Many-Storied House: Poems

George Ella Lyon

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POETRY

“We all live in this house. These stories belong to everyone. George Ella Lyon writes the most transporting, intuitive, inviting poems; their doors feel wide open. Her balancing touch is generous enough (it’s utterly magical how she does this) to include us all. I love, love, love this book.”—Naomi Shihab Nye, author of the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award winner You and Yours

“Like Elizabeth Bishop, Lyon has an ability to make startling metaphor with ordinary language.”—Lisa Williams, author of the Barnard Women Poets Prize winner Woman Reading to the Sea

“In a way, the reader is assembling the pieces of a puzzle to reassemble the writer’s life through the mosaic of experiences selected.”—Richard Taylor, author of Rare Birds: Sonnets on the Life of John James Audubon

“Each room, each curio, each haunted nail and joint is cataloged, named, and invested with chiseled language. This house is Lyon’s muse. Many-Storied House is a heartbreaking, yet triumphant, inventory of acquisition, loss, the sacramental offices of love, the vanished beloved, and their shades that forever walk the rooms of recollection.”

—Joseph Bathanti, North Carolina Poet Laureate

While teaching aspiring writers, George Ella Lyon asked her students to write a poem based on memories rooted in the floor plan of a house where they had lived. Working on the assignment herself, she began to write poems about each of the rooms in the house where she grew up. In this intimate book, she takes us along on that journey as she strives to recapture what’s been lost and to answer lingering questions about herself and her family.

The poems in this collection tell the sixty-eight-year story of the house, beginning with its construction by Lyon’s grandfather and ending soon after her mother’s death. Moving, provocative, and heartfelt, they evoke more than just stock and stone, exploring the nature of memory and relationships as well as the innermost architecture of love, family, and community.

George Ella Lyon is the award-winning author of more than forty books for readers of all ages, including Golden Kite Award winner Borrowed Children, Appalachian Writers Association book of the year Catalpa, Aesop Award winner “Which Side Are You On?” The Story of a Song, and Bank Street Best Books selection and ALA notable All the Water in the World. Her most recent books are She Let Herself Go: Poems and the young adult novel Holding on to Zoe. Her poem “Where I’m From” is featured in the PBS series The United States of Poetry and has become a model for teachers around the world.
Many-Storied House
Many-Storied House

*Poems*

George Ella Lyon
Deep in the house is the carpenter’s hand
beginning things at their end
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Many-Storied House
Provenance

Here I stand, at the beginning with more questions than answers.

What I know is Papaw built the house I grew up in, at Rio Vista, which is down below Loyall, four miles from Harlan, the county seat. It’s on First Street, #108, I found out when we sold it. Fourth house on the right, two-story, reddish brown and white. You can’t miss it.
Downstairs

First Floor
Door

we passed
will pass
are passing
through

threshold
of our
threshing
holding

lintel
of embraces

portal
of goodbyes

our DNA
clasping
your
handle
Bathroom

This is the window
they put a kid through
when they lock their keys
in the house. It was
my brother till he got
too big, then my wiry
cousin David, then me.

No screen or storm window,
so once they haul up
the sash, somebody (not
Daddy because of
his back) puts hands on
both sides of your waist
and lifts you straight up
like a post hole digger,
then eases you through
the slot. Your task is
to find the linoleum
with your Keds, steady
yourself, go out the
bathroom door—avoiding
the scary faces in
the varnished pine—
step into the hall,
turn the latch left (that’s toward the train track), and let your keepers back in the zoo.
Closet

Just inside the door,
a closet to your left holds
umbrella stand, folding chairs,
coat rack, and amiable shelf

for games and puzzles. Unlike
ones in the rest of the house,
these games have directions,
a board so you can see where

you are, written rules saying
when they are over. Likewise,
the puzzles have pictures on
top so you know where

the edges are and what scene
you are trying to fit together.
The morning Daddy was leaving for the surgery that would not save him, the doorbell rang and he opened to a jaunty man on the front porch, a familiar cadger who never paid back a loan. Tired of lies, Daddy refused and both men turned away. But a hinge in his heart turned Daddy back. “I’ll give it to you,” he said. It was the last thing the world asked of him and he gave.
That Chair

She almost died in that wingback chair by the living room window.

We’d eaten at Mount Aire up on Pine Mountain—a Sunday in September, it was—

when pain began to twist her heart as we whip-stitched those switchback curves coming down. She said nothing. This was an anniversary celebration for my other grandparents. She said nothing when the car drew up to the house, just got out, traveled driveway and steps, threshold and hall, walked across the living room to that chair. Then it was obvious, sweat pouring off, her face all the wrong color, her eyes blank. Someone ran for Flora, our neighbor, a nurse, who sent my mother for the bottle of ammonia under the sink. She twisted
the cap off, then held Granny Buby’s head,  
forcing her, if she was breathing

to breathe that jolt. After the ambulance  
and my parents left, Flora told me

my grandmother’s corset, which bound  
her middle tight as roads bound that

mountain, was the other savior. “It kept  
enough blood in her heart,” Flora said.

“If it had pooled in her feet, she’d be gone.”  
I think of this when I sit in that chair

my grandmother didn’t die in. No  
wings on her back that day.
Art

When Daddy got the hi-fi, which replaced the Crosley radio just inside the living room door, it came with a demonstration record to show what “rich lifelike sound” Magnavox could bring into your home.

Our neighborhood was bound by mountains, river, railroad. Coal trains whistled, rattling our walls day and night. But when Daddy turned on that hi-fi and the needle rode the black platter, we called the neighbors. “You’ve got to come hear this,” we said, thrilled at the whooo and hiss and roar of a “real train” so close.
Visitor

That man, that shining man—
grackle-black hair, bedazzling eyes,
a voice like effervescent velvet
sitting on the rose couch
strumming a guitar—a guitar!—
and singing

Once a jolly swagman
camped by a billabong
under the shade
of a Coolibah tree
his Australian mouth kissing
strange words into song.

Why, he was an adult and alive!
happy as a kid, I could tell,
with my ten-year-old knowing,
and this was sweeter than the blackberry
cobbler Mother had served in his honor.
Right there, that night, Desmond Tease
waltzed my sky with a whole new
matilda of stars.
Money Laundering

Because Daddy’s dry cleaners had been broken into and the safe busted up to get the day’s take, which was less than the cost of repairing the safe and the door, Daddy took to bringing the money bag home and leaving the safe open. Because we didn’t have a safe at home and because that seemed a stupid place to keep money anyway, Daddy put it in the washer. So eventually it got washed. Bills and coins and checks dancing around the agitator (in the bag of course), going into spin.

And because you cannot tender wet cash at the bank, Daddy laid it all out on the dining room table to dry. Neighbors dropped in for an evening cup of coffee served in the living room with apple pie and a clear view of that table with its banquet
of Jackson-Lincoln-Washington-Jefferson laid out. Silent word went through the family: pretend it’s not there. And silent signals slipped from guest to guest: Do you see what I see? Do you think they print it in the basement? I swear, it doesn’t even look dry.
Oh, My

The house inside our house
is a gingerbread house
and it is on the dining room table.

There is no house inside the gingerbread house probably, but you don’t know.
You can’t see in the gingerbread windows

outlined in icing with sugar wafer shutters,
so you don’t know, do you, that there aren’t gingerbread people in there who have made

a miniature version of this house
you are standing in out of whatever gingerbread people eat, which surely

is not gingerbread. Perhaps they
bake little boards, melt sugar into glass windows, cut chewy shingles out of licorice

with a paring knife. And if this is true,
then it wasn’t a dream, that raisin eye,
huge and puckered, that I saw peering

through the window
yesterday morning
to see if we exist.
Ritual

Home from work
Daddy shucks

the leather-sheathed
back brace that

straps down his pain
so he can stand.

He rolls dented
shoulders, rests

the brace against
the china cabinet.
Collector’s Item

On the cornice board
above the window
is a large plate painted
with a brown and amber
pheasant against a jade
and spring-green ground.

It belonged to Ella Ezelle
Lane Culwell, my mother’s
mother’s mother, the woman
who was kind to her, the one
who, widowed, with three
small children, started
a boarding house, married
a boarder, made it to Memphis
from the dirt roads of Prescott
 stil unpaved in 1972).

I know my great-grandmother
from one picture,
delectable descriptions
of her salmon salad,
h er bold signature in a second
edition of Swinburne,
this great plate, and the way
her hand, calm at the small
of my mother’s back,
steadied us.
Phone

This is where she stood when she took the call that November morning.

“Mother,” I said from my hospital bed, “The baby is here!”

“Who is this?” she asked, an edge to her voice.

“Mother, it’s me. I’ve had the baby—” “Who? Who did you say is calling?”

“Your daughter! Joey—he was born early this morning.”

“All right. I have to go. Your daddy’s not doing well at all.”
August 4, 1944

My brother turns two, talking a blue streak. Hot as it is, Mother bakes a cake, invites the grandparents down. First there’s spaghetti, which the toddler eats delicately by fistfuls. Then the shiny chocolate temple of cake. Everyone crowds around, singing to the future.

To the future they have pledged themselves, eight people hiding on the other side of the world. Then this day the bookcase is swung back, stairway revealed. With shouts and shoves they are herded out at gunpoint. All but one will fall to the Final Solution. But the Gestapo won’t find the teenage girl’s birthday gift, a red-and-white checked diary. The world will find that.
Reveille

Standing
On the white metal table
In my mother’s blue kitchen
Just turned twelve and full of joy
My brother puts the cold gold
Of the trumpet to his lips
And blasts the house
Awake.
Blood and Water

When Mother came home from the hospital with my brother, her firstborn, Daddy’s mother brought scrumptious homemade meals (Swiss steak, mashed potatoes and gravy; fried chicken, greens, and corn on the cob) so the new mother could focus on the baby while she regained her strength. But Jo only brought one plate.

She was feeding her boy, not that Fowler girl.
The Radio

that melted
onto the toaster oven
when someone baked a potato at Christmas

should have been on the counter between
the coffee pot and canisters but got moved
to the toaster oven due to an influx
of stack cake, fruitcake, and peanut butter roll.

That radio gave us, on Saturdays all year long,
The Birthday Club brought to you by Mosely Safes
and McCaskey Cash Registers.

I loved those names:
_Mosely Safes_ sounds like a cashmere scarf wound
around your neck. And _McCaskey Cash Registers_
makes your mouth do something between chewing
and whistling.

Oh, birthday greetings were rich:
“Elmer says ‘You’re the best!’ to Rita on her fortieth”
or “You made us Mom and Dad. Happy first ever,
Jimmy Saylor!” But I relished the brand names
of office equipment, just as deep in the season
of sweets, I hungered for beets, collards, soup
beans, and cornbread, Jo’s odoriferous turnip stew.
Legacy

When they were tearing down the Bank of Harlan, somebody called Daddy to say he should come empty Papaw’s safety deposit box. Papaw had been dead for years and this was the first anyone had heard of his private hidey hole.

Home from college, I was at the table that night when Daddy laid out the contents: a deed, a poem, a packet of Papaw’s love letters to Jo, and a pistol. All were spread on the table amid the remains of pork chops, biscuits, and gravy when the doorbell rang and I got up to answer. Friends, not close ones, happened to be in our neighborhood and stopped by.

I ushered them down the hall to the kitchen where Mother had slipped the pistol off the table and under her apron. Daddy carried in chairs while I cleared the dishes, put on more coffee, passed a plate of Lorna Doones. Poem, deed, letters lay unmentioned while visitors munched, and my pistol-packing mama sat frozen with that heat in her lap.
Junk Drawer

It held Boy Scout knives and the innards of kites, old church bulletins, oilcloth for picnics, whistles, yoyos, a Worldwide Offering Box, a black ceramic fur-tipped poodle from the set Daddy gave away at the cleaners, a toy bow and half an arrow, the front page from V-E Day, a dried-up shoeshine kit, and net left over from my kindergarten graduation dress. Junk is junk, that’s the great thing about it. All this except the newspaper could go, but the newspaper would go with it. Junk is the Secret Service protecting what is precious. It slows down traffic between this world and the next.
Vision

I was old enough to help carry in groceries, lift them from the chuffy paper sacks, and put them away. Cold things first: milk on the top shelf, meat on the bottom, celery and carrots in the crisper. Mounding fruit in a bowl on the counter, Mother said, “You want to see something no one has ever seen before?” “No one?” I echoed. “No one,” she said again. “Sure,” I replied. “Where do we go?”

Mother laughed, reached for the cutting board, palmed an orange, opened the drawer, and drew out a knife. She halved the fruit. Citrus incense rose in the coffee-rich kitchen. “Right here,” she said, gesturing with the blade at the orange’s cathedral window.
Over Coffee

“I think if I’d been a man,” Mother told me, “I would have played football for Notre Dame.” She was eighty-eight when she said this.

She could have done it, too, followed by Harvard Law and clerking for the Supreme Court. As it was, she had us—family and house, PTA and Heart Fund—till my brother went to college. Then she ran the Chamber of Commerce from 1961 until she died. I think if I’d been a man, she’d never have sat at that table and told me all those stories, how her mother hit her with the butcher knife but only the dull side, how she slapped her so hard it bloodied her nose. Mother needed to see her pain reflected in my face so she could push it away. What do you think you’d have done, she’d say angrily, with seven little children, your husband gone all week, and you living at the back door of nowhere?
Daddy’s Last Christmas

He plays the board game
“By Jove!” with his grandsons

in the kitchen. His mother just buried, he is dense with grief

in the photo that I snapped.

The boys, lithe and limber, lean over the mythic board, while he

pulls back, knowing the dice are not in his hands.
Kitchen Table

This table stands where
the green table stood
where they played Scrabble
with the Babbages, wrote out
statements for Nu-Way Cleaners,
where Mother made out rolls
and we sculpted Christmas
candles and she tightened
the vise on the cast-iron grinder
that turned ham scraps to
ham salad. This table
where she made calls
for the March of Dimes
and for the Chamber,
where she said I was
treating her like a child
where I said I was only
trying to take care of her.
This table stands
where the white enameled
table stood on which she
mixed the formula for our
bottles, before the table
we antiqued that got carried
away by the flood. This table
is where she opened
the newspaper to Daddy’s photo:
Harlan Businessman Dead at 68.
This is where she sat down and howled.
What Won’t Burn

When I opened
the cast-iron door
of the furnace
on New Year’s Eve

and leaned
over the cinder pile
to drop my diary
in the flames

I was thirteen—
thought guilt
and shame
could burn

like red leatherette
and small
white pages.
I didn’t know

they outlasted
conflagration
like the diary’s
charred metal

lock.
Bucket Brigade

Colossal storms came after Christmas
rolling off hillsides rising in rivers
furious water holding us flood-fast
radio-riveted ready to run.

We stood on the steps to the sloshy basement
watched the water work its way up.
“Get buckets! Bail!” somebody bellowed.

So for an hour
we hauled our hearts
in pots and pans
pouring our fear
down the toilet
draining danger
right to the river.

or some sense
At last we reckoned
seized us:
what work was worse or could be weaker
than flushing a flood to a fiendish river?
Somebody sighed and started the coffee.

Two a.m.
but time was in tatters.

“What comes will come,” we said, compliant,
while slowly the wearisome water went down.
The Ham

Every fall, when maple blood was drying, my father hung a ham in the garage—country-salted, curing for the Fourth—between two racks of clothes we didn’t want.

Some nights they’d send me there to rob the freezer of blueberries or glistening slabs of cake. By freezerlight I’d watch green shelves appearing, their tenants warped and moldy from the damp: entire works of James Whitcomb Riley, jigsaw puzzles—Holland, Lake Louise,—spiral handles of white graveyard baskets, a Signet classic, Love without Fear.

But sometimes I would stop, lulled by the stillness, perhaps to see the porchlight through the door, and catch sight of the ham among the coatsleeves—sudden gleaming flesh that was all wound. I’d leap the stairs, slamming doors and light against the deadweight heart that stopped the house.
New Room

When I first saw Daddy in the ICU, still on a respirator, he motioned for a notepad and wrote, underlining each word:

*Prince Edward Island*

He meant to go there. And that imagining was the healthiest he ever got. He went downhill for a month until doctors, claiming success, sent him home to die.

Then the new room, made from our old garage, meant for an office, was perfect for his sickroom. Just six steps down from the kitchen—more than Daddy could manage but few enough so Mother was never far away. She or my brother could help him to the bathroom.

He hadn’t spoken in a while. Words were leaving, like the power to swallow, like any desire to go on. Yet one day Daddy appeared in the kitchen doorway—too weak
and wobbly for the journey
he’d just made. “I didn’t come this far,”
he said, “to be separated from you,”
and sat down at his table for the last time.
Flood
It Got Us This Time

Cusp of spring after the winter
ty they converted from coal to oil.
Ground frozen, so the tank
nests in the basement.
Snow    snow    snow
slopes, valleys thick with it.
Then, at the birth of April,
rain in torrents.

Strip-mine benches, clear-cut hills can't hold it.
Cumberland River, coal-silted, can't either.
On and on water comes over roads
up basement steps    under front door
through windows    River rising in the house

Daddy gone to town
to save Jo and his business.
Mother sick but carrying
all she can upstairs
then heading for higher ground.

From Bailey's Loop
above the railroad
she watches Rio Vista fill
like a sinkful of dirty dishes

Next day when rain stops
and nature pulls the plug
they go home
to find what everybody finds:
no heat, light, water
just flood mud and ruin

and for them, something else:
oil—the sick slick of it—
smearing everything.
River had cracked that tank
against the joists

like an egg.
No Light

As if to pay
for all it took
the river left

in the middle of the living room floor

a miner’s
orange
hardhat.
Worst Flood in Harlan County History

_from Daddy’s journal_
_April 4, 1977_

Gladys stayed home—had something like flu. It had been raining HARD ALL DAY SUNDAY AND SUNDAY NIGHT. River up and nearly over road at Jones’ Motel and Noe’s BBQ. Went down to Jo—told her that there could be a flood probably worse than 1963. Talked to Jim—he said pull all switches—forget motors in all properties. Elmer tried to get to L&N railroad track to walk medicine to Gladys—couldn’t get there. Jim’s mother used same prescription. Took it across mountain at Airport Road and walked it to her.

By 3 p.m. Hoskins Bldg., State Mine Bureau, Carr Bldg, IRS all flooded. Wallace came down to help me move records of Harlan Federal up high. Water started coming in there at 5:30 p.m. No telephone contact with Jo or Gladys. Could talk to Jim. Joined Charlie Bissell in flood watch. Ed Hatmaker brought sandwiches and coffee. Flood is behind Bissell’s.

We now know that all of Loyall and Rio Vista flooded. That takes in our house. Many people are homeless. Damage WILL BE VERY HIGH. Charlie Bissell stayed with Ed. I stayed with Wallace. Was told that Gladys was on hill above Rio Vista at Mrs. Nannie Rowland’s son-in-law’s. Tried to phone but couldn’t get through. Did get Jo on Irene Richardson phone. She’s OK. Flood over her dining room table.
Wallace and I back downtown at 10:30 p.m. Flood crested at this time. It got into the back of the Harlan National Bank, under the red light at the corner of Central and Main.
Interim

from Daddy’s journal
Saturday, May 14, 1977

Our HUD trailer
placed in location
between our home

and Mrs. Rowland.
We will move in
when hooked up.

Unknown as to
how long we
will live there.
Threshold

They were determined to have their New Year’s Eve party at home, hell and high water having already come. “Bring a chair,” they told friends, since they hadn’t moved in yet. The empty house was beautiful: new walls, bare floors shining, card table in the kitchen, lit by a hurricane lamp.

“How high did it get, Bob?” Wallace asked, his hill house having stayed dry. Daddy put his hand above the kitchen radiator. “Up to here. That’s the magic line.” A chorus of “Yes sir, the magic line,” and “It got higher than that in my house.”

Come midnight, this crew found the usual toast not enough. Out the front door they went, to stand around the McPherons’ blue spruce, its deep boughs
threaded with colored light.
Hands linked, they sang, “We’ll
take a cup o’ kindness yet,”
then went back in and did.
Landing

This square where I sneakily sat
to watch TV through the library’s
glass door long after my bedtime,
where I once gave myself away

singing “The Star-Spangled Banner”
as WATE signed off, this square

was sometimes Perry Mason’s
helicopter and sometimes Mt. Sinai,

down from which Moses strode when
we played The Ten Commandments.

Now it’s the place where I stand
hands out behind my mother

to help her navigate
the last two steps.
On Those Shelves

From the landing you step down into a room out over the garage:

This is the room that made us who we were: book lovers, scholars, people of the word, who found a safe place between hard covers. Deckle- or gilt-edged, the wild world opened: story, knowledge, emotion we’d been taught to hold in.

On those shelves Papaw built into the wall below the windows stood the many mansions of our house.
Interior Design

My mother decided
my father never noticed
anything in the house.

To prove her point, she
bought a packet of the plastic
clay you use to hang posters

and stuck a few items
on the library wall
above the couch: a match

box, Wite-Out, a Kleenex
pack: feather-weight
things. He said nothing.

“See?” she told me, and stuck
up an artificial rose
and nail scissors. No

response. “Unbelievable,”
she said, adding Scotch Tape,
pipe cleaners, brush rollers,

one of the coin purses
the cleaners gave away.
Daddy just walked to his chair
every night, dozing off
halfway through the news.
Finally, when the wall looked

as though the plaster had
broken out in junk, Mother
took it all down. “It’s

hopeless,” she told me.
But that night, Daddy said,
“You know, I usually

like the way you decorate
but that didn’t look
quite right.”
Portrait

In the library above the couch hung a portrait of the house painted by Robert Easley who lived down on Fifth Street. It was done when the house was younger, when the garage was the garage and boxwoods guarded the porch.

Of course I wondered if, on the inside, in saltbox fashion the library wall held a tiny painting of the house and so forth. Old enough to know this wasn’t true—paint was paint—I wondered anyway. Maybe because of the deer in the linen closet. Maybe because I knew that for its family, a house is mostly what you cannot see.

Facing the windows above the bookshelves, the portrait looked out its own windows twice. In its acrylic front yard the dogwood always bloomed, the fullest season still ahead.
October and we’re in the library watching the president on TV. Standing up to the Russians putting missiles in Cuba. October and I am in the eighth grade, old enough to know the shift in the charge of the room is not a whiff of thunderstorm, that the stunned look on my parents’ faces is fear.

The gray and white gravity of JFK leaks out into the house, dims scarlet dogwood in the front yard, yellow Dutch elm in the back. It takes the taste of meatloaf too. The drain we could all go down is whirling at our feet.

On the dusty blackboard last year, Mr. Smith looped the invisible solar system of the atom. “The energy that holds everything together can be reversed,” he said, “and blow it all apart.” Some schools had bomb drills, kids cowering under their useless desks, but we didn’t—the teacher explained—because we lived so close to Oak Ridge. I was relieved till walking home it hit me what she meant: Oak Ridge was a prime
target. “No need to worry” = “No hope.” What was wrong with grownups?

At least the president, the youngest ever, with a yacht, a glossy wife, and kids coloring in the Oval Office, at least he was telling the truth: This is what the world is. Great forces must stick to their orbits or unleash the rush that will blow us all to smithereens.
Memory Book

I’d found the album on a shelf behind the TV among coin books, stacks of *Life* and *Look*, my brother’s map collection. I was exploring, not snooping. Or so I thought. Until the last page, this was a book about life, about friends: giddy girls, skinny, leggy, laughing. *Mickey* inscribed in white ink on each black page, and beneath the photos: *at Martha’s, at school, with the Suzy-Q Club*. No way to know who she was, why we had this book. Then came a shot of her standing with my grandmother, right on that sidewalk I walked every Sunday of my life. *Mickey and Mrs. Fowler.* Granny Buby held a broom. They’d stopped her in her work. Why would this Mickey be at my grandparents’ house? Then the final page, a newspaper clipping: LOCAL TEEN KILLED. MILDRED HELEN FOWLER, daughter of, sister of, on her way home from . . .

Knowledge knifed my throat and a sob rose just as Mother’s shadow fell across the page. “What are you doing? Give me that!”
She tore the book from my grasp. “Don’t you ever touch it again! Do you hear me?”

She could not say,
“Oh, honey, Mickey was my little sister.
Her best friends made this book.
You’re old enough now. Let me tell you about her.” Still trying to protect
that girl no one could save,
she could not
let her go, let me in.
It Was a Year

after your daddy died,
she said ten years later,

I was sixty-seven
and I told myself
You have your work,
your family. Are you
going to make something

of what’s left or are you
going to lie down and die?
This Is

the chair the husband
and wife emergency team
strapped Mother in to carry
her down from the library
and out to the ambulance.

This is the couch where
she couldn’t breathe but
said she would not go
to the hospital.

This
is the phone where
I called for help, took
things into my hands.
Shit

At eighty-six, recovering from \textit{C. diff}, my mother tells me somebody said the S word in front of her.
“I can think of no occasion,” she declares, “when such language is necessary.”

“I can,” I say. “There are times when that is the perfect word.” Like when you’re expected to eat it, I think. Or when someone’s is dumped on you. Or when you have to get yours together. Or when your mother’s is on the carpet, the couch, the floor, the bed, the nightclothes. When it’s alive with infection, and you’re the one on your knees cleaning it up.
[Untitled]

Mother? Dead? Who will
tell us what things mean if the
dictionary dies?
By the Laundry Hamper

Something happened
I tell my mother
I am five
That boy across the street
he did something
Something that hurt

He stood above me
saying BAD
BAD, You are BAD
If you tell
they won’t believe you
They won’t want you
anymore

I ran away
but he trapped me
in a room off the garage
He hurt me harder
Here I say

Something happened
Bad I can’t go back there

My mother sorts dirty clothes
She does not touch me
You know that’s not true
she says

These are our neighbors
These are our friends
Nothing happened
Linen Closet

What I feared in the linen closet was the stupendous body, long legs, and driving hooves of the stag, the flag of its tail somehow wedged among bedsheets. Its head poked through the linen closet wall into my brother’s room, eyes glass, antlers empty as a February tree. I never looked, of course, in the linen closet, so scared was I of the dead power of that deer. I never told my fear since this fact fit with mysteries we accepted: Jesus on the cross, the deer trapped in the wall.
Toy Chest

Betty the Beautiful Bride is shut inside.

Dixon, Tiny Tears, Mabel Baby, too.
The bubble stuff I got when I got the flu.

My Snow White coloring book, old orange peel,
my gray View-Master with its picture wheel.

Jump rope, tambourine, pail for sand,
comic book, magazine, little cake pan,

paper dolls whose blond hair feels fake real,
plastic handcuffs and a crashmobile.
Hiding

Mother says we are going across the street
for supper I must come out of the closet
right now I must stop making up stories
I must straighten up and fly right
Nothing to be afraid of
She is warning me

1  2  3
Doll Mother

Papaw made me
a little yellow rocking chair.
I used to put my Dixon doll in it
and rock her so hard and fast
she flew out. That’s the kind
of doll mother I was.

I chopped off
my momma doll’s hair
in such fashion that she went
from ’50s housewife to future punk—snip-snip.

I wasn’t interested
in their clothes as much
as the drama of their lives
—when Ethel’s rubbery skin split
and the stuffing foamed out,
—when Dixon’s arm popped off,
revealing a cardboard circle
and grommet for a shoulder
—when Mabel Baby’s motion-made
Ma-Ma got stuck at Ma.

I flourished as the doctor
who patched up their
afflictions, or the mother
who rocked them raucously
in spite of it all.
Night of the Mysteries

1.
It’s April
and I’ve just turned eleven
one spring night
when pain wakes me.
I get up and see blood
in the bed.

Shaking I wake
my mother
who says it’s nothing.
She fishes in a drawer
for an elastic contraption
then takes a bandage
from a turquoise
box I have seen
in her closet.

In the bathroom
she threads thin ends
of the Kotex
through the fastener
then has me take off
my clown pajama bottoms
and step into the future.

She can’t say
this is nature’s
way of preparing
you to have a baby
someday. She can’t say
welcome to the mystery.
She can’t even say
this will happen again
every month in fact
until you are older
than I am. No one
gave her the words.
She just says “It’s all
right. Go to bed.
You’ll feel better
in the morning.”

2.
I can’t sleep,
the sheet cold and wet,
the center of me
knotting and throbbing.
I get up and take a towel
from the bathroom cupboard.
I spread it out and climb back
in, bolt awake. This isn’t
my body. It isn’t. That’s
why it hurts.

And why isn’t
Mother worried? If my
brother woke up bleeding,
I think, she would call
Dr. Foley, who would tell her
to meet him at the hospital
or who’d come by in the morning
with his black bag and pills.
(I am right about this, but not
for any reason I can imagine.)

3.
Cold with fear, hot with pain
I go back to Mother’s
bedside. In the smoky
room, radio voices
splinter into
static. Daddy rolls
over, interrupting
a snore. Mother
opens her eyes. “You’re
growing up, “ she says.
“Take two aspirins
and come get in bed
with us.” I do. That’s
the worst. She
puts me in between
where once perhaps
was comfort, but now
shame is red
clotted with jewels
and I am trapped
in my body
in their bed.
Off Limits

my brother’s room
because of the golden gun
when I was three and he was ten

because of the barbells
when I was six and he was thirteen

and when I was eight
because of the shortwave radio
he and Daddy built in the basement

and when he was eighteen
because he was gone.
How It Smelled

Cap gun
orange peel
valve oil
bar bells
boy.
Sleepless

That night in a froth of wrath
at mother’s refusal of the care
I had set up for her, I couldn’t sleep.
I was leaving the next day. Was I leaving the next day? How could I leave if she wouldn’t . . . ? How would I if she didn’t . . . ? Things were fine as long as the caretaker was me, that’s what she was saying. Then it was like a visit until she could go back to work. But help? No. She didn’t need help. I had no idea how awful I made her feel. No idea. Calling people on the phone, setting up interviews. She couldn’t endure another person in her house! Never mind my life and work three hours away. I wanted to rip something to shreds but had no paper. That’s how far from myself I was.

Staying in my brother’s room, only a wall between her head and mine so I could bolt awake if she called, I didn’t want to wake her, creeping about the house, have her cough and ask “What are you doing up?” so I opened the chest of drawers. Surely I would find some paper. . . .
Indeed I did: my parents’ wedding announcement and Papaw’s death certificate. Chastened by a cosmic hand I got in bed and snapped off the light.
Arthritis, 1952

It’s like the spell cast on the castle
when Beauty goes to sleep.
Daddy bedfast. Me three years old.
I won’t eat unless Mother brings my meal
up to the bedroom with his. I am scared
still. My strong, happy daddy can’t walk.
He tries to smile at me. “How we doing,
Sugar?” he asks. I say, “Fine, Daddy,” but he
is the answer to that question and he is not
fine. He is terrified, I realize now.
Thirty-five years old, a wife and two children,
and one day, an electrified spine. Stand up
and the pain is beyond beyond, each
nerve a sizzling wire. He is going
by ambulance to Knoxville but I don’t
know this. He is going to have his spine
fused. Radiation, bonded with dry-
cleaning chemicals, far down the road
will start his cancer dance. But for now
it will cage the pain. It will lift him from
this bed, wed him to a leather and canvas
brace, send him back to Nu-Way. Once
Daddy can move, the house will wake,
his kingdom shake itself and go on.
The Photo of Granny Buby

corseted and scowling
in a gold frame stands
on my mother’s dresser
where every morning
she sits down
to put on her face.

I can’t imagine
how she goes out in the world
marked with that look
from a woman
who wouldn’t climb the stairs
to help when she hemorrhaged
or lift a finger
to arrange a flower
for her wedding.
She and her daddy did that.

Why she faces
that face
every morning
I cannot comprehend
unless it’s to say
Even you
could not
stop me
but when
after almost dying
she came home
from a tour of hospitals
and found the ornaments in her room
had been removed for cleaning
the first thing she carried back
to put her world to rights
was that picture.
November 21, 1963

When they woke
that morning

Daddy asked Mother
if she had heard

on radio news
that the president

had been shot.
“You had a bad

dream,” she said.
“He’s gone to Dallas.”
Half

Everywhere was where he wasn’t
Every breath one more he didn’t take
His place at the table
his chair in the library
his side of the bed
empty
his clothes carried out
given away
his office cleared
his shaving things tossed
with fury and tears
into the trash.
What am I supposed to do
with this? she said
over and over, this
being the stuff
of grief.

She put her hands on it.
She weeded it out.
No more Bob and Gladys.
No Bob.
Just a world brim with graves
everything steps into.
Just death’s hand closed
on the spine
of half your life.
With a Song in His Heart

Daddy called the Walkman
his play-pretty and he loved it

like he loved the radio
that sang him to sleep.

(Mother listened to talk
shows. They had

pillow speakers.) He loved
the radio like he loved

the hi-fi with Mario Lanza’s
heart breaking in his voice

or the Beatles looping “Let
It Be” on the eight-track

like he loved my brother
always at the spinet and later

the grand piano striking
heart-sparks from Rachmaninoff

or “Rock of Ages” or giving us
cascading “Autumn Leaves”
the way he loved to drive
around just him and me

Sunday afternoons singing
“Barbara Allen.” In that

scarlet town where I was
born, music was our dwelling.

O Daddy, I am leaning
on those everlasting arms.
Sanctus

On Daddy’s only morning home, he had to himself the full upstairs bathroom with glossy black tiles drawn into the plaster halfway up the wall. All the rest, and the ceiling, heaven-blue. Between onyx and sky, a paper border—pink swans processing—from just under the light switch into the lavatory nook out and back to the tub around and back to the toilet and thus to the door.

Among all this splendor
Daddy bathed
while we sang “Holy, Holy, Holy”
he shaved
while we called on our Father in heaven
He lifted the stopper on the Old Spice bottle then poured some in the palm of his plump hand to complete his ablutions
while beneath him in the kitchen
in a slow oven
a slab of roast simmered into dinner

and four miles away
trousered and crinolined
the rest of us
were washed in the blood of the Lamb.
Company

How could a child,
the last-born
of the last-born
of my mother’s far-
flung family,
walk into the house
for the first time
and within ten
minutes, fall down
the basement steps
and knock his noggin,
then, before anyone
can get a good
look at him and
invoke the concussion
watch, run howling
upstairs and lock him-
self in the bathroom?

O the exasperated
calm of his mother
on her knees in the hall
by the keyhole! O
the swagger of his father
positioning the ladder
ascending with all
the confidence of a
Miami drug salesman
only to find the window
painted shut.
This is the poem I don’t want to write, you don’t want to read. OK. I won’t if you won’t. But look, here’s the next line. We’re dangling over this cliff of white space. We’ve got to find a foothold and climb down. Think. Stay in your body. Where is your left foot? Feel for a notch. There, now your right. Now lower your left hand. Lean in. Hug the rock with your whole self. Say, if I fall it will be toward this rocky breast which will hold me. Not down to death. Now. Move your right hand.

I don’t have to write the details: Gold sweater, gold, brown and green checked corduroy skirt. The morning after the night in the bathroom. Blood blooming through bandages under my sleeves. The principal calling my mother. I don’t have to write right hand on the razor blade, scarlet ribbons flowing from my left wrist. Did we have that album yet, Harry Belafonte, *As for me, some scarlet ribbons, scarlet ribbons for my hair*? Then the left hand works at the right wrist’s under-skin river. Both hands panic at the blood. I will stain things, get caught. This will kill my parents. Blood draws me out of the miserable cell of myself into
the upstairs bathroom where pink water cools in the tub and the muffled croon of Daddy’s radio fills the silence between snores. If I die, they will still be here, stuck with what’s left. No way to disappear like I wanted, to escape the dark weight my life has become. What is wrong with me? Thirteen years old, I don’t have a clue. But at the bottom of that cliff a five-year-old is waiting. She will wait another forty years.
Yard
D-Day

Probably the nasturtiums,
whose stems and leaves
she tossed in salads
for a peppery bite,
were in bloom
in the garden
next to the hedge
that June morning
when she heard the news
as she left the kitchen
and went out
with her basket of wash.

Seeing her neighbor,
old as her mother,
hanging out clothes
in her yard, too,
Mother called across
the hedge: “Mrs. Mac,
have you heard?
Our troops have landed!
The invasion has begun!”

At word of this mission
to free the world
from tyranny
Mrs. Mac replied, “I can’t wait for Joe to come home and turn on the radio.”
Westward Ho

When Mother looked under
the sheet we’d put over
the picnic table

and found Warren and me
playing covered wagon
she would have hit the ceiling

had the back yard had one
not because we were exploring
how the prairie got populated—

we weren’t—but because we’d
opened cans of corn and chili
taken without asking

in order to provide
our imaginary selves
with real pioneer food.
At Play

All I remember about playing King of the Hill on the slight slope in the front yard is that one person was king and everybody else tried to drag her down. No brains, no allowances for size or age, no fairness in numbers. Every King of the Hill was summarily toppled. The harder you fought the more likely you were to win gouges and contusions. You attained your height, trumpeted “I’m King of the Hill!” and then the dogs were on you: Paula, all long knobby bones; PJ, dense as a bowling ball; Cathy, whose blond mane might blind you as her long nails raked your back; and Susan, whose specialty was head butts under the chin. This was blood sport, this melee by the boxwoods out of which came a new king we cheered, then conquered.
All of It
I am the one who, thirty years ago, wanted to write a dissertation on *The House as the Body in the Work of Four American Women Poets*. I saw then, in the joists and plumbing of poems, this primal link. I understood it with the three pounds of electric jelly that was my brain. I read, researched, proposed, was refused, and took off down another path.

Now I’m back in that thorny clearing. I don’t need brains to see it. The punch to the solar plexus, the knot in the gut as I step into a house slowing down around her. It is immaterial that the cleaning lady comes once a week. Outside energy can’t travel across the placenta; she can tidy but not animate the house. Mother’s vitality kept the air alive, circulating like hot water when we had steam heat. A house is a child you carry on the outside. As you go, it goes. It’s dizzy. It can’t breathe. Can’t look sharp. Can’t get its shit together or in the pot. Can’t regulate what comes in, what goes out. Can’t fix what breaks. Can’t even find it. And I can’t tell the living from the ghosts.
It Doesn’t Matter

that she is too weak
to open the car door,
she is going to work.

When she can’t turn
the key, she says the fault
is in the ignition.

She’s never had a car
act like this before.
They don’t make them

like they used to.
In the ER

All I see is You
on the gurney
in your purple
nightgown

Six hours I sit
holding your
hand, the dark
searchlight

of Your eye
scouring
my brainpan
my heart

for what this
means: Face
twisted, no
voice Pressure
in your

inner river
surging:
Hold me fast
to some
Truth before
they cut
this nightgown
off  Before
nurses slide me
bed to board

before flight
crew straps
Me down

Keep your hand
pulse to Pulse in
mine till we
know some-
Thing, make some-
Thing of my
eighty-nine
years
On Her Side

When I told the healer about my mother’s last day—
the stroke, no neurologist to give the clot-dissolving shot;
mountains fogged in, no airlift possible; no ambulance
for long-distance transport

when I told her of my frantic drive back, cell service
disappearing in road cuts, around hills, trying to talk
to the ER doctor whose true language was Hindi,
trying to talk to my brother in Ireland

when I wept and said storms next morning kept
the helicopter away till noon; then I chased it back
to Lexington to find Mother in another ER, on a ventilator,
how they couldn’t do more tests because something seemed
to be happening

more strokes

heart stopped

CODE

shocked twice

a mountain range of beats

when I said, after doctor talks and more phone calls, I told
them not to start my mother’s heart again

and my husband and sons and girlfriend gathered
round
then stepped out

and with just me

holding her hand

life left

twenty-four hours after she

was carried from her house

the healer said

“Everything was on her side.”
Final Play

Her grandkids
called her GG
for Glad Granny.

At the funeral home
my son slipped
those Scrabble tiles
into the box.
I am doggedly working
at what I do not want to see happen:
removing everything she chose
scouring every handprint.

It’s my job

to render these rooms,
the signature of her life,
anonymous;
get down to the bare space
Papaw built
for her and Daddy to move into.

What was it like that day?
Another question
I never thought to ask.

No matter now.
However it began, her life
in this house is complete.
So mine must be too
except for this

sorting
pitching
carrying away.
Every Cupboard Bare,
Every Head Bowed

Loading the truck for the last leaving
we moved Granny Buby’s table
away from the wall where it had stood
since her death the month Armstrong
walked on the moon. I was done
sorting through, emptying out.
All the lost was lost, the found found,
till the table top
swiveled
revealing, in secret space,
a leather pouch
of deeds summonses
ration coupons
Daddy’s will when arthritis hit,
ticket stubs (baseball, Coney Island)
stock in
what no longer exists,
papers making Papaw guardian
of his dead brother’s
child
(what child?)
a ballet (ballad) hand-writ in amber ink
a newspaper clipping:
My brother WINS BEE THOUGH ILL
the bill for our ’55 Ford,
and another, dated 1906,
for repairs on Papaw’s daddy’s
two-horse wagon.
Thanksgiving Night

After I’d locked
the house
for the last time
I kissed the door.

Now, remembering,
I feel my lips
on my breastbone.
The Day After

I wake up and the house I just took apart has reassembled in my mind.

The hall carpet is that flat-nap green with darker green swirl from I don’t know how long ago. The whatnot anchors the corner at the foot of the stairs where the grandfather clock stood for thirty years. Time has come loose, like the objects themselves. Freed from the last place Mother left them, they’ve sought out snug pockets of memory. The washer and dryer have appeared from behind louvered doors and occupied the end of the kitchen beneath the yellow and white clock and copper chafing dishes I packed away yesterday. Tomorrow the washer may be back in the basement, and the dryer, four wires between clothesline poles.

The kitchen is blue or covered in parchment-hued wallpaper laced with fine-drawn leaves. The spinet is back and the oval-framed prints of elegant ladies I pretended were our kin. It’s Christmas. It’s June and we’re having a fish fry.
in the backyard. I’m ten, posing with my new bike and birthday guests. My teacher came!

She brought chicken salad after Mother died. I’m up with a newborn in the middle of the night. It’s untelling what chair I’ll find to sit in, what room, what year. The dead are here with that tacked-down ripped-out carpet. Coffee’s brewing in the percolator, the vacuum pot, the Braun. We’ll eat from empty cupboards on auctioned china. All the gone clocks tell different times.
I Can’t Believe

that I gave away __________
that I left ____________
that I kept ____________

I can’t believe nobody wanted __________
or fought over __________
or asked about __________

all those __________
all that __________
that he collected
that she polished
that framed their life

I can’t believe the boxes
I carried in
and taped together
and filled
and carried out

clothes
dishes
books
figurines
coins
clocks
every item
in every drawer
or cupboard
or bookcase

on every shelf
in every closet
went through my hands

bent on taking apart
what my parents
put together
their home
inside the house
Papaw built
Welcome

Late afternoon I lie down for a nap but instead of sleep Daddy opens the door behind my eyes. He’s in his shirtsleeves standing on the carpet before the carpet before the flood. He reaches me into a hug snug as bark. “I didn’t think you were here,” I say. “Yep,” he answers. “It’s me.” “But Daddy,” I start, “it’s all gone.” Nonsense. How can the house be gone when we’re standing in it? “What time is it?” I ask and he laughs. No time, no time at all.
In memory of my parents
and in thanksgiving for our life
in the many-storied house
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