

Tempe Poetry in April 2002

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Moderator: Catherine Hammond*

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The following poems appear in *No Parole Today*, West End Press, Albuquerque NM, 1999.

Our Tongues Slapped into Silence

In first grade I was five years old, the youngest and smallest in my class, always the one in front at group picture time. The principal put me in first grade because I spoke both Diné and English. Because of that, I skipped Beginner class.

All my classmates were Diné and most of them spoke only the language of our ancestors. During this time, the government's policy meant to assimilate us into the white way of life. We had no choice in the matter; we had to comply. The taking of our language was a priority.

Dick and Jane Subdue the Diné

*See Father.
See Mother.
See Dick run.
See Jane and Sally laugh.
oh, oh, oh
See Spot jump.
oh, oh, oh
See Eugene speak Diné.
See Juanita answer him.
oh, oh, oh
See teacher frown.
uh oh, uh oh*

Tohe 2

In first grade our first introduction to Indian School was Miss Rolands, a black woman from Texas, who treated us the way her people had been treated by white people. Later I learned how difficult it was for black teachers to find jobs in their communities, so they took jobs with the Bureau of Indian Affairs in New Mexico and Arizona in the 1950s and 60s.

Miss Rolands found it difficult to adjust to living in a mostly Diné community, connected to the outside world by only a dirt road that was sometimes impassable in the winter.

*See Eugene with red hands, shape of ruler.
oh, oh, oh
See Eugene cry.
oh, oh, oh
See Juanita stand in corner, see tears fall down face.
oh, oh, oh*

In first grade we received the first of our Dick and Jane books that introduced us to the white man's world through Father, Mother, Dick, Jane, Puff and Spot. These and other characters said and did what we thought all white people did: drive cars to the farm, drain maple juice from trees, and say oh, oh, oh a lot.

*Oh see us draw pictures
of brown horses under blue clouds.
We color eyes black, hair black
We draw ears and leave out mouth.*

Oh see, see, see, see.

Miss Rolands, an alien in our world, stood us in the corner of the classroom or outside in the hallway to feel shame for the crime of speaking Diné. Other times our hands were imprinted with red slaps from the ruler. In later classes we headed straight for the rear of classrooms, never asked questions, and never raised our hand. Utter one word of Diné and the government made sure our tongues were drowned in the murky waters of assimilation.

The Names

Lou Hon, Suzie, Cherry, Doughnut, Woody, Wabbit, Jackie, Rena Mae, Zonnie, Sena, Verna, Grace, Seline, Carilene

"Virginia Spears," the Algebra teacher calls roll
(Her name is Speans)
And Virgie winces and raises her hand.
"Here." Soft voice.

She never corrects the teacher.

Tohe 3

"Leonard T-sosie."
(His name is Tsosie.) Silent first letter as in ptomaine,
Ptolemy.
Silent as in never asking questions.
Another hand from the back goes up. No voice.

"Mary Lou Yazy. Are you related to Thomas Yazy?"
Yazzie is a common Navajo name, like Smith or Jones.
She rhymes it with jazzy and snazzy.
Mary Lou with puzzled expression. "No."
"Oh, I thought you might be. He's quiet too."

I start to tense up because I'm next
with my name that sticks out
like her sensible black high heeled laced-ups,
clap, clap, clap down the hall.
"Laura Toe."
And I start to sink,
to dread hearing it on the bus tossed around
like kids playing keep-away.

Suddenly we are immigrants,
waiting for the names that obliterate the past.

Tohe, from Tóhii means Towards Water.
Tsosie. Ts'ósi means Slender.
And Yazzie, from Yázhí, means Beloved Little One/Son.

The teacher closes the book and
We are little checkmarks besides our names

Roanhorse, Fasthorse, Bluehorse, Yellowhorse, Begay, Deswod, Niilwod,
Chee, ' Átsidí, Tapahonso, Háábaah, Hastiin Néez.

Cat or Stomp

to all the former cats and stomps
of the Diné Nation

The first few days back at the Indian School
after summer vacation
you wore your new clothes wrangler tight jeans
stitched on the side
and boots (if you were lucky enough to have a pair)
Tony Lama
Nacona
or Acme

Tohe 4

a true stomp listened to country western music
Waylon and George Jones
dying cowboy music and all that stuff
you wore
go go boots and bell bottoms if you were a cat
and danced to the Rolling Stones
even if you wore tennis shoes it was clear which side
you were on.
Every year the smoking greyhound buses pulled up
in front of the old
gymnasium bringing loads of students
fresh off the reservation dragging metal trunks,
traincases and
cardboard boxes precariously tied with string
The word spread quickly
of some new kid from Chinle or Many Farms
Is he a cat or stomp?" someone would ask
"Stomp"
and those with appropriate clothing
would get their chance
to dance with him that night

She's Real Quiet, a Letter from the Indian School I

Met this girl, Mae Jean from Saint Michaels. She's real quiet. Nobody gives her
a hard time. None of the Mustangs, the girl gang, have it in for her. The
matrons don't put her on extra detail like waxing and polishing the hallways or
cleaning toilets. She's never on extra detail. She's real shy.

Mae Jean gets up early soon after the 5:30 lights come on. She
showers, dresses, and styles her hair carefully into a puffy bouffant resembling a
small tumbleweed. Every hair in place. At the beginning of school when we
have money and supplies, she sprays a sticky mist of Aqua Net over her hair. If
you watch her doing her hair, she gets embarrassed and drops her comb into the
drawer and says she's ready.

She signed my yearbook with letters lined up perfectly on an invisible
line. "To a real 'kool' chick I have known for the past years. It has been more
than a pleasure knowing you and taking your jokes. I appreciate your kindness
and friendship you have shown me; I will never forget it. Good luck toward your
educational goals and may many happiness come your way in the years to come.
Always, Mae Jean Begay A.H.S. '70."

On our way to the dining room this morning she tells me she's been
here nine years, ever since she was six years old, longer than most of us.
Nobody ever comes to visit her and she never goes home during vacations, not

even Christmas. Doesn't have a boyfriend like some of the other girls. Never seen her drink, sniff glue or gasoline. Never gossips about the matrons and she doesn't cuss. She's Catholic but hardly ever goes to church. One time we went to the Presbyterian church just to have Oreo cookies and coffee because we missed breakfast. She's real quiet and calm. Laughs softly. She gets along with everybody. She's been here the longest of all of us. Mae Jean knows all the dos and don'ts at Indian school. Watch her.

Joe Babes

Joe Babes, the ones named
Jolene, Rena Mae, Juanita or Loretta

Some teased their hair
into bouffant hairdos and
wore too much makeup.
Others wore outdated dresses and shoes,
and washed their hair with detergent soap.
They spoke in broken Indin-glish and
we used to laugh at them.

Joe Babes sat quietly
in the back of classrooms
even when they knew the answers,
were described as shy, dumb, angry, or on drugs
by the teachers

These were the ones who stood in corners
for speaking Indian
until the government said it was okay.
Then they sang in Indian Clubs
and danced at pow-wows.
Joe Babes were given pernicious looks
by the cashier in the public school cafeteria

as they went through the line
because she thought they got free meals from the
government.

Joe Babes
laughed too loud
and were easily angered
when they got drunk.

Joe Babes
were the ones that left the reservations
for the cities, for the schools, for the jobs.

We were the Joe Babes.

All of us.

Popeye's Kitchen, a Letter from the Indian School II

Went to the Presbyterian church this morning. May Jean said they served coffee and cookies sometime. Sat through the services then went upstairs to the kitchen. The white women put Oreo cookies on the table and poured coffee. May Jean and I dunked our cookies and went back again and again until the women started giving us looks, you know, like they didn't want us doing it any more. We left for the dorm and waited an hour for the lunch bell to ring.

There's this man, the head cook, Popeye we call him, on account of he's a big, mean white man. Don't let you eat unless you do your detail. Stuff like serve food, clean trays, empty trash, wash heavy pans. You gotta report to the kitchen at 5:30 in the AM even on weekends, and that lasts for 9 weeks. Sometimes we fake being sick just to get out of it. Mostly he don't let the guys eat if they don't show up. Then somebody sneaks them rubber meat sandwiches or bear meat sandwiches, seeing as how we eat it four times a week.

The guys have to start reporting for their detail or eat when Popeye isn't in. There's Indian cooks too, mostly Pueblos and a Diné woman. Just keep washing those pots and don't mess with Popeye.

Woolworths

Went to Woolworths
down at the corner of Fourth and Central downtown
lots of skins hang out there
they call it the Indian Center
the bus stops out in front

Billie and I roamed among
record albums, make-up, hair spray
sprayed our hair platinum blonde
thought we'd get away from our straight black hair

you know, the Joe-Babe look

a clerk heard the hissing can and
ordered us to put it back or buy it
she watched us with eagle eyes

we ducked out of there
and fled on the first bus back to the Indian School

April 16, 2002 – Sean Nevin

Memory

The three garden tomatoes
I picked for the windowsill
against an early frost, hunch
and sag in their own skins.

The sweet clot of seed and flesh
rots from within, and a mobile
of delicate insects begins. Fruit flies
seem to appear from nothing.

I watch one, frenzied
in the vapor of decay, measure
and re-measure neurotic circles
like the swung glow of a twig
stoked in a backyard grill.

A lit wand swirling neon
through the dark tabula rasa.
Its orange trails lingering
just enough to remember

the cursive of a letter
or the scrawled-out flare
of a name, that resonates
long after the burning
fuselage has passed through.

Sean Nevin© first published in *The Alsop Review*

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Surf Casting

The full moon draws me to the sand bars,
the fringes of solid earth, where rituals begin,
and my grandfather taught me the tiny ceremony
of knots, gave me a feel for setting a reel's drag,
creating a tension without snapping the line.

A prophet standing in the wash of shallow surf,
I preach an angler's ethos, one long line
cast out after another, each promising return.

A diviner waiting in darkness for the twitch
and dive of the switch. The simple ratification
of fishing, the strike, the snelled finery, the barb.

White-knuckled waves grapple hard sand,
flatten and recede. The ocean's fingers
smooth her sleeping child's hair, hand over hand,
tirelessly tracing the curves of his coast, the bay
of his small torso breathing. Soon I will leave here,

slam the tailgate of my truck shut, drive home
through emptied streets to the wind-flickered
porch light you left for me. I will undress
in the dark, ease you from sleep and begin
again to hunt those sinking waters,
to act on instinct alone and wait to feel
that primal tug, to set my hook in bone,

to connect completely to something unknown.

Sean Nevin© First published in *Poet Lore*

Postulates of Fractal Geometry

-ex mi ipsa renata sum

This is a poem about traveling undetected
about evading radar

because the military's new F-22 Stealth fighters cost over eighty million dollars
each

this is a poem about cruising comfortably at supersonic speeds

because the budget for one fleet of F-22 Stealth fighters is seventy billion dollars

this is a poem about seventy billion dollars
and pushing the envelope
and getting high instantaneously
coming in under radar

this is a poem about drugs

because the drug of choice in high schools is special k

because special k is a cat tranquilizer

because there *is* a drug of choice in high schools

this is a poem about uptight cats without tranquilizers
who haven't slept for years
who bicker with demons transmitting from their molars
who walk up and down and up St. Mark's Place in unlaced shoes
who never leave (except when they disappear for weeks at a time)
who cheek their meds
who always reappear
who are so angry at the C.I.A. for what they've done to them they curse
and threaten all the operatives shopping on St. Mark's Place

this is a poem about cats
and old women who love only cats

this is a poem about love

because I think I would have loved Jane Kenyon had she lived

this is a poem about the poet Jane Kenyon

and the way she refracted melancholy from the lifeblood passing through
her own heart
and the way she saw sunlight pass through her glass of cabernet

this is a poem about hearts

because a cardiovascular surgeon in Zaire makes 75 cents a month

this is a poem about pacemakers and the cardiovascular system
about the blood sluice I hear in my head when I sit cross legged at the
bottom of a pool
about aortic plaque
about tubes and ventricular cameras the size of watch springs

this is a poem about watch springs
and their thin coil of resistance

this is a poem about resistance

because the first poem I ever wrote was about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

this is a poem about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

because his thin coil of resistance grew
because he caused waves

this is a poem about waves

because *the maximum height of a wave from trough to crest is about 45 feet, except
perhaps in the center of a hurricane*

this is a poem about the center of a hurricane

because on the fractal plain the center is the hurricane

this is a poem about fractal geometry

because I've always suspected fractal geometry is essential to poetry

because fractals are the ultimate metaphor

this is a poem about fractals
and metaphors reassembling themselves at different scales

because the fifty wealthiest people in Los Angeles have more money than the two million
poorest

this is a poem about groups of fractals and the L.A. riots

because the L.A. riots were not about equal rights
or justice
or bi-focaled Korean grocers
or L.A.P.D.'s rotating helicopter blades twisting the city's hair tighter
and tighter

because the L.A. riots were about pots of kim chi buried in backyards
and in the trunks of abandoned cars
and under the footings of schools
and on the sagging shelves of liquor store after liquor store

this is a poem about buried pots of fermented cabbage
and color barriers and baseball

because Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier
with a baseball bat

this is a poem about Jackie Robinson and other gurus

this is a poem about ashrams and gurus in India

because John Lennon wrote *Dear Prudence* for Mia Farrow's reclusive sister
after they met at an ashram in India
after they smoked chillums with Twiggy and prayed
after they learned to say namaste and bow
after their gums bled from betel nut
after they became God realized on vacation

this is a poem about Prudence Farrow

because Prudence wouldn't *come out to play* but stayed in her concrete room
and prayed
and burned stick incense
and held her ear against the cool inside of her door
and dreamt about stampeding elephants night after night

this is a poem about dreams
and Sigmund Freud
and bowel movements

because I was anal retentive as a child

this is a poem about my childhood bowels
about refusing to shit

about constipation
about anticipation
about pacing in concentric circles until the last possible second
about nausea and cold sweats
about fist-sized stools
about catharsis

this is a poem about catharsis
about the way our bodies forget the pain of giving birth
about origins and destinations
about closing non-Euclidean circles

this is a poem about creation
about giving birth to one's self again and again
about predicting the unpredictable
about finding self-similar fractals in non-linear systems

this is a poem about lifting one's own blueprints from chaos

Sean Nevin© First published in *5A.M.*

The Café Terrace

I find in my work an echo of what struck me.
- Vincent Van Gogh

I imagine rain clouds
briefly misting the air
before blowing past
that night. Or perhaps,
you had been crying,

lost in the *Place du Forum*,
and upon looking up
through brimming eyes,
saw your stars pulse then
spread their brilliant spores
across a blue-black sky.

Was it the absinthe,
the bent mirror of a spoon,
that opened for you, a portal
between this world and
the next, as you sketched
the loosened yellow teeth
of Paris' cobblestone streets?

Sean Nevin© First published in *The Long Island Quarterly*

The Incident

In lieu of sleep
I mimic the garden gnome
for hours. Heels deep
as crocus bulbs,
our elbows fastened
to our hips:

two old soldiers
practicing the slow
tai chi of dementia
in the wild pachysandra.

When a company of ants
stormed the hillock
of his calf, breached
his inner thigh
like a vein gone bad,
all varicose and on the move,
nothing. . . sheer stoicism.

I, for one, had to dance
through the hedges
and out into the road,

tour jeté, chassé

my terrycloth robe
unsashed and flapping
in what the police report described
as a moment of weakness
cloaked in exceptional grace.

Sean Nevin© First published in *DMQ Review*

The following poems appear in Lois Roma-Deeley's first full-length collection of poems *Rules of Hunger* (Star Cloud Press 2004).

Gestures

i.
There's the old woman standing at check-in
whose hunched shoulders look like a valentine.
A dark man in a dark suit who finds
dinner mints in his jacket, offers one
to the young nun beside him. A couple
of red roses, wrapped in tissue paper,
fall to the floor.

ii.
A tall man sits beside me. His leather case
leans against my thigh. I'm suddenly afraid
of dinner and a movie;
small bars of hotel soap; English tea
with you and the crossword puzzle in *The Times*...
it's not about the double set of blue lines
I want to draw around my entire life,
making a neat box to hold what is right
in front of us—safe. The past is more like
this poor excuse for a train, rattling on
between two fixed points—a bead on a charm—

like some bastard with his eyes staring into mine.

"*Gestures*" was a finalist in Emily Dickinson Award in Poetry Competition
(Universities West Press) and published in *the Emily Dickinson Award Anthology:
A Commemorative Edition of the Best Poems of 2001*

24 Suffolk Avenue

No one has seen you it is past midnight.
The police car drives around the block Once Twice
you've/looked/ over/ your shoulder
staring deeply into the shadows of a street lamp
Eyes on the sidewalk circles like blue chalk
In this suburb, children still play hide and seek
They play games of *it*
while you /have been wandering for hours
searching for the perfect gift
After the last train dropped you
at the final stop you
just got off and started walking
Home was never like this Yet you see a house.
White with two stories In the window
a girl stares down You wave But the drapes close
like/ a /face/ you/ thought/ you knew.
Unmoving/ in the false moonlight,
you don't want to know
why they are asking you to remove both shoes/
lie face down in the dirt//
why someone is saying: *now you understand
how it works.*

North of Babylon

Wanting to understand not/ so/ very/ much
why this city was built with more walls than
gates but needing someone to explain just how
you walk through the dust how you look down
at both feet, without wonder how you stand
under a crumbling archway and *look up*
like you really mean it Tell me what hand
pressed to the middle of my back allowed
me to pass through Was it yours? A shove a shout
and suddenly I'm outside A woman
in sequined heels A woman old enough
to be someone's lover And then/ the land
whispered smoke and fire And then I ran
from the burning woods into another town/
There was just one street and some barking hounds.
I saw/ an argument/ of opening doors And
leaning against a wall I touched the gun the one
I stole from someone's pocket.

The Given

Everyone is out of work. In Phoenix
it's been summer for a very long time.
We're living in a green brick house, rented
to us by a mid-western couple who
never met "EYE-talions" but who know we're clean
enough. My father will die in two years.
My brother will stop drinking. And my husband
will find a good job. I'll go to school and
get a degree. Mom won't stop breathing
for a long while. But right now there is not
much to eat. And our kids want something sweet.
My father looks deep into their faces,
smiles like the gambler I've known him
to be, and says: *Would you like a few plums?*
And then my father turns and looks at me.

Plums should be cold,
in a glass bowl and offered to children.
This is his simple goodness,
the sword to keep on your back, the one
to scrape away the pain of not knowing
what we're to do next or how we're going to act.
And it's just like him to say this in a poem
I never intended to write. Like an *amen*
after a prayer, he invites you to stop
at the doorway of our past
and step into our home.

"The Given" was selected by Maxine Kumin as a featured poem in the
Tucson Poetry Festival Poetry Competition.

Refuge

Let us pretend it exists, this
imaginary forest. And
a woman in a peasant dress
who pulls the hem into a flower around her
head. The full
sound of tambourines and dancing girls
who sing with ribbons of cool pine
shadows . In this picture
the woman remains kind.
The sky is now a circle
of blue. She turns.
The spinning world

laughs.

"Refuge" was a "Poetic Dialogue" commemorative bookmark and paired with visual artwork by Beth Shadur ("Serene Turmoil in the Secret Garden")

Counting

What gave it away? Was it the graffiti on the wall?
Or the red headed twin you say race around the block? Twice
you heard a baby scream; two clay pots a boy pushes off
the second story window scared you; you step through the door
onto familiar concrete. A young couple kiss, then fight.
You close both eyes—you always close you eye—protesting the light
blue neon circles under the billboards which say *this* time
you should take notes, write it down, notice—I've *been here before*.
Maybe it was all that counting. Streets. Trees. Men in flowered
shirts. Those hands disappearing inside your pocket. You squeeze
through the alley way, running like it meant something. It rains
down your throat. Why won't you remember? First left, *then* right.
Put your feet on the sidewalk. Walk. Turn the corner. You think
nothing can't be taken from nothing—just keep moving.

Because You

Call all bad drivers "Jack" and everybody else "Mac" and because
that never made any sense to me.

Because you bailed my younger brother out of jail, getting up
in the middle of the night and because of you there is honey in the
closet, stamps in the drawer.

Because, when you are angry, you have eyes like cut lemons,
and make the sound that oboes make when they are set on fire, because you
leave your shoes in the middle of the floor.

Because You #2

Rice paper dancing over a snow lawn.
Neon arrows blinking along the highway.
Cedar pressed into the plaid of cotton flannel lapels.

That breath in the end of a very long sentence.
Hummingbirds at the ledge of an open window.
Ice at the bottom of a very tall glass.

I am not a beacon or a bell—
Not the complaint of morning hours
Not the nothing of what is

Compulsions (& Obsessions)

There is a hall with seven doors you need to
Shut; a crystal bowl that makes you think of
winter light. In your hand these charms fall
open at the slightest touch; a figure fills the
middle of the room. Against the white wall,
kneel and stack some paper cups. Like a
pyramid or a Chinese kite, the blood rises as
you count the ways of how and much this
child of fortune doesn't want to choose. And
new lemons in their yellow skins you have to
cut into a dozen eyes that will outshine the
night. See how the silver knives and smiling
spoons line up. But before the crossword
puzzle fills in right, you'll calculate worlds
of twirling dust and polish all those pairs of high
heel shoes.

The White Line

She sits and snaps her peas: *just once*
he could have smiled....when the end
of his trowel kept tap, tap, tapping and she—
thinking it was one of her new found friends—
yelled: *Come on in!* Her husband's lip, fine and thin,
press into a long white line.

Beside the acacia, on a stone bench,
she sits in her garden. Just the snail vines
talk to her now. Those low, sweet voices
that came to visit must have been from God:
They spread their fingers before flying
over house and willow tree; they stroke
their billowing sleeves and speak to her;
they pass through time.

The sun in her lap feels like a hole through which
she is falling. Like a deer in the wilderness
that licks salt and smells the water,
he works to finish and he works to wait.
but it's her garden;
only the wall was his to make.

At the Department of Motor Vehicles Division

Jesus, let me have the courage to donate my organs.
It is a selfish thing to not check this box.
Let me do this for once without hesitation, without need
for eyes in the afterlife, for lungs, for feet, for heart.

If it is reincarnation I believe in, forgive me
for wishing death so soon and by disaster. Hurricane,
car crash, drowning. Forgive me for not taking care
of this body, for not returning home to wash and dress

my father's wounds. With faith I would pin milagros,
wishes for miracles on wooden statues. A copper leg
to mend my father's feet, a silver heart to cure
mother's murmur. Jesus, it has been too long

since I have seen them. Forgive me for seeing Mary
as a kaleidoscope of color in the stained glass
windows of small town churches I have passed.
If I could see devotion it too would resemble a pattern.

It would be as clear and spontaneous as swifts
moving like a spot of oil across a watery sky.
So be quick about it. Pack you organs in ice,
swab my body with oil, and light me on fire.

I'll rise above the dividing lines of the highway
and funnel in expert abandon with the swifts, those lovers
of industry, of flue and chimney. I'll finally join
the faithful in a mass instinctual flight home.

The Seamstress

My father's feet wept like the worst of burns
so the nurse exchanged cotton for sheepskin.

He lifted the sheets for me to see the frostbite.
Palm-sized blisters covered his feet, a dark purple

crowned his ankles. When the surgeon arrived
he called them lines of demarcation. I imagined

the nurse a seamstress when she pulled silver
from her snow white hair and needled his feet

for feeling. My father never said yes. The question
was ambiguous. Dead flesh is dead flesh. Just try

to find the living, I said. No one knows where
the nerves begin and end. Take his skin instead

and peel it off like wet wool socks. Let it steam
in the sun back to the shape we remember.

Intensive Care

I look to the array of tulips place around the sanitized sink,
my father's name pinned neatly into the baby's breath. Here,

an old man is twice a child. The nurse has to hold his hips
over the bed pan. He cloaks his penis under the sheets to piss.

I'm his daughter. I should know when to leave him.
In the cafeteria I ladle soup into a bowl and watch the uniformed

nurses milling around the coffee machine. Their laughter
strikes up like static. This evening, a stranger will open

my father's wounds. He will remove the infection, gloved
palms cupped wide like the tulips; stamens waxen with pollen.

Pyramid Lake, Nevada

I.

Jim drove while Rosa held the stillborn child tight in her lap—
past the abandoned mining town of Bodie and the reservations

of hot box houses with washers set outside and clothes lines
tied to trucks until he recognized the volcanic tufa

that rose up from the salt lake to meet them.
Rosa knew Pyramid lake was the proper place to bury her.

Jim knew it too even though the tufa wormed
into Rosa's hands and shredded her skin. Afterwards,

Rosa eased her body into the lake and let the salt take
her hollow belly across the waters, to the source of smell

and sulfur and egg and child until she could recognize where
her mother came from and where her daughter was going.

The pelicans stitched along the shoreline,
filled their pouches with fish; fed and wept, fed and wept.

II.

Pelicans stitched along the shoreline and children
in colorful suits scattered across the beach
like lit sparklers. Jim lifted his own daughter

onto his shoulders and pointed there, past the sand
trails and that stumped cactus finally blooming red.
She's buried in the pinnacle, the one that lifts

from the ground like a gourd. Let down to walk
on her own, her legs pained with sharp points of light.
She thought the child traveled like sand then,

brushing lime out of her hair. Sand settled in the soft
corners of her eyes, made her want to sleep
like the child in the tufa cradle.

Jim's daughter read the tracks of small creatures,
following them down to the water.
Winged shells spilled out of her shoes.

Jim showed her how to skim the surface on her back,
then curl into the dead-man's float. Her swimsuit,
a bright orange blossom on the water.

Hurricane Linda Strikes California Coastline

West coast newscasters might predict
an evening sunset, no fog, but I know
the storm carrying the name of my mother

will hurl across the Pacific like an Olympic
discus. Let those TV junkies close their eyes
until their obscure dreams of Linda

are saddled into one Technicolor galaxy
spinning off the tip of Baja.
Let those who know Linda have a lingering

nag of unease when she whistles through
the cracks of their ill-built homes, shakes
the tin siding like tossed away foil

on a picnic grill. I listen to the A.M. radio fade
into Linda gaining strength in a depression
over tropical waters. She is the helix

of my DNA, the dominant gene
that flickers in my cells like a pulse
of fog lights across the eddying bay. Linda

is the top spinning lost under childhood's
couch. The whorl of my thumb print, this
misdemeanor set into ink.

Newcastle Bar & Grill

Across the street, a second-hand store displayed gold purses
and a man sold Avon after-shave bottles shaped like Model Ts

and hot rods. He tried to sell one to me each time I went in,
even though I was too young to buy cologne for a man.

Summer afternoons, the carpenters walked down to the bar
for a drink and to watch my mother in her cork heels

tend to the after-five crowd. Her pockets filled with tips.
Quarters spilled from her purse when she pulled out her keys

and dimes sparkled in the gravel that lined our drive,
but we were still poor, and she was still a single woman

impressed by the man who sat at the bar with his red
Camaro parked out front. The cash drawer sang with change

when she gave it a final tap with her hip at the end of her shift.
She plunked a Shirley Temple down at my table with a half smile

reserved for patrons who didn't tip and gave me a handful
of thin mints hugged in foil. I savored the warm chocolate,

watched the gold purses spark across the street as the Camaro's
headlights lifted out of their sockets for the long drive home.

Horse

Carol lifted a skull out of the spring growth and took it home, away from the field it called home. The skull belonged to the same horse

that had flipped her onto a rock when she was young. The skull was the house she grew up in, the garden wild with rabbits,

the fence tufted with dog fur. The skull was her father's crown beneath his thinning hair, him lifting her skirt. It was her spine, stiff

as a garden hose in winter. Carol placed the trophy above her door by its sword nose. Horse might as well have been swinging from oak

like a criminal, far away from purple clover, the miner's lettuce crowding the brook. Horse lifted into head into the living space it no longer held

and raged on the nail. The sound rippled through the field of thistles spines erect as they waited for the crush of hoof.

Horse ached to lose the door, but frame would not let go. Nail loosened like horse's teeth, but wood would not let go.

The dog whined at horse's invisible body as it kicked free. Inside, horse's tail switched cobwebs loose and the dog nipped

at its flanks, but horse still entered Carol's room and gnawed on her fingers. Carol tried to find sugar in dream, sweet green apples. Horse,

wanting spring's growth in its nostrils, would not let up until Carol gave in, her body coiling like a snake as she galloped it home to rest.

Donner Pass Lookout

I asked my father when Halley's Comet would orbit Africa. He made up an answer. We were waiting for the meteor shower

of the century on the edge of a granite rock scraped by glaciers big as ocean barges. I watched his cigarette smoke curl past

my sleeping bag and into the night sky. Above the horizon was a fixed star as long as I didn't close my eyes and wish.

My summer complaints? He would never speak of my mother, only the art of carving names into aspen like the sheep ranchers who wrote

their stories in growing bark. In daylight I could see the granite was marked with graffiti, boyfriends wished upon. Same here. I wrote

their names on my binder in deep Bic red. Words from here to there tell stories about fathers and stealers like the men

who carved their dreams on aspen. And I was wishing on stars, banking on straight teeth and big breasts. I could have wished wiser, carved deeper.