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Where there's Smoke

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Where There's Smoke

by

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Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

This thesis is a collection of thematically arranged poems that explore one of the significant ways in which we define ourselves as human beings, that is, through our past and present relationships with others, whether those relationships are familial, cultural, social or personal. Through the direct presentation of images, these largely narrative poems seek to refine perception and thus reveal some of the complicated truths inherent in our various relationships with others, all in an effort to find meaning. The form of the poems often reveals a process, a continual redefining of views on human experience in both its life-affirming and disappointing aspects. It is through such discovery and disclosure that these poems aim to affirm the process, passion, and meaningfulness of art and life.

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
Miami, Florida

Where There's Smoke

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in Creative Writing

by

Elisa Albo

1992

To Professors John Dufresne, James W. Hall, Peter Hargitai:

This thesis, having been approved in respect to form and mechanical execution, is referred to you for judgement upon its substantial merit.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott
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The thesis of Elisa Albo is approved.

James W. Hall

Peter Hargitai

John Dufresne, Major Professor

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Dean Richard L. Campbell
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CONTENTS

I. Homefires

II. Signal Fires

III. Appassionata

I. Home Fires

Lessons

I was eleven
when my father led me
down the hall into the amber
light of his study,
when he took out a drawing of
the female reproductive system,
clean and bloodless,
the velvet of the orchid-
curves full, tubes
delicate as eggs glistening
on the picture's laminated surface.
Do I look like that?
I thought. Does every woman flow
and connect in four brilliant
colors? He explained anatomy
but I already knew the basics—
rumors that spilled from
my friends' o-shaped mouths,
facts from my father's
fat medical texts, notions
from my mother's
magazines.

Years later,
an egg rapidly and
perfectly dividing
stuck in the stem of
my tube and grew till it burst
like a shower, warm pools
gathering in the basin of
my womb, draining,
leaving me pale and empty
for months. My father
understood the tender balance,
the science of desire.
I didn't need books or
diagrams to explain

the tight line of my mother's lips.
I'd grown, and bled—
something small and
ill-timed had died
inside me.

Burden

Mother sometimes
feels her mother
doesn't love her,
not really.

Grandma lives with her,
can't be left alone,

having survived
two wars in Spain alone
with nine young children.

(Mother was the baby.
When the boys found an egg
it went to the baby,
the whole thing,
but she couldn't keep it down.)

Now Mother feeds her mother
with her own family,
rarely goes out and
feels guilty
when she rarely goes out.

Seven grown children
scattered over the world
see little of Grandma,
receive her daily panegyric
with less guilt
no resentment

to hide
and carry.

Mima

Without telling me, my sister turns off
the gray highway and into the cemetery.
Mima is buried here, and since the funeral
five years ago, I have never returned
to this earthly reserve. She's not here,

my Turkish grandmother, who sailed
from Spain to Cuba and New York,
finally landing in a small central Florida
town with pretty lakes and no breezes,
my Mima who cooked with lemons and
olive oil, told stories of her girlhood,
how her young husband died of pneumonia,
how she pretended to be Catholic and survived
with the help of nuns who knew. Years later,
her greatest fear was to be forgotten—
"Don't say such things," I would whisper,
echoing her words and superstitions.

She's not here among these stony monuments
and trees. She was never so silent. I hear
her voice in my mother's. Mima speaks late
at night in our crowded kitchens, at weddings
and namings and graduations; she tells her
great-grandchildren fantastic bed-time stories.

My sister finds a small rock, places it on
the headstone, next to many others. I do
the same, whisper Mima, I love you, I remember,
but you're not here, not just here.

Lladro

They can't help but be delicate,
these porcelain figures from Spain,
these one of a kind Don Quixotes,
caravels at frozen sea, angels, geese
and ballerinas, China girls—lips
and eyes and outstretched fingers—
each figure in tender tints of pink
and gray, of blue and fleshy hues.
My Spanish mother and aunts collect
them, display them in curios and
cabinets. They give them as gifts
to their children and nieces
and newlywed nephews, in love with
the prodigious art of our ancestry.

Why It's Delicious

Because my grandmother marched out to the end of
the yard, threw the white oval seeds on the ground and
walked away, and almost overnight the tangle of vines
wrapped itself around the clothesline pole, the fence and
screened-in porch. Then small green pumpkins sprouted
and brightened in places so odd we had to move them to
give them room to grow, or to keep them from breaking
through the screen. And when they were large and heavy,
Mima ambled out, lifted the pumpkins and carried them in
to carve and cook the chunks for days in soups, with rice,
and with lemon. And except for a handful, she toasted
the seeds and we ate them with salt, cracking the shells
with our teeth to reach the slim green meat inside.

Because Jeanne's mom planted and tended a garden that grew
peas we shucked on her new husband's farmhouse porch at
the foot of a Pennsylvania mountain, and she steamed them
and served them for dinner with chicken and mashed potatoes.
Because that bicentennial summer Jeanne and I joined
her mom, she arranged a net over blueberry bushes under
which, like clever birds, we snuck to steal the dark ripe
beads. Because Jeanne's mom took us to pick fat strawberries
we boiled and stirred into jam in huge pots all day and
slathered on thick slices of airy Amish bread, and carried
home in mason jars sealed with parafin, souvenirs.

Because the fleshy grapefruit in the neighbor's yard
overhangs our fence and personally announces the coming
of winter in our central Florida town and is sweeter
and juicier than store-bought fruit I would never pay for
and reminds me of the time we lined smudge pots up and
down the rows of groves to keep the freeze from killing
the crop, and of how I welcomed my first kiss one evening
in the crook of the arm of one of those fragrant trees.

Because the moon was full and teasing the tide with her
shimmer when I caught a striped schoolmaster at midnight
even though the fish weren't biting on our side of the party
boat, and you scaled and fileted my keeper on the dock,

packed the pink flesh in ice for the ride home, and I cooked
it with lemon and butter and wine, and with our fingers,
we feed the perfect flaky morsels to each other's mouths.

At Marco Island

When he saw it in the hotel gift shop,
my nephew held the small seahorse in
his six-year-old palm. Is it alive?
he asked. Once, I said, placing it back
on a shelf, it swam on the ocean bottom
with the fish and sand dollars. When
the weekend was over, I gave him the seahorse
wrapped in tissue paper. He opened it
searchingly, twirled it by its curled up tail.
I kissed him, told him that whenever he spun
the seahorse, I would be thinking of him.
Tia Elisa, he said, when I'm sixty,
will you be dead? I wanted to do the math,
figure my life expectancy, regret ever
shrinking from the sometimes prickly skeleton
of everyday existence in a city centuries
from Marco. But there was no time. No,
Sam, I said, I'll be everywhere with you.

War Story

After the car accident, the waiting
to get my bones x-rayed, my wounds
swabbed with antiseptic, I sat on your couch,
a blanket about my shoulders, asking
for socks and warm milk, caressing
the bandaged cut on my leg. My heart

careened when I closed my eyes, saw
the head-on collision, the car spinning
180 degrees before finally, mercifully,
coming to a stop on the edge of the highway.
My cousin, your wife of one year, had
bruised her knee, put her hand through

the radio. You were lucky—not a scratch.
I extended my New York visit another
week to calm down, to heal. Early
the next morning, from my bed on the couch
of your tiny apartment, I listened to you
get up, shower. I smelled coffee.

Folded into the wing of the couch,
I heard the front door open and close.
That evening, when it opened again,
you were angry and confused—someone
had broken into the store, stolen
expensive perfumes. I hugged you.

brewed some chamomille. I was fifteen.
During the day, I helped your wife
to dress. We took slow walks, composed
the evening meal, played at cards
and slept again. As the morning light
seeped in, I heard you rise and close

the bedroom door, I felt your weight,
the cushions sink beneath me and come
to rest atop the frame. I smelled
cologne, turned on my back. Your
fingers moved across my forehead,
brushed the hair aside, stroked my brow

and cheek. You were twenty-five. They
slipped down to my chest, then further
down between my legs and lingered there.
Somewhere, glassy streams of amber perfume
spilled from cracked and jagged bottles.
I didn't speak, just felt the bones—

your arm on my hip, my rib cage with
the muffled banging of my heart,
the wooden slats beneath my back.
The white wall rose like a bone—porous,
shadowless. Meet me in the shower,
you whispered. Wait until you hear

the water run. And then the cushions
rose as they refilled with air, the cold
condensing in my lungs. I pulled
the blanket to my chin and burrowed
into the sofa seam. I heard the shower
burst, the water drain, the front door

lock click shut. Two days later I flew home.
My father took my bag, my mother raised
my skirt to the knee and frowned. Both
embraced my newly tempered shoulders. I took
their arms and we marched out of the terminal.
An accident, I said, just a scratch.

This Uncle

This uncle hugged me a little too tight,
a little too long. When it was her turn,
my sister's eyes widened—he was holding her
too hard. Each time after the long trip,
Dad would pull the Pontiac onto the trampled
grass in front of their house. Our cousins
and aunt and this uncle would hasten through
the metal gate and into our arms. It was
only natural as we kissed my aunt, natural
as we hugged our cousins, until this uncle
opened his arms like a vent and too warmly
pulled us into the darkness of his embrace.
It took my aunt over twenty years to leave
him, an air conditioning man, who died
repairing an American Standard in
The Comfort Inn while servicing the units.

Tenth Anniversary

She sits on the center of her kitchen table,
her head leaning into her palm. She has sat
there for hours, the stillness of the house
pressing in, the second hand on the wall clock
prodding each minute forward. On the fridge,
bright carrot and orange-slice magnets pin
airline schedules, pre-school paintings and
reminders to the avocado metal: "This week

we're learning the letter C—send Cookies
and Cupcakes." On the table the cold water
sweat has left her glass, the scotch and soda
diluted. The amber ashtray her husband stole
from a Quality Inn cradles a small heap of ashes,
the burnt ends of her Merits. She could empty
the ashtray, wipe it with a paper towel, set it
back on the sill next to the cactus. She could

pack a bag for herself, call a sitter and a cab,
fly off to that convention in Garden City.
Outside, a cat wauls for its mate, sirens fade.
Inside, the refrigerator hums, the telephone
doesn't ring. Her heart beats round and round
the stillness at the center where she sits,
drink and cigarette—no desire to pour another,
no strength to strike a match.

Purdah

At fifteen she is married to a man
she had never met. Her family gives
her up like a weak lie, her life
chattel, sold to her young husband's
fold. The couple work hard; they learn
to love. She tries to accept her place,
enjoys her ritual few minutes each day
with a neighbor when she engages in

the relaxing squeezing on and working off
of one delicate bracelet after another,
the friend pushing the bracelets on,
tapping one to the next, ten or twenty
transparent glassy rings sliding like
shackles over the tight narrow bone of
her wrist. The young woman recounts
her troubles—the constant scrubbing,

boiling, mending, waiting for her
husband to return home to eat, sleep,
wake and go so she can begin again—
tedium old as the Hindu gods. Every
few moments, the friend pauses, gathers
up the bracelets, presses the slight
curves with both thumbs, testing for
cracks—hairline breaks that scratch or

cut. Four years later, a train accident
kills her husband, severs her bond with
his family. She is put on the street
to beg with hungry bands of women,
thousands of widows in Calcutta like
her who belong to no one, who own
nothing, who recall when troubles could
be counted on few glassy bracelets.

Near Quitting Time

A middle-aged hairdresser silently twists
a cutomer's thin blue strands. It's near
quitting time and her make-up has melted
into creases, the tips of her fingers
brown with dye, stained like a mechanic's
at day's end. When the phone rings,

she pads to t he white formica counter.
"Cost Cutters, can I help you?" Above
her head, shelves of shampoo, conditioners,
sprays and mousse promise miracle cures,
professional results, instant hair repair.
"It's me, honey," she says, leaning on

the counter edge. I've got one more comb-out
and them I'll be home." Magda pauses, twirls
the cord like a curler, crosses her leg and
rubs her foot" The moon at the beach?
It'll be full tonight. But the kids,
dinner..." She tugs at the plastic apron

straps tied around her neck, around her waist.
"Not tonight, honey, too tired. Maybe this
weekend." She returns the receiver to its cradle,
herself to her station, grabs a comb, and
watching the mirror, teases her elderly
customer's blue strands into a stiff bouffant.

Smoke Rings

When people ask her why she smokes,
she doesn't justify the indefensible;
instead, she tucks the truth away
like a strand of stray hair,
concealing her continual connection
to heat and fire, her preoccupation
with smoke and ash, flint, sparks
and lighter cap snaps. For her,

smoking is a break in the daily
trade, a bit of grace under
pressure, a wedge in the teetering
edge of a modern divorcee's life.
Alone in darkened bars, she likes
the way smoking takes up space,
filling emptiness with a lingering

haze. At night on her balcony,
the smoke curls from her fingers;
the cirrus wisps the wind spirits
away leave whole lives to consider.
And sometimes, when the air is still,
she blows a wobbly wreath and
jabs her fist up through the ring.

Critical Mass

Driving I-95 to downtown Miami,
I lift my eyes to
a huge cloud. I don't have to
conjure up an image—
the vermilion glow of the setting sun's rays
lights up the unmistakable
shape from behind: the billowy head—

the explosion—of a mushroom cloud.
I don't see a mesa in the cloud,
one of those flat-topped rocks
that rises out of the desert and sits
silent for millions of years.
I don't see a silo or a water tower.
I see the clear and shapely outline

of my fear, clear as the brain
in the walnut, the tiny white skulls
in the flower-print bedsheet,
the blood in the punch. These days
it doesn't matter if I'm an optimist,
if I recycle every scrap
and count every sticky gram of fat.

The truth looms before me,
though not in the clouds, but in decisions:
to scrub my stove until it gleams,
to buy a house, to vote, to teach,
to marry again, to have a child
and raise her, clearly, to see.

Migraine

My mother closes her eyes to press back the pain,
to push back the fist that threatens her face
from behind. She needs no country lawns or dingy
yellow rooms, just the darkness of her bedroom,
the stillness of her bed, and a hand to guide her

there and draw the blinds. She swallows three
Advils. She has tried them all—aspirin,
Tylenol, Fiorinal, Darvon. I carefully close
her door and watch the kids play in the den—
somehow they know not to quarrel or shout.

My grandmother got migraines—she would sit in her
recliner and rocking back and forth, press ice
packs to her forehead, willing the demons out.
I read about the latest research, clip articles,
tape documentaries, ignore headaches and wait.

Elegy to Zoila Franco

I dreamed my aunt woke up
and spoke without her cough.
She sat down beside me,
cross-legged, in the center
of the living room rug and
smiled at me like she did
when I was twelve and
asked her for a cigarette
and she gave it to me.

"What are you building?"
she asks in the dream, picking
up my Lincoln logs, criss-
crossing them in layers,
the notches on each end
dropping neatly into
place, her slim fingers
working with mine until
we have built a cabin,
lit it with a red roof,
sat back in the resined glow.

Her lips curve evenly,
not the crooked line of
lips which have drawn on
Winstons for forty years
and extra oxygen for ten.

In my dream I want to
declare my aunt's home
in Spain a no-smoking zone,
bless her with two children,
a husband who works days,
fame for the fine white lace
she embroiders evenings.

Instead she and I run
through a pine forest,
hands clasped, laughing,
weaving in and out of trees
when we come to a clearing.
Pine trees rise all around us,
their trunks slim and scored;
needles tumble to our feet,
purifying the air, laying
patterns on the intricate earth,
and my aunt can breathe easily.

II. Signal Fires

A Photograph of Cambodia, 1990

The war memorial outside a temple in
Kampong Thum is a playpen. Bats and
balls rise above the high wooden railing
in a heap that hardens into slim hollow
bones, bleached or brown skulls—the ochre
of dried blood stains the cracks. Facing
the memorial, half hidden in shadow,
a young man stares, arms loosely crossed,
eyes black as holes. There's no logic to
the arrangement; skulls, many jawless,
tilt down, away from the young man's eyes
and to the accumulation of jagged arms
and legs—tibia next to fibula, ulna
dissecting radius—limbs far from ribs,
leaning on heads like exclamation points.

Horses

Even before the panzers appeared
like black crabs on the horizon
to scuttle Warsaw, horses were
everywhere. They pulled wagons
dripping water, carted ice, fruit
to market, children to school—
their muscled bodies strong or bent,
burnished with sweat, the clips on
cobblestone, snorts and neighs,
everyday voices. And those Poles,
who were young but old enough,
recall how hundreds of horses were
crushed, their ribs cracked
like twigs, bullets breaking open
wounds that bled red streams
with the heavy rains. They fell
like pride fell in the eyes of
captured neighbors, huge
corpses collapsed, their legs
rising, pointing, as if the crooked
streets had grown stiff fingers:
Don't do this, we are innocent,
you've no right. In a few days,
their legs folded and slumped.
Horses not butchered or buried began
to turn. The rotting smell filled
the streets and alleys, seeped
through windows, under doors—
a smell dark as the lives
everywhere gone.

Forced Right

Spain, 1948. On the first day
of school, the nuns tied her
left hand behind her back. At lunch,
they rapped her knuckles with a ruler.
At first, the written words of
the Jewish girl wobbled, her fork
trembled in mid-air. Over time,
a subtle switch occurred in the brain—
a creative neuron from one side
hastened to the other, was forced to
analyze, and got confused. Today
friends rave over her dinner parties;
her handwriting is refined, though
n's and m's appear upside-down.
Her two daughters are lefties,
her son ambidextrous.

Passage to America

At the Havana airport,
soldiers opened my mother's
suitcase, rummaged through
her slips and nightgowns,

emptied her toothpaste into
a bucket—in case jewelry
was hidden inside.
Then, she has told me,

she and my infant sister and
I landed in Jamaica, courtesy
of a Jewish agency who had
secured our passage, paid

for a bed in a home for
the mentally ill, and for
the food orderlies laid out
on tables like manna only

when agency officers came
to check. For seven days
we woke and slept with
no milk, just the nightly

cries of misplaced minds.
On the third day, my mother
pleaded for an egg, which
she separated before feeding us

the yolk. On the fifth day,
she threatened suicide--
a small jar of strained peas
appeared. Each morning

she went to the bathroom
down the hall, a baby in each arm,
and brushed her teeth with
a bright white bar of Ivory soap.

Florida

1. Lakeland

In fourth grade I learned that
our entire peninsula had once been
under water; that swamps rose through
swirling fog, seethed and settled;
that we had never had earthquakes.
Then people moved in. Now the lakes
smell like swamp water; children swim
in sinkholes, see scum sway greenly
onto the rancid banks, moist dirt
dank and bristling with weeds.

2. Winter Haven

As a child I watched flames like
white orange blossoms flap wildly
off a twenty-foot cross. Robed men
pierced the citrus-scented air with
pointy hats and fists. My parents
explained the link between ignorance
and hate as we quickly parted the central
Florida night. I worried the six-point
star hanging from my neck and stared out
the window at the diminishing light.

3. Miami

Years later, from the balcony of
my high-rise apartment, I watched
smoke rise from the rioting streets
of Overtown—a white hispanic cop
had shot a black man, sparks from
his gun igniting pent-up rage
that made daylight from night,
the smoke redolent as that of
the wildfires that blacken the sky
when the Everglades spontaneously burn.

4. Davie

Western facades mask McDonald's and
gas station food marts. Horses strut
down city streets. Stopped behind
a ford Bronco at a traffic light,
I watch a man punch the woman
in the shoulder, in the neck. She
stares ahead. When his fingers get
tangled in her hair, she pulls away.
In the back seat, a small boy stands up,
thumb in mouth, to watch and learn.

5. Yeehaw Junction

The sun drops like a pink neon
medicine ball over the scrub pine
prairie northwest of Highway 60.
Vultures gather and hop away
from road kill as I drive past.
Then they step back. At night,
miles from civilization, cars keep
their brights on, stereos loud,
A/C high. Behind sealed windows,
their passengers can't smell the land.

Prairie Farmer

The previous tenant of my new apartment subscribed
to Prairie Farmer. I leaf through the pages on
my balcony in Miami. The boom of bass-swollen rap
blares from the street below. The dissonant sounds
of car alarms jar the tropical air. I glance at
special features: fine-tuned fertility and farmers
who endure; Erval Borgie, 1992 master farmer,
overcame hard times with determination, hogs and
faith. His wife Betty says she's driven more sows
out of mudholes than she cares to remember.
A conspiracy inhabits these pages, against weeds:
foxtail, pigweed, lanbsquarters—against rootworm,
cutworm, the animal activist threat. The atrazine
label has been amended to lessen groundwater
contamination, the trend is minimum tillage.
Did the old tenant leave here for parts midwest,
to a prairie where people overcome and endure,
where they heed the farmer's creed to serve
conserve. If he learned to plant corn and drive
tractors, perhaps he will return to the bray
of the urban landscape, to our city, having
mastered the art of jumpstarting this engine.

South Beach

On South Beach an old woman,
standing on the steps of her hotel,
leans toward the ocean, listening
to the waves. With one thin arm,
she grips the rail, her body bowed outward—
as if someone were pulling her from the waist
into his arms, as if the wind that stirs
the cloud of her white hair props her up
in the balance while tightrope tubes of
neon brand the buildings next door and
claim the once dying, now thriving
neighborhood. She knows it is only
a matter of time before developers double
her rent, before she releases the rail
and enters the night like an arrow
piercing the sky in a graceful arch that
rises, slips, falls and quietly slides
into the vast black waters.

African Rebirth

After a drought the first night of the rains
near the Tives River belongs to the frogs.

as if from the dead, they rouse, push their way up
through the parting soil and erge from

the damp dirt to descend the bank by the thousands,
a frenzied amphibian army rushing to sate

their lust in the bubbly mud. Their canorous croaking
an Orphean concert, rises from the moist darkness

and rattles the stars, their passion a primal song
to the waking Savo plains.

Hurricane Season, 1988

In Miami we're used to the threats and
sometimes the punch of seasonal storms.
Weathermen warn of certain destruction
while the blade of a hurricane slices
the palm trees and houses of little-known
islands thousands of miles away. Along
our canals, frantic men in rusty machines
prepare for possibilities, race to cut
trees—their shady decay whittled to dust
in a few loud moments. And most of the time,
we get only the rains, but still the trees
come down, houses rise up, office buildings,
strip centers, malls; our new jungles
march toward both coasts. Beyond the canals,
fields brown with gentle cows disappear.
Already the grass grows in patches where
sheep once nibbled and clipped. Last August,
weathermen determined that a hurricane
was hacking the Mexican coast. Here,
the maelstrom has been sawing us for years.

Offense

When the drunk in Coconut Grove
grabbed my breast that muggy summmer
night, I stood still for several stunned
seconds before—through the gel of clammy
disbelief—I raised my arm and shoved him
off. He staggered away with his buddies,
snickering, while all around, tourists
seated at sidewalk cafes drank beer,
chatted, slurped oysters from their shells—
oblivious as I shrank into a doorway
and gasped for air. Then I walked
back through the crowd to my table, told
my two friends, who told the manager.
No, I didn't want to call the police,
to attract attention—surely the drunk's
addiction. Yes, I was all right. He
was gone—white, blond, medium-build,
casually dressed for this warm Sunday night.

Assumptions

I'm pumping gas at a self-service Gulf station.
Two boys saunter by—one chubby, one blond.
I'm wearing a full Indian print skirt, a blue
short-sleeve blouse. "Secretary, right?"
the fat one suddenly barks. Not the first time
I've heard this. A man who lives in my building
once got in the elevator, pressed a button,
looked me up and down, said, "Let me guess—
legal secretary in a downtown office?" I don't
recall what I was wearing. He needed a shave.
I gave them both my stock reply: "No, nuclear
physicist." A lie. The boys laughed and walked
away. The man keeps his distance, probably yells
at his secretary, assumes too damn much.

Fat Ladies
someone wrote on the brown elevator wall.
Below it, next to the inspection certificate
signed by M. Self, a scratchy beige spot
where the maintenance man tried to rub off

Ugly Ladies.
They're ruining the building, these kids,
says a short man who gets into the elevator.
They break into cars, litter the parking lot,
pee in the stairwells and steal newspapers,

Dumb kids,
I'd like to write that on their foreheads,
hoodlums—no respect for no one. He gets out
on my floor, nods good night before I can
tell him that kids didn't break in or steal,

Dumb man,
grown men did, and women with babies—security
guards have been catching them. I follow him out
into the hall until he turns the corner; then I
step back into the elevator and uncap my marker.

Uncertainty

I have students who when they write,
do not capitalize the word God,
who when they think, fail to connect

their thoughts, who when they laugh,
the laughter trembles with uncertainty,
who when they love, some reveal,

cannot decide to give, cannot decide
to take—how much of each? Where
do they look this up? To look within,

is the answer up there?

Scenarios

In case someone grabs
my purse in the street,

in case the boss questions
my decision,

or I need to break
my lease,

in case I run
into my ex at the beach,

in case I wake up
in a strange city

find myself alone
and liking it,

just in case, I rehearse
the scene,

chart the moves,
recite the words.

I've never played
them out,

but you just
never know.

Ovens

My fear of death is
a fear of stillness,
of veiny cold and
blue skin turning...
unimaginable.
I've always denied
the details of burial—
the airtight vault,
the sealed coffin,
the certain decay—
but cremation in
an oven carries
its own facticity.

I've seen pictures,
the dark brick arches
of ovens in death camps.
half-moons like mouths
or jaws or caves,
one next to the other,
one on top of another.
They barely resemble
a kitchen oven or
the polished metal
square of today's
final burning place—
ceramic urns and wooden
coffins neatly shelved
in solemn air.

My eyes can't blink
away the coffin or
my ear blunt the sharp
metallic click of
the door snapped shut,
the rising roar of fire
dying as soon as it rises.

And who will gather
and scatter the ashes,
dry white flakes now fine
and managable—someone
with a memory like mine?

An oven is an oven.
Already I cook no
once-warm flesh, I eat none.
In my mouth I can't deny
the texture or my teeth
the tense white bones—
the fear of stillness
planted in the earth.

Power Lunch

Three women at The Quick
Wok Chinese Restaurant
discuss hard drives,
toss programs and floppy
disk pull-down-menu lingo
back and forth. In turn
they input fried rice and
greasy eggrolls; jaws up-
date, download, processing
bok-choy and carrots,
steady as cursors.

No one smiles. Faces blank
as tractor-fed printer paper
stare at each other as if
at cool green screens, love
and laughter stored in back-up
files. Their meeting over,
the women skip the tea, smooth
their skirts and exit, back
to work, their fortunes
wrapped in plastic on
the white linen tablecloth.

III. Appassionata

Between the Covers

Your books are everywhere,
heaped on shelves against
your walls, in your concrete
block and wood plank book-
cases; stacked on your floor,

in your bathroom and on your bed—
vertical crowds with horizontal
newcomers resting on top,
shelf after shelf of everything
I've ever wanted to read, of

everyone I've ever wanted to know.
I can hear their wordy silences
pressing against each other.
I spend hours scanning spines,
filing names, longing to know

the soft edges, slight wood scent
and seductive dog ears—to know
them as you know me, to touch them
and trace their outlines as
you trace mine—stretched across

the white sheet, print on the page,
eyes scanning rows of cryptography
as you pass back and forth from
self to self, deciphering who I am,
and finding yourself. We need

to know, to take notes, to read
books and keep them close and
compressed as individual leaves
drawn together, as separate pages
bound by a fine, valuable cloth.

December Apart

While you are shoveling hard-
packed snow in New Hampshire,
I am eating figs on your balcony
at the beach in Florida. With
every push of your shovel, I bite
down on the sweet brown beads.
With each of your muscle strains,
I split the skin with my teeth.
When you gasp for a breath of air,
I swallow a cool stream of milk.
The sun burns the bare tops of
my feet, warm as your skin beneath
layers of flannel and wool. I
finish the string of figs and
close my eyes. The taste sticks
to my mouth like flesh to ice,
binding my desire for the sweetness
of your mouth on mine, for the
strength of your shoulders rolling
over me in the swirl of sheets
on a snow-blanketed morning.

Ego

You
may
think
in
your
cocky
way
that
just
because
you're
my
friend
and
my
lover
that
you're
everything
to
me—
wring
that
thought.

Belly Ache

You always loved my rounded belly.
It has earned its toned and untoned
contours—the binges and purges
no therapist could cure for long,
the shock of new life ignited,
then doused. I dance to re-shape
it, with Latin gyrations; you say
it excites you, laying your head
on the soft pillow of my middle.
I'm not pregnant. I was once,
remember? but it never left my belly
whole, and sometimes I can feel it
breathing within—you've heard me sigh.

Comforting Rituals

I push myself beneath
your arm, snug as
the tight black curl
of your body hair
I find on the sheets
when I make the bed
or pressed to my chest
in the morning.
There is something
congruous about this
motion, something
comforting about rituals
brief but binding—
like a keen kiss,
like the harmony of
whole words that
pass soundlessly through
the sum of our skin.

The Calm Before

This morning, sipping coffee in the kitchen,
I waited for your refrain—working late again—
for the door to close, for silence. But then,
something unfamiliar—a scratching sound. I
looked out: on the balcony screen hung a squirrel,
spread-eagled as if stretched on a rack, tiny

nails hooked into tiny holes, the light underside
of its soft gray belly smooth, revealing no sex—
a female. She hung there, suspended, as if bored
or caught. I hesitated to open the sliding door,
disrupt her, or cause a fall. I stood up, moved
closer and watching her, waited. With a scrape of

nail to metal, she scrambled to the ledge, one foot
pushing the screen, the other tentative. As quickly,
she was gone, to scale another screened-in balcony
or slip down a wall to cross the golf green and climb
a live oak—instincts pressed to explore the depth
of every surface, to test the skin of longer limbs.

After the Fight

She watches him slip out
to the kitchen and open
the freezer door. The cold
air like vapor from dry ice
streams out around his body,
his hips and legs, all she
can see, the half not hidden
by the half door. He stands
there, motionless, hungry or
thirsty or unsure. Lying
on the bed, watching him,
she imagines that everyone
is wrong about hell—fire,
sooner or later, burns itself
out. Hell is frozen. The wind
chills and dries out the bones;
ice traps and preserves forever.

Travels

Today as I clipped the dead leaves
off the Swedish ivy you gave me
last year for our anniversary,

I recalled our trip to Jamaica
soon after we met—the lucent
water of Montego Bay, the white
wicker furniture of the Royal
Caribbean Hotel, the curried lobster
and apple tart in Negril; the red,
green, black of flowing skirts
and flags at market, the deep
honeyed voice of our driver, who
at the mention of a leak in the roof
of the bus, sang out with the wisdom
of an oracle: "It's raining
all over the world, man!"

I recalled the sailboat built
for two you were bent on manuevering,
the shockingly cold waterfall at
Ocho Rios, the surefooted guide
with seven cameras around his neck
who snapped our shivering teeth
into a smile, the grip of your hand
when I slipped on a rock or went
blind in the dark of a nightclub.

Our honeymoon was my first time
to Europe—in the coldest winter
in forty years. With you I stood
in the glowing light of Spanish
stone cathedrals, explored the narrow
streets and crumbling Roman bridges
of Salamanca, mused on the corners
of Mona Lisa's mouth as intently
as on the spectacular violets, roses,
lilies in Monet's wildly ordered garden.

And after our trip, as we rounded
the corner back to our new home
in Miami, you whispered that we were
slipping out of a time warp, as if
we had never left, our travels
frozen on film in a faraway land.

Now I travel around town by car
and read about Ayurveda, Shambhala,
Zen; I attend lectures and seminars
on growth and spirituality, weave
large wicker baskets, drink filtered
water and unfiltered apple juice.
You take out trash, put away dishes,
sit through foreign movies, make love
with efficiency, but stare with blank eyes
when I try to explain my swollen lids,
my therapy sessions, why I can't get up
in the morning or sit in a cramped,
windowless office every day,

or why today I threw the ivy,
whose leaves yellow and dry up like
corn flakes fast against the wall.

Her Husband the Stockbroker

wakes up, scans the papers, calls
the office, checks the foreign markets,
feels the heft of fractions & abbreviations,

rolls with the volley, the rally,
buy, sell, trade... HEY! (It's the wife.)
Buy me out, take me over, wrap me in your acronyms.

In her dreams, the electronic ticker tape
flashes across the rafters, drops down
the wall and onto the beige carpet. She feels it

slide up her leg and spine, up over
her shoulder blade and down between her breasts;
it slithers around her waist and tightens

its grip, the heat of red crystal letters
branding her skin. During the day, she calls him
to protest her diminishing returns, the splitting

of shares. He doesn't hear. He works the phones,
promises to labor like this, day in, day out
and weekends, for three, no, four more years

and then, he says, "We'll be set." For now,
past dinner time, he eats, showers, saves the shave
for morning, gets in bed and whispers, "Don't call

me before four—unless it's important,
and honey, the market was down today;
the market is emotional, you know." She knows.

Night Vision

You and I were in a house
with twenty-foot ceilings
and many narrow rooms,
with wooden floors and
three or four people
in each room, laughing,
lounging, talking.
I couldn't make out
what they were saying,
these people, mostly
women with curly hair and
either flowing or tight-
hipped skirts, and they
were everywhere, chatting,
giggling in that house,
the walls slanting,
shifting upright,
the chandelier tilting,
chatting. And every night
you were with a different
woman, a beautiful or ugly
woman—white, black or
bronze—tangled in
the sheets, hidden in
the tangle and paisley
sheets and blankets
of your four-poster bed.
And once when the water
flooded under the wall,
when it slipped from
the molding in flat
flowing waves, I knew
your bed had burst, from
the next room I knew
and ran and rolled up
towels and pressed them
under doors and trapped
the water. and you and
the current one sat up
in bed--surprised and

grateful and content.
You didn't care about her.
I could tell. I knew
as one knows in dreams
she didn't matter
to you, and you smiled
at me—you and I
are such good friends,
your Buddha smile said,
just wonderful friends.
Not just friends,
I thought, that's not
what I want, standing
here at the foot of
your bed—my hands and
feet and hems wet—
I want to be yours, even
in this tall narrow house
with wet wooden floors
and so many women. But
I couldn't tell you--not
when your desire got soaked
up in your caution and
trapped behind your face.
Whenever our gaze locked,
lingering like lovers',
the walls shot higher,
iron bars crashed from
doorframes to the floor
which froze and shifted
under our feet; you slid
away, slipping through
the cracks in the door
to the next room.
I could hear laughter
and chatter in there.
These women didn't matter,
none of us mattered—
you were waiting for
the one true one.
And I was waiting,
furiously waiting,
when I woke up
in a different house.

Perspective

I thought I could get by, step over
the hole of the loss without falling
into its darkness, without flailing like
a pitched chick in the empty arms of
space, get by the sharp eyes of a judge
who dissolves unions in the afternoon
from a high wooden bench in his own
borrowed inner sanctum. "Were you
coerced into this?" the judge asked.
"No," I said, no, unless, I wanted to say,
the heart, the mind, the red of the soul
can be guilty of blind faith, of clutching
the moment like the front of a shirt in
determined handfuls. Ask me more questions,
I wanted to say, make my case different
from all the ones before me even though
I'm the eighth or ninth today, one of
hundreds this month. "Who is your witness?"
he asked. "My sister," I said, but there
were others I could have said, my family,
my friends, my God—they witnessed our love,
the happiness, can attest to the trust
we placed in each other. Still, we never
saw the end. But from his bench, I thought,
surely the judge could see more clearly,
say a few words... "This marriage is
dissolved," he said, and "good luck," voice
soft, echoing in my ear as I walked out
of the courtroom and through the revolving
doors of the justice building.

Hindsight

Even Monet's lilies,
up close, are nothing
but color, flat against
canvas, formless, incoherent.
You have to step back
and peer at a distance
for their beauty to emerge.
How red was my heart,
how smooth or scarred
the rounded palmfuls?
How does it look now
that time has given you
distance as it gives
others perspective? How
do all the others look?

Three Months after the Break-up

What you didn't know
is that my heart
is the spiny arm

of a starfish,
the large claw of
a stone crab.

the missing tail of
a green lizard
who could lose a part

of herself
in the branches
of the brightest

royal poinciana
and still
keep her balance.

The Moons of Jupiter

The gardenia bush grows wildly—unpruned
branches stab outward and down, white flowers
glow like Jupiter's moons on a clear night,
the fulsome perfume adrift in the humid air.
As I leave your house, you walk to the bush to
pluck a flat-petalled bloom. I protest—
you break one off anyway, careful to leave
unopened bulbs on the stem; you hand it to me.
I take it without looking into your eyes,
the whites red-rimmed like mine—after nine
months your wife wants you back. You hug me.
I grew up with gardenia bushes in my yard,
learned early about their petals, how easily
they bruise. At the corner, I look at the flower—
the white flecked with insects, brown with
thumb prints—and let it fall from my fingers
to the street. I turn and circle your block,
drive past your house, circling again and again.

Interiors

When we finally moved in together,
because the distances had become
too wide and moments together too
strained with partings, we took
several weeks to hang all of our
pictures, remnants of past marriages:
your Erte with a beast draped like
a dress around beauty—a study in
perception—my Paris primitive of
Montmartre, painters poised to draw
tourists, the inevitably misspelled
marquee of a sidewalk cafe. But
the air ached when you insisted
pictures hang high on the walls,
museum-like; I wanted them at eye-level.
We dropped one down, raised another
while some ancient Mephistopheles
circled, straining to squeeze the life out
of our newly forged creation, of our
attempt to get it right this time.

The Next Room

Do walls define
my current space,
        contain the furnishings
                that decorate this life?
Are words useful chairs or
        flowers in a vase?
                Is art the hand
                        that tidies up,
that beats the dusty rugs,
        that pries the window up
                and airs the room's
smells out?

Or is art more than that?
        Not the pattern in
                the quilt but the warmth
that wraps the heart,
        the hand that pats
                        the child's head
but points its fingers too.
        It spills the milk,
                unmakes the bed;
it mourns the dead—
                        art remembers,
especially when good intentions

        are lost or stalled.
With the tug of a cord,
        the flip of a switch,
                the strike of a wheel,
it lets the light in.

It's this and that.
With art we make
        life the home.
We must—
        before stepping
                into the next room.

Appassionata

My aunt dressed me on my wedding day,
expertly securing the white satin-covered
buttons dotting my spine, smoothing
my lace collar, puffing the sleeves—
her fingers working the fabric as if
dressing were an art. When she lifted
a teacup or a cigarette, the slow movement
of her hand, the arc of the line to her lips,
held a grace that could answer prayers, or
dreams. I didn't know then that my marriage
would not last, would end in the same year
as her life, a life that taught me
to fasten buttons, lovingly, into place.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis is a collection of thematically arranged poems that explore one of the significant ways in which we define ourselves as human beings, that is, through our past and present relationships with others, whether those relationships are familial, cultural, social or personal. Through the direct presentation of images, these largely narrative poems seek to refine perception and thus reveal some of the complicated truths inherent in our various relationships with others, all in an effort to find meaning. The form of the poems often reveals a process, a continual redefining of views on human experience in both its life-affirming and disappointing aspects. It is through such discovery and disclosure that these poems aim to affirm the process, passion, and meaningfulness of art and life.