

THE ART OF IT/

by

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## Training

I imagine

you are quite settled, by now,  
the last of the equipment  
leaving yesterday,  
two days after they loaded you,  
and we kissed goodbye.

I think about you, armies away,  
when I pull the blankets  
to our necks at night,  
the children and I,  
adding security where it's least needed.

Have you seen

the children there?

I picture there are none,

or else they are well

hidden among the viney overgrowth

that swallows you as well, camouflaged,

learning early it is best to blend

with all sides.

Or perhaps there is a neutral zone

where they surface, daily,

on their own land, and live

like we want to--

unaffected and unexposed.

It seems a challenge too many miles away  
to answer clearly, yet moving closer  
with every airlift.

I imagine  
the heat makes it difficult  
to breathe; dust in,  
dust out.

But you are there, fighting  
to inhale every lung  
of Honduran air,  
plagued by the insects  
you swallow at night,  
trapped,  
between the flaps of the canvas  
and foreign ground.

The bridges you build  
are for no one;  
the strategies you plan  
seem as cryptic as the Spanish tongue.

## Bridge

Her children took the light with them  
when they scattered  
like the dandelion seeds  
in the unkempt lawn,  
to grow up tall  
and weedy, in someone else's  
garden,  
leaving her alone  
in the constant dusk  
of the house.

Perhaps it is not so much  
the solitude, as the silence  
that stills her,  
that leaves her, day  
into night, at the shabby edge  
of the card table.

She sits  
playing solitaire, but remembering  
bridge, like the night  
she and Ronny McGrath,  
as partners, had bid,  
and made, a grand slam  
against the Alden sisters.

He had kissed her that night,  
quickly, out of triumph,  
but a kiss on the lips, to a girl,  
is still the world.

But tonight, her leg, half-lame, kicks  
at the air beneath the table,  
the same limping rhythm  
of the pendulum  
on the clock in the hall  
that has always run slow,  
she kicks, hinting,  
two hearts;  
bid  
two hearts.

## Purchases

Old man  
wandering the mall,  
your baggy pants  
cinched at the waist  
with string, like a bag  
of penny candy, tied tight  
to guard childhood  
treasures, searching every cranny  
of the building's floorplan  
for the glint  
of loose change,  
I've avoided you often enough,  
your outstretched hand  
dull with the earth,  
your downcast eyes, once green,  
now dull, a grimy beard  
your one remembrance  
of what a man  
must be.

Old man, where  
are your babies,  
an old love, the woman  
you'll remember the rest  
of your life, the one who said  
she'd love you forever;

where is the rest of the world  
you buy, nightly,  
with leftover  
nickels  
and  
dimes?

## Over the Back Fence

You know, Marge,  
there's not much in the notion,  
anymore, that you get  
what you pay for;  
like the little boy down the street,  
his head full of tumors,  
just turned eleven, won't see  
twelve, without a miracle;  
or the checker at the IGA  
working nights for six kids  
and a husband who's looking  
for younger ground.  
Maybe there's a percentage  
on deserving these days, Marge,  
like a dollar don't go  
as far as it used to,  
and you can't get the good stuff  
with clean living.  
But there's got to be something  
in believing, or we'd have given up  
weeks ago, and the Baptist church  
on Oak and Vine'd be out  
of business. Guess you gotta listen  
for the good ones though, Marge,

you know, you hear  
what you want to; believe  
in what you can, God,  
are you even listenin'?

## The Drill

It's four a.m., the phone rings.  
Some weak, but authorized voice  
says you must go in.  
Sleepily you tumble out of bed,  
leaving a trail  
of blue flannel behind you.  
I don't move; no breakfast.  
I just roll over  
trying to ignore your mumbles  
of God-damn this and fuckin' that.  
We spent hours last night  
packing how many months  
or years worth of supplies  
into two moldy duffles  
and an Alice pack.  
Enough handkerchiefs to share  
with the enemy;  
barely enough toothpaste  
for a week.  
You had to stand on them  
to get them closed,  
but you could carry them all,  
a steel pot on your head  
and a shovel, of all things,

slung around your hips  
where a pistol ought to be.  
A quick goodbye;  
one peck on the forehead.  
But I see, through tired eyes,  
how you stand by her door  
and, afraid of her waking,  
mouth a kiss  
and silent endearments  
to the white rails of her crib.  
If this were real, she'd be awake,  
laughing and chattering  
despite our tears.  
(Daddy's arms are always safe.)  
First dates, Disney,  
a dream house, memories  
all crammed into ninety minutes  
of useless time.  
If this were real,  
there'd be movement.  
If this were real,  
there'd be breakfast.

## Fears

Mother told me once  
that when she was a girl  
Grandma made them sit  
in a circle when it rained  
holding hands, and quivering,  
to ward off lightning,  
the house standing  
amidst the seances  
despite the trees that scratched  
like flint against the roof  
and the powder keg of fuel  
outside the basement window.  
But it was when she was alone,  
two hands not enough  
to make a circle,  
eighty years not enough  
to shield the child,  
that the gods came home,  
ran down the wires,  
through the windows,  
up the curtains,  
setting her stumbling  
in her own smoky nightmares.

The lot sits empty  
the trees razed by nature  
and the chain saws  
that fear sent in,  
the jays picking at the shreds  
of what was Grandma's bathrobe  
while the weeds reclaim  
their squatter's rights  
in the crannies of the bricks  
and the mulch of decaying rafters.  
And in the wet, sooty flowers  
of the living room carpet  
the mushrooms are building  
a fairy ring.

## Field Trip

Daylight disappeared  
as the school bus sank  
into the tunnel  
spitting fumes and gray  
smoke into the green  
suburbs behind us,  
leaving us marvelling  
at how dark it could be  
at mid-afternoon,  
then shielding our eyes  
from the glare  
as we entered the city.  
We slid to the windows  
pointing, drawn by the neon  
of the sex shops  
which rallied even in the sunlight  
and echoed the first impressions  
our parents had warned us about:  
Live, Graphic.  
The boys in the back  
laughed and called names  
at the sad old bag lady  
pushing an A&P cart  
and mumbling to herself,

scratching under her grimy collar  
as though fighting off fleas.  
The streets reeked  
of sweat, of piss,  
of the sooty steam that rose  
through blacktop pinholes  
from the subway below us.  
But we clung  
to the windows  
picking out the millionaires  
by their suits  
and the hookers  
by a simple flash of red.  
Then someone said look  
at the wino and I grabbed  
tight hold of my purse  
as we passed him  
on the steps of the museum  
going in to discover  
centuries of mankind  
and to get a taste  
of what we were.

## Salvation

Sometimes when I go  
down into the cellar,  
and the lights are dim,  
I can see  
Grandma there  
among the pickled  
beets and cabbages,  
straightening  
the rows on the shelf  
one by one,  
placing every jar  
in alphabetical order,  
and with the stub  
of an old yellow pencil  
her gnarled hands  
marking each label  
with the last possible date  
it can be saved.  
And if I'm quiet enough  
I can sneak down  
and surprise her,  
making her hands slip  
and glass crash  
into a crimson pool  
of beet juice.

## Mechanics

I dropped my mother once,  
on the cold tile of the ladies restroom  
just two weeks  
after the rehab discharged her  
with a new set of wheels.  
I remember she laughed  
and said that's okay  
until the tears came,  
and she struck at them  
with one good hand.  
The stroke had left us helpless,  
floundering on the floor  
like my babies have,  
struggling to find foothold  
and a ledge to boost up.  
My teenage tears, the quibbling  
over the patches on my jeans,  
and my language (slightly blue),  
disappeared as we fought  
toward one goal,  
to land Mother firmly  
in a seat she never wanted,

each time coming closer  
only to have the wheels  
slip back from under us--  
the runaway train effect--  
neither of us ever thinking  
we should just  
apply the brakes.

To Jeanette:

on the death of her twelve year old son

I used to watch you  
at our weekly prayer meetings  
almost clenching your fists  
as we pleaded the "Our Father"  
believing more and more,  
with every word, in Lazarus.  
I wrung my hands,  
wondering how you did it,  
choking back your own tears  
to reassure us  
that life is good  
and that Scriptures  
don't lie. We'd sit  
picking out Bible verses,  
every ambiguous explanation  
of death, and healing,  
and resurrection,  
pasting faith on our faces  
and tongues, as though that  
would make the final difference.  
It seems somewhere along the line  
no one told us it was already decided,

and that our words have power  
in only one world.

But you can believe in Heaven  
because you believe in children,  
the quintessential good,  
the nuclear generation that has no  
idea, and you know  
that babies make the perfect  
angels.

## The Art of It

I can see me now,  
ten years down the line,  
baking cookies and cleaning  
like our mothers used to,  
waiting for the kids to come home  
for conversation.  
Or I could look at it creatively--  
Good Housekeeping's New Traditionalist--  
learning umpteen ways to raise bread  
and children,  
and a dozen more to keep it all  
from falling.  
Learn the power of the art, I think;  
experiment.  
Feel the rhythm of line breaks  
in child-speech; inhale the caesura  
of afternoon peace;  
note the strange internal rhyme  
of a family.  
Perhaps there will be poetry  
in the laundry, brushstrokes  
in the sweep of the broom, concertos

in electrical hums,  
but the mattresses, as I turn them,  
will heave my sighs  
of relief.

## Lessons

You sing around my feet,  
the alphabet an early accomplishment  
although somewhere around "g"  
things go haywire, and "w"  
never has existed in your eyes.  
The letters ring in my ears,  
the essence of my words  
sounding new and almost vital  
in the downhill speed from "l" to "p"  
and in the exaggerated finality of "z",  
its uselessness yet unlearned.  
And then the numbers creep in,  
one to ten over and over again,  
in English and baby Spanish  
picked up from public T.V.  
There's no lilt in your voice,  
no choice of what comes next,  
just the easy belief in zebras  
and the simple assurance  
in the order of things.

My only Sappy Love Poem  
for Michael

If I were to say  
that the wind and the stars  
were reflected in your eyes  
you'd call me hokey,  
preaching phony creativity,  
blaspheming that I could capture love  
in simple words.  
But poetry, by it's nature, can't run  
that deep, can't reach  
inside and pull up the guts  
of it, that murkiness that rises  
in my throat when the words  
won't come, the elusive something  
that feels your fingers tumble  
over my imperfect skin, leaving a trail  
like rug burn--warm, immediate,  
bristling to the touch.  
The lines are gone, the curves  
trace smooth, the familiar self  
transformed.  
If I were to say  
there's something in it,

admit to no less than absolute  
passion, list every entry  
Roget ever made under "love",  
the words would fail at your lips.  
They speak  
for themselves.

## Cliche

The Earth moved  
last night  
just a few inches  
to the right.  
I can sense it  
this morning  
due to some heightened  
perception of  
rightness  
and the slight  
swagger  
in your walk.

As I began assembling this body of work, I was forced to stop and consider how it came together, what tied it essentially to me. Then, as it was arranged and rearranged I saw trends emerging, both in its themes and style. Thematically, there is the thread of the family in all of the poems, in some poems manifesting itself as a fear of potential loneliness and imminent loss, and in others manifesting itself as a joyful raucousness, a celebration of familial dependency. This duality has arisen naturally as I question my female roles as a wife, a new mother, and as simply an independent, creative woman.

Stylistically, the poems reveal me as a storyteller with a strong devotion to the narrative and conversational voice, and also relying on a definite sense of closure. Each poem works towards some realization abruptly revealed to both author and reader in its closing lines. But primarily, The Art of It reflects me, a young woman caught in two places--the domestic world and the creative world--trying to learn, through words, how to bring the two together. The poetry, I believe, acts as a bridge, a means of examination and revelation, turning psychological aggravation into artistic energy.

It is essential for a woman writing in today's society to consider her place in the women's tradition, for her to be sensitive to how her work reflects what is unique to her gender. In the book Naked and Fiery Forms Suzanne Juhasz distinguishes between two types of woman poets: "feminist" and "feminine." The first category includes poets such as Adrienne Rich, whose work serves a political purpose--to describe the role of the woman in contemporary American society, and ultimately to suggest how this role might be changed, improved. Poets of the second category write a poetry that is distinctly feminine because it stems directly from their female sensibilities and emotions, but it is not necessarily political. It is a poetry that "reflect(s) those qualities traditionally associated with women: being personal, particular, concrete, and contextual." (Juhasz, 138.)

In considering my own work I find that I fall into the group of "feminine" writers, writing clearly from a female consciousness, but rarely making further political comment or moving too terribly far beyond the world of the persona in the poems. At the same time, because women, "in their attempts to know themselves (a goal common to both sexes), need to make their definitions in terms of their interpersonal relationships with other people," (Juhasz, 138) the discovery of self via others

becomes very apparent in my poetry, usually in examining the relationships that I experience as a member of a family--as wife, mother, daughter. Upon closer inspection of the poems one can see a trend emerging, one that addresses a problem of many contemporary women immersed in family.

My poetry divides itself almost naturally into two groups: 1) those poems with an overwhelming sense of loneliness and fear of abandonment, and which also consider the sense of dependency that rises out of that fear, and 2) those poems which celebrate personal communion, rejoicing in that very "dependency" which, in effect, creates the vulnerability to the earlier fear. The poems that make up The Art of It dramatize an ongoing struggle in the poet's mind to unite these two emotions, to strike a balance that would effectively permit both independence and security.

The poem "Bridge", for example, is a very "lonely" poem, opening with lines that give a clear sense of abandonment. The subdued tone of the writing, however, conveys a sense of resignation, as though this is the life the persona has been expecting all of her life. "Her children took the light with them"; they have managed to leave the woman without even the most fundamental hope--a symbolic brightness. Again, later in the poem, she is faced with the loss of love, this time

in the form of the male/female relationship. Ronny McGrath, who kissed her once, cursorily, and upon whom the woman obviously placed inflated dependence, is gone, and the woman is left alone and lacking anything that even resembles a fulfilling life. The people who had given purpose to her life are gone and she is left stunted, unable to do anything creative. She is slowly realizing that perhaps it is herself that she cheated years ago.

The issue of security and dependency arises as clearly in the poem "Training," one of the few that also takes a political turn. I believe one of the most important lines in the poem is "adding security where it's least needed." It contrasts the political idea of our national "security" and the far more personal desire for security in the writer--a desire that, in this poem, overshadows her concern for her fellow man. The writer intellectually realizes that the security of the blankets--a physical manifestation of her emotional need for her husband--is excessive, hence the word "least." However, she cannot emotionally keep herself from this fear and insecurity. She consistently considers the world in the light of her own dependency on family.

Her question about the children is a good example of this thinking. It is answered in her own mind before it is even posed--"I picture there are none." She believes

that none could exist in a country that disregards the family unit, a country whose greatest offense is that it has "swallowed" her husband. Several lines later her true concern is raised: "and live/ like we want to--/ unaffected and unexposed." The persona craves Edenic security, no responsibility other than family. The next few lines, however, indicate an ambivalence, a realization that she must learn independence and responsibility in order to survive emotionally: "It seems a challenge too many miles away" reasserts her current mode of thinking, but the fact that it is "moving closer/ with every airlift" suggests at least a reluctant admission on her part that she must broaden her horizon of concern.

In a sense the persona and her husband are in parallel situations. They are both "trapped/ between the flaps of the canvas/ and foreign ground": he literally; she between the "flaps" of domesticity and dependence on the security of the home, and the "foreign ground" of an independence that has now been thrust upon her by a sort of unwilling, but real, abandonment. The responsibilities that she now faces and the sense of self that is in its fledgling stages are in essence "as cryptic as the Spanish tongue."

Contrast these poems with those, such as "Cliche," "Lessons," and "My Only Sappy Love Poem," that are

clearly written as celebrations. They are faster moving with a much lighter tone and are written with a touch of humor that reveals the writer almost laughing at herself, at the fear and loneliness that pervades much of her other work. "Cliche," for instance, employs puns and double entendres, and can be read in several different ways. First, there is the poem's redefinition of the obvious cliché in the first few lines. Underlying that, the poem questions the cliché's validity on the literal level: if the Earth actually moved a few inches to the right, would we be able to perceive it, and would our bodies adjust accordingly? Finally the poem revels in the afterglow of love making, perhaps the ultimate physical dependency within the marital relationship. The poem's phrase "heightened perception of rightness" (my italics) suggests that the speaker has come to the decision that this intense closeness and its ensuing dependency is right for her. This assertion is a long way from the uncertainty shown in "Training."

"Lessons" shows the persona in a different role, this time as a mother addressing her child. The most revealing lines occur late in the poem: "There's no lilt in your voice,/ no choice of what comes next,/ ... / and the simple assurance/ in the order of things." Through these lines the reader can see that the persona envies her child's innocence and the sense of security that

accompanies that innocence. This form of dependency can be excused in the child because of her age, but society would not extend that same pardon to a grown woman. She is expected to assert her independent nature. However, I believe the woman herself is reassured by watching her child and can see her dedication to family as the "order of things." Her child makes her "vital" and when she is caught up in that "vitality" both her drive for independence and her fear of vulnerability become unimportant.

It is in the title poem of the collection, however, where I feel the ambiguity of the woman's world is most clearly resolved. The title "The Art of It" not only refers to the obvious art of poetry and to the delicate art of keeping "it all from falling," but to the art of balance--the art of moderation. In this poem we can see the author's creativity reflected as a form of independence (a notion that also can be traced in the celebratory poems "Lessons" and "My Only Sappy Love Poem".) It is in The Art of It where she decides to look at her domestic/maternal role as an opportunity for creativity (see line 7), to try to bring the two impulses together. The result is a poem which opens with the same sense of abandonment that we have seen before: "waiting for the kids to come home/ for conversation." But, with the "or" in the next line the reader is alerted to

impending change and a moment of enlightenment. Instead of dwelling on the negative aspects of a binding relationship, she is led, although cautiously, into an acceptance of and delight in what she ultimately perceives as her role as a woman. The line "learn the power of the art" is referring not only to the art of being domestic, but to the art of enhancing the domestic/dependent side of her nature by means of her creative/independent side.

Granted, the poem comes perilously close to sentimentality, but it is trying to capture the rush of realization and ensuing celebration from the feminine standpoint. One must notice the subtle change in the language following the "but" close to the end of the poem, however, in order to receive its full impact. The change from the grandiose words of the art world to the far more mundane and realistic "heave" of the mattresses allows the reader to realize that the persona is aware of her previous inflation of the perfection of things, but aware also that this compromise of her independence is what she has been looking for--it is her realistic relief. At the close of this poem, the reader is faced with a woman who is knowingly admitting her dependent nature and is gratefully accepting it.

Stylistically, my poetry reflects what I like to think of as the "art of experimentation." Over the past

several years I have been learning to create poetry by trial and error, trying a little bit of everything, and keeping what I feel best fulfills my stylistic needs as a writer--the style that best lets me express my emotions and self, and hence reveals my most natural and effective voice. Through this experimentation, brought about primarily through the influence of workshopping, I have tried several approaches, but must concede that I have found my primary strength to lie in the narrative--a style that lets me be both storyteller and poet, maintaining a straightforward, uncomplicated diction that could, perhaps, lend itself as well to fiction as to poetry. At the same time, however, I utilize line breaks, word choice, rhythm, and the overall conciseness of poetics to add "layers" and emotional tension to the basic "tale" and thereby admit my writing to the genre of poetry.

Some of my poetry could be categorized as what Jonathan Holden, in his book Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry, refers to as "the free-verse, narrative, conversation poem of voice." (Holden, 35.) This type of narrative poem is distinguished by its general use of free verse which imitates the style of conversation, utilizing an "I" that is actually addressing the reader. The poet must work to establish a trust between the reader and the "I," generally relying

heavily on tone of voice to do so. The voice must be clear and compassionate to both its story and the reader, but at the same time must avoid becoming over emotional or judgemental. Such a lapse could undermine the "I"'s credibility. Although this style would seem very open and "free" it is not without its limitations. Holden outlined them in his book:

For example, the narrative conversation poem cannot indulge in flashy metaphors and similes, because to do so would not only interrupt the natural movement of narration but would also irreversibly ruin our trust in the ethos of the speaking voice. . . . But the incompatibility of decorative imagery with the narrative conversation poem leaves the poet with a seriously depleted assortment of means: it is free verse prosody-- the line break, the choice of line length, and the counterpointing of syntax against line-- which brings into relief the drama of the story and the complex of emotions in the speaking voice as emotion is modified and enriched by accumulation of context. (Holden, 37.)

Look, for instance, at the first lines of the poem "Field Trip," twelve lines which, with line breaks removed would read:

"Daylight disappeared as the school bus sank

into the tunnel spitting fumes and gray smoke into the green suburbs behind us, leaving us marvelling at how dark it could be at mid-afternoon, then shielding our eyes as we entered the city."

This could easily be the first line of a piece of prose, emphasizing scenic detail and utilizing clear prosaic logic. But, the passage is neither flashy nor ornamental and conceivably runs the risk of being declared "flat." However, when written in verse, the lines take on another dimension:

Daylight disappeared  
as the school bus sank  
into the tunnel  
spitting fumes and gray  
smoke into the green  
suburbs behind us,  
leaving us marvelling  
at how dark it could be  
at mid-afternoon,  
then shielding our eyes  
from the glare  
as we entered the city.

Notice, for instance, the occurrence of the word "sank" at the end of the second line. The line-break pause that occurs after "sank" reinforces its meaning, giving the impression of almost being bogged down in

mire, especially since it echoes the tone of "disappeared" at the end of line one. In the same way, at the ends of lines four and five we get the impact of the contrast of "gray" and "green" by having each color appear in the same position in following lines. Similarly, "dark" in line eight carries more weight by being broken from "mid-afternoon" in the next line. We were amazed not only by the immediate surroundings, but by "how dark it could be" altogether, a line that intimates a human condition, not merely a physical one. Also notice, however, that as these impressions are presented they are not accompanied by excessive emotional baggage. They are being presented for the reader's interpretation and do not appear as having already been judged by the writer.

As the reader can clearly see at the end of "Field Trip" and many of my other poems, I firmly believe in a theory that Anne Sexton once promoted, that of "making a (poem) an entity, then coming to a little conclusion at the end of it, of a little shock," a sort of "pulling a poem up"; snapping it shut in such a way that the reader is immediately struck. (McClatchy, 13.) Sexton did this through the use of heavy end rhymes; I prefer the twist of irony, something that sends the reader back, perhaps to read the poem again in a new light.

Take, for example, the closing lines of "The Drill":

"If this were real,/ there'd be movement./ If this were real,/ there'd be breakfast." The last line almost punches the reality into the reader's stomach, leaving a muffled "mmph" feeling. The drill has turned, in this case, the very personal fear of war into something household, almost mundane, and in the last line it is frighteningly revealed that our only course of action is "breakfast." We have become essentially helpless. The intensity of the last lines is amplified by the "double entendre" in the word "movement," meaning both movement about the house and movement of troops.

I believe that the same empty, gut feeling appears at the end of "Bridge." Throughout the poem the reader has been lulled by lonely, but happy memories, reinforced by the rather hushed language of the poem: "light," "dusk," "solitude," "stills." Following the "But" in line twenty-eight, however, the poem begins to echo the clock as well, and can be read in the same sort of "limping rhythm" of the pendulum. This sets the reader up for the last lines: "she kicks, hinting,/ two hearts;/ bid/ two hearts." The obvious choice of suits suggests not only that her loneliness has become inescapable, but we are led to believe, by the simple choice of the word "hinting," that the persona has cheated at life, that it was all somehow a hoax that we, as readers, were allowed to believe in only to find out

that we'd been hustled. We end up not only pitying the persona, but ourselves as well.

The poems "Cliche" and "Salvation" also utilize this technique, but in a different way, and the result is a more positive realization than the heavy introspection of "The Drill" or "Bridge." Through the twists in their last lines, and their comparable brevity, "Cliche" and "Salvation" resemble the poems of Ted Kooser, a contemporary poet who seems to be a master at encapsulating the world in as few words as possible. In his poem "The Red Wing Church" which follows, Kooser snaps the poem closed with a pun on the expression "only God knows." The sense of closure is unmistakable, and, I believe, lighthearted, sending the reader into the poem again to experience its simple pleasure.

There's a tractor in the doorway of a church  
in Red Wing, Nebraska, in a coat of mud  
and straw that drags the floor. A broken plow  
sprawls beggarlike behind it on some planks  
that make a sort of roadway up the steps.  
The steeple's gone. A black tar-paper scar  
that lightning might have made replaces it.  
They've taken it down to change the house of God  
to Homer Johnson's barn, but it's still a church,  
with clumps of tiger lilies in the grass  
and one of those boxlike, glassed in signs

that give the sermon's topic (reading now  
a bird's nest and a little broken glass).  
The good works of the Lord are all around:  
the steeple top is standing in a garden  
just up the alley; it's a hen house now:  
fat leghorns gossip at its crowded door.  
Pews stretch on porches up and down the street,  
the stained-glass windows style the mayor's house,  
and the bell's atop the firehouse in the square.  
The cross is only God knows where. (Kooser, 81.)

I feel that both "Cliche" and "Salvation" echo this style to some degree. The closing lines of "Cliche"--  
"and the slight/ swagger/ in your walk."--have an easy,  
playful closure following the more demanding lines about  
the "perception of rightness." Such lightheartedness  
allows the reader an "ah, yes" feeling and sends her back  
through the poem to make certain that she has caught all  
of the layers that it is operating on.

The last line of "Salvation" elicits a more purely  
emotional response than those of "The Drill" or "Bridge,"  
and, in fact, the entire poem builds tension to achieve  
precisely that effect. The result I desire in this poem  
is not so much a lesson, but an unexpected feeling--a  
shiver running down the reader's spine. The poem,  
although it could be conceived as just a happy

reminiscence about one's Grandmother, would be far more effective when read as if accompanied by the soundtrack from a horror movie. Throughout the long first sentence (which, like "Field Trip," resembles a story) the tension builds and tightens. Grandma appears as an apparition, an eerie manifestation of the past. The word choice echoes this eeriness: "cellar," "pickled," "stub," "gnarled." And then, as the music would quiet just before a big movie murder scene, the poem becomes hushed, setting the last line up as impending doom. It is a welcome and startling twist when the token "crimson pool" is simply beet juice. The reader can both cringe and laugh as a result of the same line.

However, a problem can arise in my devotion to this "pulling up" technique. I have found myself, at times, aiming at the end of the poem, writing lines to build to an ultimate cause, creating poetry I liked along the way, but in order to save the poem in the long run, having to discard the glaringly thematic lines I had built the poem around. In such situations, writing becomes a question of emotional control. In order to be successful, I must remind myself that the reader will pick up on clues along the way, that the poem will have the desired effect without my having to lay all the emotional cards face-up on the table in the last lines.

For instance, the first several drafts of "Training" had an additional three lines at the end: "Yet you are there, fighting,/ and watching/ for the children." These lines fulfilled my requirement of turning the poem in on itself, in this case taking the reader abruptly back to the question of the children. However, after closer inspection, the heavily sentimental lines overpowered the strength of what are now the last lines: "The bridges you build/ are for no one;/ the strategies you plan/ seem as cryptic as the Spanish tongue." The new ending allows the poem to comment freely and more effectively than it would have on broader issues, leaving it on a public level instead of pulling it back to a highly emotional, private one. I think that the valuable lesson may be that in "pulling" too tight it is also possible to choke the poetry of the poem.

It is in working through these complications though, that my poetry takes shape. I have been doing what some deem impossible--learning an art--and it is from combining the knowledge of what I have discovered to be both my strengths and my weaknesses that this body of work has emerged.

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THE ART OF IT

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A REPORT

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As a relatively new writer, my poetry reflects what I like to think of as the "art of experimentation." Over the past several years, I have been learning to create poetry by trial and error, trying a little bit of everything, and keeping what I feel best fulfills my stylistic needs as a writer--the style that best lets me express my emotions and self, and hence reveals my most natural and effective voice. Through this experimentation I have touched on several approaches, but I must concede that I have found my primary strength to lie in the narrative--a style that allows me to be both storyteller and poet, maintaining a straightforward, uncomplicated diction that could, at times, lend itself as well to fiction as to poetry. At the same time, however, I utilize line breaks, word choice, rhythm, and the overall conciseness of poetics to add "layers" and emotional tension to the basic "tale" and thereby admit my writing to the genre of poetry.

However, no matter how much my style may, at times, fluctuate in my work, the poetry itself can almost all be traced to two central themes--those of abandonment and celebration. It quickly becomes apparent that my greatest fear is of being left, of being lonely, and that that fear manifests itself in the lines of my work. Poetry, I believe, acts as a

means of dealing with that fear--turning psychological aggravation into artistic energy.

Countering this, there are my "love" poems, poems about children and family, which clearly celebrate the relationships which, in effect, actually create the vulnerability to the earlier fear. These poems are generally shorter and faster moving with an absence of the heavier, more didactic tone characteristic of the abandonment pieces. The collection as a whole is working towards a middle ground, a place where I can indulge both my secure/domestic side and my independent/creative one.

In order to be stylistically successful in this portrayal of the ambiguity of the modern family woman, I must remind myself that the reader will pick up on touching lines, and consequently the poem will have the desired effect without my having to lay all the emotional cards face-up on the table. This puts me in a tricky situation since I firmly believe in Anne Sexton's theory of "pulling a poem up" at the end, and often rely on a heavy twist in the last lines to achieve this effect. However, I have learned that I must be careful--by pulling too tight it is possible to choke the real poetry of the poem.

It is in working through these complications, however, that my poetry takes shape. I have been doing

what some deem impossible--learning an art--and it is from combining the knowledge of what I have discovered to be both my strengths and my weaknesses that this body of work has emerged.