like halibut. “Yeah, you can, Hon.” she runs her blood-tipped

fingers through her curls, shakes loose the smell of shampoo that stings my  
cold unbuttered flesh. I slide sauce and spoon across the glass surface.

“Oh, wait,” she thrusts the spoon between lipstick-pink lips. “Ooh.”  
Her tongue’s muscle flexes, “but maybe too rich for your blood,” she chortles

and I withdraw the sauce but she shakes her head. “No--the meat, the cost,” she says to  
me. I point her toward a flank: heart-shaped cut straddling long muscle,

tender, juicy on the grill, or spread with my own molasses, cumin,  
and chili glaze. “Baby,” she nods & stabs her ruby finger, “I’ve got the one for you.”

## Trailing my gone boy

There he runs, patch-assed  
On the cusp of public lawn,  
Dragging the long brown witch's finger of a stick.

“Look what I found!”  
Digit, plow, rudder,  
Metamorphosing as he trails it.

Pebbles rattle under the oak tree  
Loyal grass bows and springs to his finger-stick  
Even though his heels crush.

Behind, the stick jitters in crooked stitches,  
Sluices a puddle, splays  
The mud in furrows,  
Tracks his ragged path while it collects.

Now he stops.  
Finds a pliant spot,  
Plunges the stick in.

This boy with his jagged laugh,  
Tyrant of the wet, bright, mapless world  
Twists his clever wrist, turns  
This morning to an eon,  
Drowns my heart in his unfathomed well.