2003

Look at My Sky

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LOOK AT MY SKY

By

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A Thesis submitted to the
Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Summer Semester, 2003
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have had many wonderful teachers who have encouraged me to become a better poet, teacher and human being. I would like to thank Dr. Andrew Epstein for opening me up the world of New York Poets and the life of Frank O’Hara, Dr. James Kimbrell for helping me tighten my poetry and showing me how to format and theme my own work, Dr. David Kirby for being the captain of my ship, for making me a stronger poet and for showing me that life and poetry are really the same thing.

I would like to thank Christie Grimes for her patience, her line editing, and her belief in me. Maggie Gerrity for her insight in line editing, her ability to see the concept of time as I do, and for sharing her passion of writing with me. Ben Lauren for being the other half of my poetic voice that will always be cherished and shown in my work and in my life.

I would like to thank my family and friends who have always believed in my talent and success, and to my mother, my most ardent and loyal fan, I am eternally grateful for the blessings and love she has shown for me.
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ABSTRACT

*Look at My Sky* is a collection of poems that expresses the value of living, the need we have to be heard, loved and understood. These pictures on the inside walls of a moment evoke emotion, celebrate the human spirit, and give voice to things we are afraid to say. These moments live a lifetime in their brief passing, their flight across the sky when they burn brightest; become alive and worth remembering—they are the reasons we think and love and feel and change more than we did before. We become witness to ourselves when ordinary becomes extraordinary, when the moment makes it so.
Jagged Words

A poem is not a friend I call in the middle of the night
crying that my father just died, no comfort for me
when I madden myself on a search for the perfect phrase.

A poem wears itself like my favorite jeans,
lingers on my skin like sweat after sex,
then slips inside the sleeves of a jacket I outgrew.

A poem explores the map of my body for just the right word,
washes my back of the scars left by someone else’s hand,
beckons me to openly fuck the words without being scared of what I feel.

A poem becomes the wrinkled skin of a three-day-old apple
sitting too long in the burn of the afternoon shine, exposing
the naked sound we voice when we painfully reveal ourselves.

A poem dares to write that I am broken, a plate still sitting on the table,
clean after a scream. The heart of a watermelon, cut in the cool
of an afternoon, wanting to coax me from beneath my own skin.
I Rode My Bike Over To God’s House

after the other kids went swimming, to see if the heavy side door was open. Hair wet, dripping down my back, so hot that sweat slid off my elbows; legs sticking to the seat of smooth wood when I sat down,

I stared at all the statues of saints forever caught in the moment trying to show themselves as holy.

Then I looked over and saw how sad Jesus was on the cross and waited for Him to look at me and blink— trying not to blink myself so I could see who would blink first and win—

I felt cool in my chest, like my foot was asleep inside my whole body, lifted somewhere outside myself. The longer I sat completely still, the deeper the cool sensation came over me,

the blessing became stronger—tingling me like sparkler spray; when I knew at 11 years old that God was near me, like I was standing in front of a double door refrigerator, and I knew He was there — as real as my fingers touching the back of the pew in front of me.

I felt smooth like a sleek body gliding through water, completely quiet.
A Foolish Man Speaks and A Wise One Just Waves

I know that many men die long before they are ever old--that just because someone has grown past their twenty-fifth birthday doesn’t mean they know anything about the subjects they violate. Sometimes the most dangerous people are the ones who never listen to anyone but themselves. And I am just realizing I didn’t have to give up being a kid because I turned sixteen and lost my virginity trying to love the girl with fire red hair and a laugh that swallowed me. I know she lied when she said she loved me and even though I felt my heart crack when she said goodbye—I didn’t know I would split wide open, didn’t know what heaven really tasted like.

I didn’t realize my father was twenty-nine when I was born and I was twenty-nine when he died until after it happened, which made us a circle we never rode all the way around, some sort of infinity that never played the same 8-track tape at the same time, spinning songs we both knew and never sang together — even when we were living in the same solar system, the same familiar neighborhood, wearing the same size shirts, drinking beer at the same ballgames every Saturday for seven years; we never sat together until the start of the fourth quarter.

I know as a fact I can’t balance a checkbook or do easy math in my head no matter how many times I ask for help, but the glide of my tongue slowly rubbing the roof of my mouth gets rid of an ice cream brain freeze, and that right this second, someone somewhere is in need of the extra air that escapes when I open a bag of chips, and I know that no one thinks the same thought at the same time unless they’re really stoned, and I finally figured out you can’t kill yourself simply by holding your breath, yet I had no idea that cucumbers and pickles are really the same vegetable caught in different life stages, or that Wal-Mart sells gallons of mismatched paint for half-price on Saturday mornings, and some silent people do have the world figured out. They’re just quiet about it.
Thoughts of Miles Davis

I wonder why I cannot capture the music that got away, after you left this morning
that floated between breathing kisses
sliding my body thoughts over your pillow

roaming across the room
in the slow saunter of Miles horn “Tempus Fugit”
capturing you
looking out the window
soaking the sounds
swaying me
deeper into the sensual—glide
soft breath between lips that love to kiss your face,
tender eyes too loving not to watch

you smiling at me, smiling at you, moving
in one motion, we lean into watching, looking,
moving while the world slows down,
and we stop—

the alarm repeats its horn drives my song away
when I look out the open window at the sky.
Light streams across the bed and I pull the covers close
and dream of you again,

warm skin of your legs presses into mine when we sleep
and I don’t want to move,
I don’t want put no clothes on,
I don’t want to be anywhere else but where you are,

waiting for your next kiss, wishing for you
and your song to return to me.
Frozen Window

At 12, I knew my parent’s marriage was dead
the night I scooped deep snow in the dark.

I wanted to shatter the glass with my shovel
as I watched their window, knowing my mother

was a shadow inside, begging his love
with legs opened, fists clenched.

I dug the edge of my shovel into the drift,
scraping against the sidewalk,

wanting cold or snow to absorb my anger,
numb me completely before the ache became too much.

I left their end of the sidewalk covered,
so she would realize he was gone.
Late in the Afternoon

I ride the distance with my father, small and quiet beside him, ashamed that he scares me, a six pack of beer and two Dr. Peppers between us.

I rest my head on the door frame, counting rows of corn, train cars--willing myself to disappear with the sun behind trees I’m imagining to climb.

He directs me to the open horizon and I watch a ray turn into a barn--a house I recognize as he starts his third beer. The rub of gravel sounds fat beneath the big tires as I move closer to him--his arm around my shoulder, knowing he will tell me the story about land he never bought and the imaginary house where we never will live, never telling him I want to go home. Still, I ride the distance with my father.
Winter of My Church

1.

Between my grandparents I sat every Saturday night in the winter of church, listening to the frosty echo of the priest. Our arms touching, and we nearly froze to death in the third row, when the cold numbed our fingertips, I slid my hands into the warm fur lining of my grandfather’s best gloves, moving my legs as little as possible against my slick black dress pants,

I press my cold ear against her heavy blue coat, feeling the low stir of her lean over my head, her cheek resting on the spot she just kissed, shielding herself over me protected by their arms held side by side but I became so warm they almost smothered me and I fell asleep--

without remembering what the priest was talking about, too tired to chase his voice in a circle of a story about Jesus, three men I never knew and some old man who collected taxes and sat in a tree.

I wondered who painted the deep dark colors on the upside down ceiling, and wasn’t scared to be alone in the marble walled side rooms they used to tell secrets beneath swish swish whispers I couldn’t quite hear—so I would watch to see if they acted any different coming out than going in.

Most of the secrets made people drop their eyes to the floor, kneeling down into the slow rising slide of their face behind hands shaped like a steeple, wishing I could hear silence better so I could know what they know but aren’t saying after ten minutes, the quiet ones blend back into the third verse sound of a hymn that weighs a thousand pounds to sing.

My grandma would twist her wedding ring and rub one hand over the other, smiling she asked what I was thinking and I told her about all the angels I wish I could have over to my house for the day, swimming in the river to see if wings really got wet or if they took them off before they could really relax.

And I asked her if she believed that God could keep track of all the people in all the lands in all the years that we were ever alive enough to write anything and remember to tell someone to be nice and not tell a lie or eat apples or ever say bad things about your mom or dad because if God hears every word then there would be big trouble after the sermon ends.
2.

The weight of Grandpa’s forehead never stopped thinking, rubbing his eyes so he could see better and listen more when he could barely stay awake because the church didn’t have any polka music or funny jokes he liked to hear.

They talked too much about God when we weren’t trying to listen each Saturday night before we went out for dinner to eat and laugh and tell stories about things that happened almost every day, listening to the thirty third time he told us about how Uncle Bob lost his combine in a poker game so be careful because you just never know.

Grandma always knew things that God whispered to her when she was waiting at the window for Grandpa to come home. She smiled as she washed the frying pan as she wished herself past the eastern row of trees that marked their land and hid their house from harmful people who raced down their road, kicking up gravel dust that drifted back to the house when the open windows smelled fresh after a rain.

I don’t think they spent much time reading the Bible together but in the church of his cow pasture I saw the love that Jesus must have had for his men when Grandpa would stand at the end door, call his cows by name and not move at all. He just waited for them to come back to where they were fed, to where they knew the way home without even looking. He never had to lock the gates or fear anything.

Grandpa always talked to them like they could understand his rough German when he cussed them for slipping on ice knocking him down into the gutter—and walk by later and pet their backs for a really long time to make sure they were still friends. He sat on his three pronged stool and told stories that had big endings that took me several tellings to understand how he painted a bigger picture behind and above the one he gave me to see.
One Breath

We come home after midnight, stumble
kiss our way down on the living room floor,
make love that burns the candles,
listening to songs in Spanish

I’ve never heard, and I paint you
with my eyes closed, my body easing
into the warm bath of loving you,

soaking me again in the open waves
we dance against when the kiss crashes
over our heads. We laugh
lose our balance in the deep,

then stand again, bare feet
rubbing on the sand of the moving floor;
firmly planted, your legs wrapping
around my waist and lean back into the wave

that lifts us and sets us back down.
You stretch yourself out completely to me.
I have never loved anyone more
than the afternoon we danced in the ocean.

Later, we wake from our embrace,
eat ice-cream in the dark, feeding one another
our frozen tongues in search of warmth.
Light from far away softens you as you tell me again

about the first night we met, a new story between
every kiss, my mouth wanting to swallow the ocean
of you, the laughter that lingers on our skin
before we slip back

between the sheets and feel this space, our bodies
breathing in the moment. Night weaves the world
we live in when no one is awake but
us
What is Missing:

the middle button from my favorite shirt,
my oldest pair of shoes
someone threw away without asking,
the tingle of your kiss on my shoulder
as the alarm rings a third time,

the space left inside after loving so hard
even my shadow hurt, the last moment of my dream
that escapes too fast to remember,

my second-to-last thought before I fell down
the icy steps and broke my elbow.
the darkest corner of my heart completely lit
by your voice, the sound of the song
that will always make me stop

and remember what I don’t want to,
a familiar stranger— with eyes that mirror mine
in the quiet passing of the same thought
in separate cars,

the soft pillowed underside of a hand
that holds mine without letting go,
the left black mitten I lost
in the snow fury of a sled gone wild,

the urge that makes me run into the ocean
without stopping until I am swallowed,
the sky I memorized the night my heart broke
from loving so hard I couldn’t stop,

the sorrow inside the slide of a sad violin
across the last moments of a movie,
the slow moving Sunday afternoon that rolls
over into a long nap, the longest stretch of healing
breath that marks the beginning of me,
when I write myself down
in the last lines of a poem that has no ending
before I let go and disappear

and disappear
Mother Ice

Long before summer rains finished falling, my mother dug ditches to avert the water flowing into our family.

_Leaving_ was the only word I remember my father saying—
all the others fell on the floor and no one picked them up, sad silence between talking and crying

tying knots in my stomach on nights when my mother disappeared into the shadow of the loveseat. Her low voice was the only sound that told me she was still there,

that she didn’t drown in the dark after the heat of blame cooled and emptied their love. She made him leave before she broke herself open. I searched for every splintered piece

of her, of them, before I cut myself completely on the spine of their love, trying to memorize what they were when they were beautiful. Later, on starless nights,

old cottonwood trees crackled cold as we stood beneath the flashlight of the moon and punched holes in the ice to watch water flow beneath, hoping

for a moment that might melt us back into ourselves before our hearts completely froze under the ice.

Years later, my mother came alive again with us joining the room of old faces softly speaking stories of my father between laughter and tears. She was beautiful in a way I hadn’t seen in years, again the center of her husband and children.

Again my mother was strong as the torrent wind sweeping me back into that peaceful circle, all seven of us holding hands after everyone had left.

It started and ended with my father.
Hot Air

I could feel God all over me
as I frantically peddled home to tell my mother
that our neighbor lady down the road was dead.

I never lifted my eyes from the brown roof of the house
I visited once with my mother to get eggs,
when Ruth answered the door with skeleton hands
that shook like her voice, a breathy whistle
between her teeth.

I wasn’t sad that she was dead--
I just didn’t want the air of her spirit
to slip free and catch me
in the open space of the field
before God lifted her away in a vacuum of wind.

I wanted for Him to burn her house to the ground
so that none of her escaped.
The Truth About Marshmallows

Marshmallows are fat, white and funny looking—
kind of like my Uncle Jerry,
who comes over every year for Thanksgiving
and ends up sitting too long at the table—
chewing too much on the one small splinter of truth
he has left from a flat toothpick kind of story.

He realizes his sliver is about to break into choosing sides when my nephew comes
to the table and asks, what are you guys talking about? and Jerry’s smile
lights up like a bad Christmas tree as he starts smiling and talking—
the kind of smile-talking-out-of-the-corner-of-his-tiger-growl-kind-of-smiling-talking
of unearned sympathy so he can get someone younger than we are to believe in him;
a smile he uses when he thinks he’s clever, talking sly like John Wayne
loping through the dusty street looking for a sucker to protect
so he feels good for the day.

My mother begins to feel uncomfortable and eats too much
before the turkey is picked clean naked on the plate,
without thinking he talks too loud and too much about how it was
for them growing up in my grandmother’s house. Clean white sheets on the bed
remind me of marshmallows on summertime camping trips by the river
overgrown weeds and a boarded-up fence sign
never stopped us

climbing through late at night
to start a fire, watch water run across our legs
when our faces glow the shade of being young, for a little while
becoming more than we really are.

My mom always ate the charcoaled black leftover ones,
burned by my sisters because they were too busy talking,
too forgetful to watch the fire or wait for golden brown
that stayed too long and left too quickly
before the blackness set in.
Stuck in Traffic Trying to Find Jesus

I drive toward the sun, windows down, chasing light through trees, afternoon flickers inside the dark canopy, racing toward a town I have never seen and don’t care about. I stop at a gas station, wash my face, look in the mirror, don’t recognize my eyes—shining, more piercing than before, I wonder if they knew what I was driving toward, ninety miles an hour, trying to capture a few words, a laugh with him so he would remember how I held his hand as a child, holding his suitcase, walking down the sidewalk, swallowed up in the warm cup of his heavy hand before he slipped inside his pickup and left our house empty. I chased him all the way to the corner of his new life, red tail lights turning right, disappearing into rain.

Getting back into my car, I think I see Jesus on a bicycle making a right turn, which reminds me of afternoons I painted pictures on the backs of passing clouds, running barefoot with my dog through the summer corn, watching for him to wave with his whole arm from his tractor far away.

I finally drive into the parking lot where my sister stands waiting and she tells me, the lily I carry in my hands falls and breaks on the pavement. We ride the elevator to the floor where his dead body is and I walk to his room. Standing at the door and then at his bedside, I lean over his quiet face, his wrinkles relaxed, he becomes the pictures I knew as a child.

I touch his hair, cup my hand around his mouth wanting him to speak. I give him back his suitcase full of anger that I held, hoping he would come back and take it from me. I walk to the door, turn around one last time and wave goodbye to him with my whole arm.

“Remember what the sky looks like because this is the day we lost a parent.” I try to memorize what my sister says, but give up, lean against the car door, searching to find where Jesus went on his bicycle when a car horn startles me, the afternoon sky now covered in clouds.
Mismatched Chairs

We sit at the kitchen table on mismatched chairs,  
waiting for my father to come in  
from the field. Night air carries him home

as I wait in my pajamas with my mother.  
The softness begins when she sits down beside him,  
her open hand caressing his shoulders

as he speaks between bites, each word drifting  
close to the table, swirling our ice cream  
into soup with cold spoons, laughing,

begging her to scratch our backs into relaxation.  
We tell stories and make faces for him,  
he wiggles his ears and make us laugh  
so hard the dogs will bark.

Tomorrow doesn’t even exist when we sit  
on the front porch swing, sleeping bags wrapped  
around our legs, listening as crickets sound  
their song somewhere beyond the yard light,

the scruff of our bare feet across paint-chipped wood  
a sound I can’t quite capture when we sing  
with our mother while our father stands nearby.  
Watching smoke from his cigar dance orange

against black sky made me want to stay awake,  
not fall asleep when we later said prayers  
with my mother at the foot of my bed.
Cantaloupe and Corona

I watch a world that doesn’t belong to me pass by my window, riding with new friends over roughened blacktop of northern Mexico, feeling each bump of my first missed holiday. Escaping tradition, we feast on banana bread, cantaloupe and Corona.

Mariachi music drowns me homesick as I hit the scan button again. My family faraway, laughing over drumsticks and cranberry sauce, makes me want to wave at clusters of brown women on lawn chairs who stare at the day with flat black eyes.

Dark mountains loom in silence behind signs in a language I don’t understand, deeper into the driving heart of hot sand offers no quench for what I am missing. Tired of talking, I have another beer, stick my head out the window, the wind whipping my hair toward the Sea of Cortez.
In Mid Thrust

a lover stopped me: “why are you so beautiful and still all alone?”
I didn’t know what to say as he kissed my mouth, blocking my answer.

I tried to swallow his tongue so he wouldn’t ask again.
I knew that someday I would become alive and reckless,

would feel the pure heat of another on my back
before it was too late and I became ordinary.

Tired of posing for family pictures containing merely one chair, I don’t like to laugh
at the television when the sound echoes that laugh back into the cushions of my couch.

I want skin to rub against my hand in the shape of someone else’s thought,
to wake up and fall back asleep beneath the drape of an arm that holds me,

to invite the morning that brings a smile through tired conversation.
I wish for someone to break me open, rubbing my back with a towel after we shower,

for his kiss on my neck when I am writing about him,
that he belongs in my house like dishes in the sink,

clothes strewn on the floor, wrestled sheets that tell a story,
a space large enough to hold us both.
Communion on I-40

Driving too fast across Arizona in an ugly orange rental truck, heaped with my belongings, I steer my way toward a life without you.

Yellow stripes disappear under my wheels, clouds rising over the painted sand overpower me becoming white soft pillows behind your head,

your nude body alive against mine, tears running down into our mouths, our tongues groping as we searched for something to say—

each mile marks more distance between the bed where I left you and the horizon I cannot seem to touch.

I open the package you tucked in my duffel bag, retrace the letters of my name on a card I don’t want to open. Your cologne lingers as I start to eat the bagels and bananas you packed, my communion with your memory, with you across the desert floor.

The open sky seems large enough to catch every glimpse, each thought darts through my head as I feel you somewhere, missing me—so sad I cannot even think all the way through, waiting for a sign, for the sky to open.
Distractions

Too many poems I haven’t finished,
too many thoughts I can’t lay to rest
  long enough to sleep beyond what they say,
too many words I didn’t say at the time
  that now become complete conversations,
novels no one will ever know but me.

Too many raindrops falling into a flood of circles
on the windshield that shine like I used to
  when I knew enough was enough,
when I didn’t know answers to questions
  better left unsaid.

Too many mornings I am jolted awake from my dreams,
Too many cigarettes smoked to the filter of feeling,
  too tired to be this young and this tired,
too late to retake the test, too late
  to hurry the flower to bloom by itself in full color.

Too many Sundays spent alone for no reason,
too many times I double think my body moving forward,
  standing still in this moment passing like a cloud,
when the bottom of my heart aches beneath my smile,
  afraid to say how I really feel.

“I want my Sundays in a row.”
Sunrise

Standing in the open doorway of his last goodnight kiss,  
I turn to wish him *sweet dreams* and he says *you too*  
with sincerity in the bottom of his voice,  
I feel kissed all over again—  
beneath rays of sun,  
falling through trees  
dancing across splendor,  
and I say *come see this*—  
and he tiptoes across tile and stands behind me, his chin  
resting on the shoulder of a whisper so beautiful I can’t breathe it all in  
and he slipped his reply inside my ear—  
*just feel it,*  
*feel everything, that’s all*—and I did  
breathing out worries I don’t show,  
of who I am,  
of what I want to be with someone,  
with myself.

He tells me that when he was little,  
he lived across from an open field,  
and though his mother always worked too much to dream  
he did—and felt the beauty, everything  
then and this moment remind him  
of his old front porch, feeling where we stand  
talking, so quietly so not to rush away the moment,  
disturb what we cannot say  
instead of saying what we want—  
and I watch him speak,  
looking into another time he never forgot.

I move closer to him,  
breathing  
to make sure it’s real.
BeTheWind

He asks if I really
want to ride in front
and I say sure, until they slam
lock me thick heavy bar across our legs.
I want to bolt, jump from this box.
He just laughs and says,
don’t worry—
it’s gonna be a great ride...
Suddenly his arms zoom straight up
in open air, I strangle the saving rail as we
slowly start to climb, too scared to look around.
The sixties beehive behind us hits up her husband,
Honey, this bar is screwed in backwards. Is it supposed to be?
We creep, chug closer toward top. Her voice stutters, more frantic,
This could come loose! Honey, now this is really dangerous!
I whip around, screaming, Shut the hell up already!
Silence. Then she softens, leans in and says,
Oh, baby...scared?Don’t worry.
Just get those hands up...
Get ‘em up now...
I mean it I lift as we drop seventy-five feet into the hollow stomach, push lean plunge
back slam against seat following her sixties mantra,
We’re free baby...Keep ‘em up baby...
Ride it all the way...
Let it go.. Be free...Baby free...
And I let loose of everyone else’s hands, ones I was holding
most of my life when they were scared,
needed healing, filling their cup
while they emptied mine.
I shed my skin
screaming that minute I became me,
rejoicing at the top of my lungs,
hands flying to the sky,
laughing completely with my body
riding fear out of my mouth with eyes open wide,
we laugh all the way, holding hands, waving
the wind swinging back and forth
we laugh, spin through
hard lean into
last curve
lunge forward slam to abrupt
HALT
scramble out, run down to the front--ready to ride all over again.
Telling Secrets Without Talking

My mother only tells her best secret stories when she is not paying attention, busy cutting her steak or asking for another napkin. Another life, almost another woman younger than the one I know.

I always try to imagine what my mother looked like when she was eighteen, that day she boarded the Greyhound for the long ride through the flat lands her first trip alone, somewhere else to finish watching the sun disappear.

She watched the windows pass the world in books, movies she made in her mind of characters, people that she met on the ride across pages that struck her like lightning enough to read night through to next day

before she came back after solving the best mystery, falling in love with a man she would never marry too many miles ahead to fall in love this time riding and reading through the Texas heart to visit her cousin—a penpal a new life dreamed on her own.

After many hours, my mother touched her foot on Texas land so many cowboys crossed in books before her next chapter turned her head – her cousin in a convertible, driving my mother into her first Friday

free--she touched barefoot on tile the first time ate avocados washed clean with taste of Tequila, met her first stubborn armadillo that would not share the highway when they rode the wind across the edge of air to watch planes take off—
sitting on the car hood, talking about dreamy boys they imagine
will turn into the men they may marry—that watch and wave
large cargo plane pulled over toward them, side door wide
open, shining smiles belonging to young boys draped over
the arm of one another trying to be the one who catches
kisses my mother sent over another—
to share her smile and wonder draped over one another
trying to turn the plane around

and roll faster down the runway, arms spread out for free
flight wing dipped like it was waving--too hard, too fast
it fell
touched the spark of ground--
snapping the spine love clumsy
crashing forward—blind into itself, exploding

a flame fury of orange wind that made the girls jump
and run to the fence, holding hope in each finger wrapped
around chain link windows of houses in other dreams,
with wide eyes watching the page read itself in love death
young hearts burning--flames consume the tenderness of their dreams.
Miles From Home

I stood beside your bed in a stream of sterile sunlight, your swollen belly half-eaten by anger that closed your eyes before I entered the room.

I couldn’t pull my hand from your cooling warmth that drained my body in the touching, softening the shape of your face into the man I recall from a picture I knew as a child.

I wanted to be the one who was with you when you left, the one who would be brave enough to crawl inside the last touch of your skin and slip away.
3:47 a.m.

Light from the street fills the apartment.
I pick up the phone, dial your number,

hang up before you answer,
take another drink, redial,
wait to say I’m sorry.

The machine beeps. I know you listen,
as sadness roams the silent line.

What if he’s with you?
I hang up, not wanting to leave
you alone.
We’ve Kept Secrets in My Family for Years

After the funeral finished, they sat in their car and ate egg salad sandwiches my grandmother made, watching each vehicle wobble up, down, then up over deep ruts sliced in cemetary lane,

Hidden behind the wall of their white windshield, wet sloppy snow splattered them invisible—while watching three cold men bury an old farmer’s body in ground freshly frozen—solid space not long enough to conceal the coffin, they yelled blame back and forth until one worker simply severed the end of the casket, shoved the farmer’s laced shoes further into the pine box, placing the end piece on top, slowly sliding their secret down into the mouth of the grave.

My grandparents drove home, holding hands, shaking the chill they felt of what they witnessed, a frozen memory that left them trembling inside the truth they told late at night in their living room.

A fear they felt every day after, repeating the promise for me to remember, to cross my heart and make sure I would be with them,

stay close to them through their dying day, choosing me in my fourteenth year to be the one to honor the silent wish that they wouldn’t die alone.
1. Dented Fender Day

I got my first bike when I was 8, a red Schwinn and my sisters were mad because I wouldn’t let them sit on it when my mother took pictures of me trying to balance against the dining room desk, wanting to learn how to ride away.

I felt the imprints of my father’s callused hands hot on my shoulders, gravel popping like firecrackers under my tires.

While I wobbled down the broken sidewalk at full speed, my father yelling — *Keep going!*

My dog chasing, me screaming—

*I want to stop*

--all the way into the side of our barn.

My father ran to rescue me, laughing while he unpinned me from the wreck, a dented fender first day. I didn’t let that stop me, learning to ride across the yard, around the fence, down through the ditch on a trail that passed our mulberry tree—

a sacred shelter on lazy, war-torn afternoons when I was lookout for the rest, whistling when I saw someone move in the long grass, trying to slither into our territory suddenly a surprise bucket of purple berry ammunition pelting us like raindrops.

Our screams of laughter charged the sunbaked air, across the backyard, my brother counter-attacking with water balloons hid in a bucket nailed high in the tree. We battled until we got tired and picked more berries, an offering to our mother, who stood at home base with a garden hose and warm soapy water to wash our feet before we could go uptown.
2. Purple Barefoot Boy

My sisters took too long inside,
so I ran back to the tree swing
one more time, purple-footed again.
I wiped them on the grass but they were already stained.
My mother honked the horn for me, so I ran
barefoot across the yard and piled into the back of the Buick,
calling window before my sister.

I rode to town thinking about what flavor sucker
I wanted at the store for staying in the car
listening to the radio, teasing my sisters until they screamed.
I felt a sudden wave of panic
as we pulled into the church parking lot,
all of us climbing out of the car.
I followed my sisters so my mother would not see
her purple barefoot boy.

We entered the chapel to light candles
for a relative we barely knew, mouthing the prayers
our mother formed when we couldn’t quite remember. I sat as far away
from her as possible, waving my hymnal as a fan,
thinking of a song in my head, swinging my tan sticky legs
back and forth off the pew, not paying attention
until I felt the heat of her stare on the side of my face.

I caught her shame as she looked at my feet, shook her head three times,
rolled her eyes. I slid my purple shoes as far under the pew as possible,
feeling Mother Mary staring down at me from the mosaic above the altar.
The look in her eyes took up almost the whole room,
as she walked down the picture path toward me,
her blue veil wrapped by the shining white glow of a thousand pieces
that surrounded her like a full body halo.

I felt kind of sorry for not wearing shoes in front of Mother Mary
but what I was really thinking about was how long it took the workers
to glue that whole shine.
Going Home

Quiet space sits between us when we drive through town, hand on your leg. You smile between drags of a cigarette, ask again if I know how much you love me,

the thought turns the corner of a smile and we start home, riding the same road, smooth under worn tires, looking at land we bought twenty years past, when my eyes saw you differently.

At night, I wait for you to fall asleep, your leg pressed to mine, watch you breathe, bodies moving to music we know by heart, our life fully lived inside a dream we dance together, sacred across the kingdom of our kitchen.
Ode to Kent

When I was 11, I wanted to kill myself.
I imagined taking pills and dying--
it looked easy until I saw a Burt Reynolds movie
when he chased all his pills with milk
and threw up immediately
because the carton was sour.

I thought of slitting my wrists in a white tile bathroom
so the blood would slowly shape a lake around me,
my eyes rolling back and closing one last time
but then I realized I would have to go over to Tommy Basore’s
upstairs bathroom because we had blue shag carpet in ours.

I wanted to sprawl on the tracks and wait for a train to slice me open
like a cantaloupe and I did try one afternoon a mile from my house.
As I laid there waiting, my arms stretched across wooden ties,
steel rails stabbing my back, I suddenly realized--
a train hadn’t come down that track since 1972.

That day I knew my dog still loved me, that sometimes he kept me alive
when I would rest my mind on his St. Bernard stomach
in the back yard. He would sniff the top of my head while I wondered
how I could get to heaven from where I was,
not knowing heaven was not for me.

When I was 11, I wanted to kill myself.
I imagined taking pills and dying--
I am never repeating my secrets again
and only telling stories
I never bothered to write down.
Dad and Dreaming

I have waited too long for him to return
his phone call on Sunday nights,
when he left to get a pack of cigarettes at the store
and never came back

so I don’t hold my breath each time the phone rings,
when one dog starts the neighborhood barking.
I don’t listen to the slam brakes make at the end of a long scare, I leap a little
closer to hoping I hear his boot heel grind gravel in the driveway,
the *sorry* behind every word he doesn’t say, the name he calls me
when he is laughing and out of breath
that keeps me from locking the door and falling into the deep low hands of his voice
in a dream when we are smiling wide awake
making the same face he does

when we laughed so hard our eyes disappeared,
watching the velvet white smoke of the strong smell of cigar box wisdom
he only spoke once and repeated a second time for free,
missing the point of what he tried to say
lost somewhere in the swirling wind of dry leaves on tin cans
in an open back alley I need to remember—
so he can still be somewhere near my own back alley after dark,
no longer chasing a weakness found in dogs that don’t bite, birds slide away on wind
inside the sound he now sings
that helps me put me to sleep one last time
before I see his wave to me that says,

*I will not leave without saying the word you need to hear
more than any other sound alive.*
Singing Against The Sky

Suddenly red tail lights screech
stop blood red ahead of me and disappear
drop off a curve--

I slam to a stop. The world turns upside down,
running full force toward the twist of warm metal;
a woman comes out of darkness, lays hands on body
swiftly speaking in Spanish for God to show Himself.

Her prayerful hands hush his blonde head against his body scream,
wondering why he has to soak my towel in a blood river
that seeps into the pavement beneath me.

The scent of orange peels and beer mix
in the overturned car I sift through
broken glass, cassette tapes and backpacks
to show me a name, something I can place
on a face I have seen who will visit me again
in this bad dream—

broken by a shrill scream, prayerful woman marks death
across his sweet face. I feel the stare of cold stars,
my foot touching against a tender hand, lifeless, empty,
still reaching for someone to save him.

I turn away, refusing to swallow the ache of young death
transforming him somehow, when my eyes wonder if he saw God,
face to face on the pavement, beneath the crush—

darkness flashing across the stars
shapes me into something I cannot name,
that shines through desert
air changing into something holy.
Photograph of My Grandmother, 1930

Florence was her name,
carried inside her sweater, hidden
behind her faraway look when her picture was taken,
ever comparing herself to something as beautiful
as the city in Italy she visited in a dream,
    floating down the river in a long boat,
    fanning the breath of trees on a lazy afternoon.

Inside her dream, she tucked
    her rough hewn hands in her lap as she spoke,
        afraid to toss them,
    like loping ostrich necks,
        into the air when she laughed out loud.

Beautiful was the scent of lilac lingering long after she left the room.
Losing My Religion

1.
The stars
I wish on this night
shine like her eyes did that night
when I stood in the doorway alone
against the dark of my singing
in the dark of her bedroom

2.
She was a white island
in the middle of her queen bed,
hair cropped white linen nightgown blended
bed spread I rested my head on her arm
to stay steady while I whispered too heavy
to speak—

“How am I gonna live after you die?”

I choked on the last desperate whisper
buried my head in the cover of her arm.
She already knew how bitter the taste of sad would be
for me to lose the shape of her head, my hand following
in prayer—

“Remember our talks
and God will show you that everything else
will simply come to you if you let it.”

3.
She looked like a queen that night
watching stars blink down through the west window
when I turned myself inside out to see
the picture of one last time—

I knew I would write about how
she shined completely white in front of me
in the presence of God
I wept
Before I wrote this down—

late last night I couldn’t sleep,
my biggest worry coming up with an idea.
It felt its way into the skin of a poem, writing itself
on the page before me, trying to catch up before the image
slipped behind the paper, words too clever
with better hiding places, tucking themselves inside
jackets I hadn’t worn in years, my body outgrowing what once fit me perfectly.

They wanted me to run backwards down a road I barely remembered,
because I didn’t want to think about tenderness I touched
before I knew last Thursday night was the last night we would spend together
and I had to reinvent my empty living room once filled by your breathing.

I do not want to write another poem on the inside roof of my heart,
to resist and give in to the surge of our last kiss, when the wave
dropped me down on my knees, and I surrendered to someone better fit for your life.

When I looked down the road
at somewhere I knew God was leading me--
even though I questioned every inch of dirt in my driveway
because I didn’t want to stay here and worry
about missing something that was you

late last night when I couldn’t sleep,
before I wrote this down.
Not Everyone Can Sing the Songs I Know By Heart

I know the color of my own eyes,
like my grandfather before me,
deep blue with brown circles around the center
trying to shine in the stillness of late afternoon

when I am restless even to myself.
I am helpless because I am quiet
and the world is moving without me.

I need to run, to catch up, to see
what street everyone else is gathered on,
to find some peace in the walk
that I don’t give myself

when I am alone in my house, warmed by the candle,
the whisper of breeze that flows through the front door
when cars drive by on their way somewhere else.

I always want to go with them, to feel the motion of wheels
beneath me, surrounding me, knowing

I am going somewhere that others haven’t gone,
discover things they will write down later on and remember
the truth they forgot they knew of someone else’s experience

that brings brief joy but sometimes I must travel on alone
because not everyone feels the way I do. Not everyone can sing
the songs I know by heart, laugh at funny stories of remember when
because they didn’t witness

the resurrection of my own soul, when others fell
away from my tree, away from my branches,
trimmed with every fall.
Road Trip with Lois

We rode for three long days in an ugly rental car,
crossing the borders of six states I didn’t even know I missed,
driving ourselves crazy with each mile marker we passed
toward the edge of the world, or at least California,
wondering on the way
if everything we knew was true,

trying to stay happy inside the dark green prison box
with no room to stretch out, to get away from the sunshine hot
sweat sticky leg pressing heat suction cup touch of my sister’s legs
sticking her to me and me to the seat
we claimed as our own, listening to Mother try her best
to keep us looking out the windows, watching not to lose hope
when she drove us away
from the scene of their accident, the last days of divorce
no one talked about, silence thinking so loud
hurt screamed through everything we had to say—

five hormonal kids who didn’t know how
to swallow after pain slid into the space they needed to breathe,
without guilt smeared across the precious left to cool air, refreshing
until someone opened
the window of their mouth, blowing air hot misery
into any cool pockets of peace left untouched,
my mother pleading with us to stop being selfish,
to love one another,

to be polite, which usually lasted about five minutes,
give or take the thirty-second honest minute
we really took to think about what she said could be true.

Then my two sisters joined by one year, sitting too close
to be themselves, fought with word weapons that stung
like hand on sunburn, ruffling everyone...
A trip to Disneyland would change us
and make us like one another more,
but she guessed wrong when she caged a boy
buried inside a book, two sisters who seasoned every conversation
with contempt, girl baby smiling on the outside
a master manipulator against her wild-eyed boy brother
who had dreamed of seeing the ocean
when he slept in a bed fifteen hundred miles from the shore of being free—
with windows rolled down and constant curves of the coast,
he saw the blue that changed his heart, wanting
massive waves to roll over his head and wash him away
so he could forget the yelling silence that pinned them in place.

When their mother stopped the car, he opened the door
and ran dead sprint away from the command
to come back,
tossing off his shirt, running to the waves
that soaked his skin with salt and laughter, tumbling,
stumbling and standing against the waves,
trying to balance inside the water made him realize
that life and God existed in other places he had never seen
and the sun warmed and dried his skin from the inside out,
laughing at what he knew and what they did not feel
when they sat on a blanket and watched him,

the glow of orange sliding into the thin line of blue too far away
to touch. But he knew that the end of the day would become the next picture
he painted late at night, waiting for the next chance to run into waves,
possibilities whose bottom he’d never find.
Summer of ‘73

The smile of the little red-shirted boy selling cookies on the roadside
made me miss my own smile the first time
the somersault spin of my stomach surged me,
sliding over the giant edge of the ferris wheel,
scared our rocking cart would crash.

Burnt marshmallows and the glow of orange fire warmed me,
the old quilt tangling my legs when the groan of our porch swing
and the scruff of our bare feet across paint-chipped wood
made a rhythm I can’t quite capture again.

As deep as a familiar breath, the screen door slammed open
the day our neighbor died on his front steps;
when we ran across the field to see what death looked like.
A Little Catholic Guilt Never Hurt Anyone

“Bad little boys don’t get any ice cream,” she hisses, yanking her prodigy by his arm, scolding him louder than his red-faced screaming down the airport corridor.

It reminds me of being dragged to first communion after I heard the Eucharist was really thinly-glued pieces of wallpaper that stuck to the roof of your mouth—at least that’s what Pat Moritz told me; and I believed him, even after he committed three mortal sins and ten venial ones when he whispered his confession to me before seeing the priest. I forgave him immediately because I didn’t like his sister and I thought that was kind of bad, but not as bad as sipping altar wine when Father Vic turned his back and we were changing from our ceremonial robes.

I knew that the little boy in the airport would probably grow up to terrorize his ugly older sister and kick ankle-biting dogs for no other reason than he was angry at his mother, who never stopped repeating herself, who never stopped slapping the back of his head as she dragged him through childhood, stumbling over the same Bible verses Sister Carole blazed into our brains. They stayed as long as thoughts of kicking a can down the street or staying up late to watch Pet Cemetary at low volume, too afraid to scream yet more afraid of the long moments that froze us when we couldn’t hear our father snoring two rooms away. And I wondered if Pat would someday go to hell—the same fiery brimstone prison Sister Carole showed us on page thirty-four of our Catechism books—the same hell she said would be our home when she squinted at us, her old crow head leaning in our direction, slamming her hand on the table, testifying that “God sees EVERYTHING you do.”

Her heat always stayed on Pat, who would just smile his stupid smile at her, sending Sister screaming to find his mother. I wonder if I as a grown man will ever stop feeling guilty for wanting to punt little dogs into next week, for wanting to throw rocks at garage door windows as I walk by and for loving my friend Pat because he showed no fear at such an early age. I wonder as I pass by the young prodigy throwing a temper tantrum on the airport floor, if I will ever be able to eat ice cream without the guilt that comes from being a bad boy.
Look At My Sky

Things just aren’t the same--
I don’t laugh as loud or as much,
the sun doesn’t warm my skin as before.

I sit still more often, drink more,
remember less than I used to,
tired of trying to chase you
when I know you don’t want to be found.

Solid ground seems harder to walk on,
dreams are hiding in places I can’t follow,
surviving a small space between tears that end me
and hope that starts me-- to feel

the deepness of sunsets with you or without you—
fire red, breathless orange, soothing pink
swirled into love as large as the ache, knowing

you have disappeared so deep in the dark,
I cannot even feel you, when I am quiet,
when I dream you singing the song we never finished
singing when you sit with me and look at my sky.
Biographical Sketch

Kent D. Nielsen was born and raised in Aurora, Nebraska. He graduated from the University of Nebraska-Kearney with a Bachelor’s Degree in English and Creative Writing. He taught High School English and Creative Writing for eight years in Nebraska and Arizona. He attended Florida State University and graduated with a M.A. in Poetry in August, 2003. He will attend Georgia State University-Atlanta to pursue a M.F.A. in poetry.