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THE BREAKFAST TABLE

By

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B.A. University of Louisville, 2002

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2005

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A Thesis Approved on

April 15, 2005

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ABSTRACT

THE BREAKFAST TABLE

Allison L. Egnew

April 15, 2005

Inspired by William Butler Yeats and his theory that “A poet...never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table...” from “A General Introduction for My Work” this poetic thesis examines everyday occurrences in an often conversational tone. Devoid of overly descriptive or heavy language, it is an intentional deviation from the typical poetic dogma. These poems cover such events as death, cemeteries, the end and beginning of various relationships, coffee cups, and old houses. The common strand is not necessarily in theme but comes instead from voice and style. The power of this poetry is intended to come from the way in which things are said, not the words used to say them. Additionally, the reader should gain an almost immediate understanding of the work than need poetic interpretive skills to gain access to meaning.

“A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table...”

William Butler Yeats in “A General Introduction for My Work”

Halloween

I wanted to buy a pumpkin today
and carve
as those in love tend to do.
But I didn't ask.

You're too busy
already hacking at me,
scooping the sinewy slosh
with a sharp silver spoon.

You put my orange innards
into thin oily bag
to throw away
in Tuesday's trash.

As for my pumpkin—
I am scraped to delicate flimsy.
Slick, cool—
hollow for your fucking.

Maroon

1. your sweater.
2. my bottom lip after the third glass of merlot.
3. not the sky, necessarily, but the harvest moon.
4. the dress of the girl you're staring at.
5. your cigarette ember, dancing.
6. not Gatsby's blue gardens
7. but the rusty mums on everyone's dusty doorsteps.
8. the dying flames in the fireplace.
9. not the amber-colored bourbon i'm asking for now.
10. the juices from your steak swirling in the whiteness of china.

11. the blood running out of my face

as you open your mouth to speak.

Harvest Time

I hate Autumn.
I pray all the bonfires
roasting her toasty smores
catch all her trees on fire.
Burn her season
to chalky ash and glowing embers
for me to kick
with my burly boots.

Everyone's allegiance is to her.
They all worship her hayrides.
Eat roasted rosemary pumpkin seeds,
drink hot apple cider
like wine and wafer.

I never liked trick-or-treaters.
They frighten me.

Every single leaf a piece of flat heart paper
soused in blood, almost black.
Each infrared tree
an anatomically correct heart
thumping, upside down.

All the while
Autumn's poking at me with her twigs—
wanting me to confess
why I shudder
at her colors.

Harvest time was when he slipped out
for New York City.
For her.
And fall breezes
more crisp.
More new.

Demitasse

Petite porcelain cup
white as a bedsheet.
Satin and glaze.
The chip on its curving handle

confesses chalky core.

Tribute to a One-Time Beauty Queen

All Hail,
for I am Tiny Miss, 1984
of the Russell County Fair.
Bow, boys who ignore me.

See my blue crush velour cape
outlined thick in gold sequin?
I get to keep it until 1985.
Perhaps I will allow you to touch its hem.

But this tiny tiara
is forever to play princess with
only to be misplaced
years later in a move.

Tiny Miss was lost, too
cast away somewhere with my crown.
Pencil legs are gone now
replaced with fleshy ones

that no longer look as though they will snap.
Hips blossomed from eating
too much pink ice cream and macaroni
(the princess's favorite foods).

The winning purple taffeta dress
(dust now in her royal ruffles)
exiled to the fairground's humid Hall of Crafts
hung among common quilts and jars of moldy marmalade.

Once again, all hail! For today I give you
a decree to light my cigarette,
command you to fetch me another whiskey with water
for this Tiny Miss

20 years dethroned.

At Dinner With Your Writer Friends

Lean on in,
allow me to tell you this secret, reader.
What my writer friends don't know
is this bar,
where we are feasting now,
has ashtrays next to their toilets,
bolted to the metal walls.

I return to our table, announce my discovery.

I can see all their little minds turning.

And yet, they do not care that I have claimed them,
these ashtrays bolted to the metal walls.

So, this ashtray thing,
that's worth a poem,
right reader?
I thought so, too.
These writer friends of ours
are not humble enough to notice
all on their own.
Besides, they wouldn't know what to do with it anyway.
She thinks everything is a metaphor;
He thinks everyone should sound like Keats.

This ashtray thing
well, it's yours and mine.
Together this ashtray thing
is yours
and mine.

But mostly mine.

The Judge's Funeral

The stiff starched collars of lawyers
soak up sweat and soften in the sun
outside the Methodist church.

The inside of the church
is smallish—more country-looking
than its stained-glass windows allow.

Behind the casket a book made of carnations
says in disco gold glitter
The Book of Law.

His bench is dirt and wood now.
Nothing left to land his gavel on
but air, cloud.

Faux

Your love for me
is like a fake
Christmas tree
still standing
on January 2nd
in all its glory.

It hurts my eyes.

The Morton Salt Girl

I'll be the first to point out
that I've been some good to you.
I was a couple of firsts:
sex and love.
And you frivoled away those two
on me like old pennies.

But something we've never been about
is forgiving.
You and I
we don't like it.
It's just too hard
to not say
our worst suspicions of the other.
To not rub
shiny salt rocks
in with the gore.

We like the taste of it
when we're licking our wounds.

Marilyn's Record Player

Sinatra sang
"Everyday I Have the Blues."
She shimmied out of starched dress
and slipped between satin sheets.

Anything but Frank
and they wouldn't have found
phone in a hand
no longer sweaty, wilting.

Simply still.
Only rigor mortis remained
and the whispering sst sst sst
of black vinyl spinning.

A record just scratching—
static—
But no ears
left to listen.

Funeral Procession

It is June and tourist season
in a tourist town.
As we head towards the square
we approach a Sunday afternoon funeral procession.

SUV's hauling beautiful boats
have become entangled
in the solemn line of cars.
You pull aside to the curb

as cars whiz past us, honking.
"It's important to show others
that your life will pause for them," you say.
Like the hammered-thin hands

of a clock almost stopping.
The slowing of the gold pendulum
before a black wooly blanket
covers the face of time.

Disciple

Last night I dreamed
I was a disciple.

As we walked behind Christ
towards the desert horizon
Judas took my hand.

He kissed my sweating palm.

Strikeout

I keep typing her name
on the old typewriter
the heavy keys cold, almost wet
under my fleshy fingertips.

I keep loving the way
the black line
looks through her name,
cancelling her out.

I keep impaling
every single letter,
dividing her into two ugly halves,
revealing her two ugly halves

that don't make any sense.

Ex-Boyfriend

I heard one day
you may have died
in a car accident.

I pictured you
bloody and disfigured
as black-shadowed angels
carried you away.

They rumor was, simply, untrue.

I heard weeks later,
returned from the fictional grave refreshed,
you were getting married.

I much preferred the news
of the car accident.

Drunk Writer

I want to leave you alone.
But I have to write all of me down—
crinkle myself into a not-big-note
and pass it along
from palm to palm.

Even though the watery whiskey
makes it hard to keep these eyes
somewhere between squinting and slits,
it's all the fucking rules on how to write poems
that makes it hard to get this crap out.

Escapade

Mother and Father,
what a wasted bit of currency
sending a 16 year old girl
to Europe.

I never told you
that I drank through the whole thing
sleeping off hangovers on the bus,

not even looking.

Now that I am too old
for you to provide such a luxury
I would crouch to pray at the Eiffel tower—

it could really save my life.

The Exploitation of Floyd Collins

Thousands of balloons
that read "Sand Cave"
littered the Kentucky sky, 1925.

Local men stood around
sipping illegal whiskey
whispering escape strategies among themselves.

Newspaper reporters arrived
with crisp press cards in their hats
yelling questions into the dankness.

His father sold souvenirs
maps and tickets
posing for photographs (\$2 a piece).

All the while Floyd Collins sat trapped in the cold cave
hallucinating about white angels,
trays of chicken sandwiches.

In the end, no one saved him.
Peddling each moment of his life away
like pennies at the fair overhead.

Salem

They had so many tests back then
to see who was a witch and who wasn't.
Your favorite, I could always tell,
was when they bound up the girls
and floated them down the icy river.

If they choked on blue frothing water
and burned their tiny wrists on tied rope
struggling to be freed
yet sank
to the murky muck of a bottom
then they were human after all.

Dead, but exonerated.

Yet if they survived, somehow,
then off to the gallows they went
to meet their Dark Prince.

And that's how it is with you.
In love with you.
With you I am miserable
and dead.
But if I save myself
I am a whore.

And deader still.

Church Light

Rose-colored light
pours out of the Sunday night churches
Shines on rainy road.

Moving to Maycomb

When I was only fifteen
I moved out of 1995
to Maycomb, Alabama 1937.
To live with my husband
Atticus Finch.

We were married in the chambers
of Judge Taylor.
I wore a satin dress
the color of iced tea
with matching gloves and hat.
Scout, my maid of honor.
Jem, the best man.

Every morning I walked to town
on streets that turned to red slop
to sagging square.
Knocked on frosted glass door
Atticus Finch, Attorney-at-Law.
He would give me a dry peck on the cheek
as per our custom.
I would deliver him his folded brown paper sack
lunch that I had prepared.

Sometimes I caught him
looking at her photograph
on the mantle.
Her long black hair flowing
like tendrils of molasses
that his heart used to be stuck in.
But often as I held her children
or undressed him, I felt her eyeing us.
Approving or disapproving, I didn't know.
I was only fifteen.

Of course I came after.
After Tom Robinson.
And Boo Radley.
I sent Alexandra on her way

and made fast friends with Cal
which caused quite a stir.

At night he would read the paper.
And I would tuck the children in,
kiss them on their foreheads.
I would walk into our humid bedroom
the air flowing in and out
of my linen nightgown.
And I took great delight
in undressing him.
Loosening the wilted tie
unbuttoning the starched shirt
unhooking the pocketwatch
from his crisp vest.
Looking in his eyes through his tortoise shell glasses.

We usually slept with the window open
listening to the going-ons of our street.
In the night he would wrap an arm
around my waist
and whisper baby.
Even in my dreams
if he would ever get over
the Graham from Montgomery
I didn't know.
I was only fifteen.

White Blossoms

I want you to stoop down
and kiss me.
Because you are tall and lanky.
Lofty.

It would be a candid gesture,
bending your back,
your hands behind you
and me on my painted tip toes.

I would stretch to you
like climbing a tree.
Us surveying the neighborhood—
looking out

on all the short boys and girls
down below.
Them jumping
at our apples.

1840

Before the first pistol crack
of the Civil War—
before the first bullet,
a perfect silver sphere,
pierced the leg of a
running Confederate soldier—
your ancestor's house
your inheritance—
was built and standing complete.
Filled with the candelabras
and the petticoats
and the player pianos
of your great great great great grandparents.

Now it is a house turned attic
filled with things that go nowhere
and belong to no one.
A broken player piano;
a card table with three legs;
a cracked Regulator clock stuck on 11:17.
While you walk amongst the ruins talking
Engagement
Children
Restoration
I follow slowly behind.
I can only sigh
at the riddle of where one puts a broken player piano,
although I can't help but tinkle her grimy keys.

Perhaps one night in the future she will play us to sleep,
her old music whipping into the hot humid air,
floating in and out and around us,
out the square wires of the screen door
back over blue hills
over Confederate graves of family members long departed
along the black and starry river.

Her song so changed—
so out of tune.

Garnett and Everett

for my great-grandparents

The funeral home bears a striking resemblance
to Tara.

He blows his nose into a monogrammed handkerchief (e.e.)
sitting in a wheelchair by her coffin.

The Christmas wind blows
the town folk in and
many only tip their hat, take his shaking hand.
What do you say to a man who has lost his wife of 72 years?

A man leans down, says that he has done well—
72 years of marriage was long enough.
“Not long enough,” he informs.
He doesn’t say it in a cynical way, but in a I-wanted-to-go-first way.

As the man turns away
he sits alone for the first time,
touches the curved wood
of her coffin’s shiny corner.

On the Death of a Railroad Man

He was a railroad man for 43 years—
changing the way the trains went—
flicking the tracks into correct position
with his glinty brass key.

In photographs he wore
blue and white pinstriped overalls
dirty with oil and dirt.
His hair was black, slick.

So when he died I knew
he was riding a train into heaven.
A passenger for the first time.
He was in a suit without the jacket

young and handsome, clean and young
hanging off the step
that led him into the first class car
holding onto the rail

waving to me.
As the train pulled away
I ran down the platform.
The sun was setting

the light catching the buckles of his suspenders
winking goodbye to me.

The Tragic Smiths

His family has its own cemetery. Enclosed in a wire fence that bends and morphs with the hills. It's filled with everyone from dead Native American relatives (Blackfoot) to the three brothers that died in the Civil War to stillborn babies who never opened their eyes. The only thing they have in common is the name on the rock. And in some way it's the tone of their land.

All I knew of was his uncle. The one that raped and murdered the girl. The uncle followed her out to her car after the last night of the county fair. The smell of cotton candy and cigarettes and marijuana and oil floated into the air. Later blood drifted into the cold sweeping creek, far away.

His great-great aunt Nannie started it all. She walked home from school in a white dress with a blue satin ribbon in her hair. Her friends went a different direction, and her cousin Elmer caught her by surprise. He surprised them all by raping her, and bashing in her skull with splintered branch. Later he swung from a tree that leaned over the Cumberland River. The soles of his shoes cast tiny shadows on grey water.

After we had been together for a small time, his grandfather died unexpectedly. Grandfather Smith was working on the farm, he couldn't get his breath—leaned against black wooden fence. I should have known when no one was surprised. I should have known when he didn't cry.

They all die tragically, the tragic Smiths. In our family when someone dies people wail and sob and say how they can't believe it, even though he was 94. Death only comes when it's expected with us—we unlock the door for it, and we wait for it to come in. They never see it coming for certain, they never know where it may lurk. They keep their doors bolted and an old chair under the knob—but are never surprised when he smashes his way in.

Fag Hag

I was blowing them kisses.
He told me and he agreed
that when I puckered up that like
I looked just like Marilyn Monroe.

I will admit
that when he kisses his boyfriend
breezily on the cheek with a casual flair
I wish I could be their wife.

Dear Hometown,

Sometimes I write about smoky bars,
icy martinis with three olives in frosty glasses.
Skyscrapers and jazz.
Tiny cafes with porcelain tea cups
and the swirl of espresso one hundred shades of brown.
The sound of a train rumbling into the city at 2 a.m.

Now that I don't have to write about you, my little town, I do all the time.
"Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris,"
at least that's what Hem said.
And I've been meaning to tell you for quite sometime
I like what you did to my heart.

Allison

The Ashes of Frida Kahlo

After her body was cremated
her bones were the color of lilacs—
violet silver purple.

Her husband, Diego, pulled out flimsy notepad from his pocket.
Immediately he began to draw
the portrait of her beautiful bones.

I hope my ashes
are made of broken typewriter keys,
scraps of paper.

As mourners pass
perhaps they will reach into my coffin
and grab a handful of me.

Stick me greedily in their pockets
on their way out the door.

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