

Home

Home is where they raised me up
like Ms. Pearl's squash plant,
People's Garden, climbing
toward the sun.
Home is cookouts on the street,
my grandma's candied yams
enough for anybody passing by;
breadcrumbs for the birds.
Home is playing hopscotch,
Double Dutch, Little Sally Walker.
What I love best
is skipping over Mother Nature
pushing through the sidewalk cracks
(won't break nobody's back).
Home's a shortcut through the alley,
a key to my own front door.

Sometimes it's the inside
I love best—my room,
the sweetness, morning bacon
cooking on the stove;
hot wet air after a bath;
laughing at my mama's
hair all over the place
when she took off her hat,
could have filled up the doorway.

Sometimes I don't look
to the outside:
ripped up, torn up
so many changes come.

Home is how people
need each other here;
in all of this
we've got to find the good,
the way we're glued; the ones
who always seem to come
to be that glue;
the heart
we can't let die.

I'm gonna be right here for you.
Who's gonna rise up for me?

Inspired by a writing experience with Over the Rhine Residents in 2012, sponsored by Over the Rhine Community Housing for their *Our Beloved Community Program*. Published in *ÆQAI Journal* (June 2014)

Familial Tremors

My mother's hands
pinned patterns she unfolded,
thin brown
as last year's leaves,
onto cotton, rayon, double-knit, velvet,
wool for our coats
laid out on the maple table
with extra leaves
bought with the dollars and coins
her sewing had earned.
Her hands pinned hems and seams
as we stood (*Straight, now!*)
on chairs wearing
the cloth cut neat,
wrote checks for what
they could not make and
kept the family books that tracked
that money in and out again.
Those hands could not
keep still even when she sat,
made lace
for the table
with thick needles and thread.
On slow days
they'd polish the silver
we seldom used.

Today my mother
holds out her hands
to show me how they
tremble, leaves
about to fall, they'll not
steady now for pin or pen.
She pulls
them close again
as hands would soothe
some dream-shivered child—
Rest now.
Day's done.

Why We Tell Stories

Because our lives do not
fit neatly into segments—
beginning, middle, end—
we find ways to pretend

there is a place where things begin
and some conclusion reached
before we start again.
In stories, we can count on,

if not reason,
at least a plot unfolding
like the seasons—
buds to blossom, branches thicken

into leaves that green
and turn and fall
when it is time—
and worlds that rhyme.

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Husbands

My mother likes a man who works. She likes
my husband's muddy knees, grass stains on the cuffs.
She loved my father, though when weekends came
he'd sleep till nine and would not lift
his eyes up from the page to move the feet
she'd vacuum under. On Saturdays my husband
digs the holes for her new roses,
softening the clay with peat and compost.
He changes bulbs she can no longer reach
and understands the inside of her toaster.
My father's feet would carry him from chair
to bookshelf, back again till Monday came.
My mother likes to tell my husband
sit down in this chair and put your feet up.

Published in:

Motif: All the Livelong Day (Motes Books, 2011)

The Lives We Live in Houses (Wind Publications 2011)

American Life in Poetry, The Poetry Foundation Website (April 2015)

Writers Almanac, American Public Media (July 15, 2015)

Housekeeping, August 1899

Cincinnati newspapers tell of a woodworker who drank carbolic acid and, not trusting its effects, shot himself too. In his pocket was this letter: "Living with my wife was unbearable. She was too pretty to work and would not attend to the duties of the household."

It's not as if I spent my days
at the mirror; only the once
he found me, rag in hand,
outside the darkened window
caught up, not in of the curve
of my own cheek (he was the one
forever staring at the round parts of me)
but in how the light of an evening
seems to shine out from under
all that green, like it's caught
there in the bushes. I know
that's just fancy talk,
he told me so, it don't
put meat on the table,
five o'clock sharp, no matter
if the four o'clocks
have just begun to bloom
or the hummingbirds decide
to sit a spell
in the sheer blue air around them.
I have the wandering eye
for wonder. Mama said
I was just born that way— a butterfly
would stop my snuffling
quicker than a teat.
Too bad neither worked
on him, all that carrying on
about the chores he knew
I'd surely get to
one day or the next.
I can't say I'm sorry
that he's gone—some men
are too particular
to keep.

Published in

Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel (Volume 17: February 2014)

Tangle (Dos Madres Press, 2015)

Quarried: Three Decades of Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel (Dos Madres Press 2015)

Speech Lessons

When my daddy left
the Bible Institute in Harlan
for Eastern Kentucky Teachers College
100 miles or so up Highway 25,
he got sent to speech class
same as the other mountain kids.

My mother says
his vowels spread
thick as milk gravy—even she,
from just one county over,
and already a fine cook,
couldn't always separate the lumps.

Daddy liked the class just fine
until they tried to make him change
how he said *pie*.
For years I'd beg, "Tell me the story
again, and how you'd say it."

And he'd stretch that "i" from here
to Harlan, back again to hear me laugh
and teach me how
to listen so that later when I'd headed
north up 75 and on across the river
I'd always know the way

to find my tribe.

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