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Publication Date

2015

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Snapshot of Two Years: Drafts and Experiments

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Krista Michaele Lukas

December 2015

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the editors of the publications in which the following poems appeared:

“After Another Two Years,” *Pomona Valley Review*

“At Age Seventy-One, My Father Gets an iPad,” *Carbon Culture Review*

“Once It Was Otherwise,” *New Millennium Writings*

“Sorry For All the Times,” *West Trestle Review*

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What If I Left You

What if I left you
with one redeeming memory?
The beach—seaweed
tangled in my hair, skin
saturated, wrinkled, pale.
You'd take my hand
to look for a scar, a ring.
Rinse your conscience of failings.

I'd wait, calm
as a storm's eye
passing through, a false promise.
A forecast of screaming
gusts around my shoulders.

Named for a woman
unknown to you,
I'd be waiting, still
a pool untroubled by tides.

If I left you—if we closed
our mouths, hushed
to utter silence, we might begin
the circling slash of winds.

Eating Alone

I.

I know now why my father buys canned soups, no vegetables,
eats grapes and apples unwashed, fried salmon directly from the pan.

I have discovered convenience foods, frozen
entrees that need only to be heated, plantain chips

to scoop up cold artichoke dip. I have to go from hungry
to eating in a matter of minutes or I won't.

I'd rather dust, vacuum, rearrange,
I'll do anything

to avoid facing a plate with no one
across from me. Decades a bachelor, my father

says he isn't lonely, but there's a reason he goes out to breakfast.
A diner, deli counter, even a convenience store where the coffee's

been sitting too long. Breakfast must be the easiest meal
to be out eating by himself.

II.

This morning the large eye of my grapefruit stared up at me
from its bowl. I felt an emptiness, as if I would sink into it,

the citrus sting, a sphere sliced in half, the sections crudely carved
with a steak knife. This feels like practice for being a widow.

My father is onto something—
get out of the house. Eat in the presence of other people.

III.

At lunchtime, I try it, at the super market. A clerk offers samples
of chicken salad, butternut squash, colorful in a case

alongside sliced beets and mango salsa. I order plastic
containers of the proper food groups, take them to the patio
where I sit at a concrete table with a view of the parking lot.

The Boy Scouts, their manners and neat uniforms,

greet every passerby. A sign apologizes for any inconvenience:
the store does not endorse their organization.

“Excuse me, would you like to buy some popcorn?”
Watching the customers who smile and decline,

I manage to swallow enough, just enough so I can face
going back inside. I wander among displays of oranges,

avocados, white, yellow, and purple onions. Above the lettuce,
bags of candied nuts hang for easy picking. Stacks of bread,

cupcake towers. In the middle of the frozen aisle, a jumble
of soup mix, fruit cups, dented tomato cans reduced for quick sale.

I imagine the meals I need
today, this week, this year, all the food I will need
the rest of my life. It will become me. I will not survive without it.

Dear Antonin Artaud

I come across you on the Poetry Foundation
and learn you're best known for the Theatre of Cruelty:
"magic tricks, special lighting, primitive gestures,"
the intention being "to shock the audience
into confronting the base elements of life."

Could this be why they feature none of your work?
Surfing over to PoemHunter, I read
your "Jardin Noir," about spinning eddies
of sky inside black petals, not at all what I expect,
side by side with the advertisement for a mysterious ailment
that afflicts 250 million Americans.

Diagram of a man with lines drawn
to various body parts to indicate
genital itching, a white film on his tongue,
various aches and pains.

In a second diagram, he sits on a toilet,
alongside "diarrhea" and "constipation."

Before I can click to learn more, the ad changes to Aladdin
Bail Bonds, illustrated this time by a photograph:
a man holding a little girl; both dressed in shorts and T's,
they could be models for a department store catalog.
She is blond and sweet looking, and her dad,
presuming he's her dad, has neatly trimmed hair,
that—oddly—appears to be either wet or very oily.
A blue bar invites me to click for more stories,
yet there is no story, unless it's the one I'm making up.
I wonder if this smiling father, like the one in your play, *Les Cenci*,
raped his little girl and if she, in turn, will hire hit men to murder him.
Whatever their future, they are both delighted for now, and if
one day she turns on him, he may try to throw
this moment in her face, pointing out how happy she was
at the age of two, when Aladdin got him out. They got him through.

Sorry for All the Times

Again without warning, I have a baby
girl. I have given birth

but I hardly remember the pain. It seems

so strange that we have this child, and unexpectedly. Maybe
we have adopted her. I let her suckle, hoping
my milk will let down, as I've heard it can, to see

if that will work. But of course my milk lets down—
that's right. I carried her. She begins to nurse—
it feels good, and it hurts.

By the second day, she is talking in sentences. I try
to impress upon her father how amazing this is, how
extraordinary. Yes, yes, people boast about their children,

but this—this is different, this is truly a feat. I cannot believe
my good fortune. My child is a person who would not have been
otherwise, she is a person and more important

to me than anyone, ever. I feel sorry for all the times
she came to me, suddenly, like now
and how I felt no joy, only burdened, nearly

crushed. This time, I understand—my daughter is someone
I can know, I know I have known her for a long time. No, no,
not only some idea of her, but *her*. This child. This one.

Religious Education

-found in my diary from May, 1981, age ten

I'm spending the night
at April's, so I went with her
to CCD. There was a party
because it's their last day
this year. They said lots of stuff
I didn't like. Like, the best thing God gives you
is communion and you are nothing
unless you drink the holy wine and eat
the holy bread as often as you can
and in the morning the first thing
you should do is throw yourself
on the floor (on your knees)
and say your morning prayers.
They said you should say
the Rosary (whatever it is)
every day for this lady named Mary
who told everyone to say it
a long time ago. I get confused
sometimes. I believe in God (sorta)
and love and all that. Grandma told me
I am very religious
without even calling it anything
because I never did or will do
anything terrible and I'm good
and that's religion.

Smoke Skies

- *from Yosemite's Rim Fire*

There is an orange light on Hope Valley,
on Elephant's Back. Ash drifts toward the earth,
flutters and settles on onion fields, drying sage.
In the car we smell a forest burning, we turn back
before we reach the edge of Caples parking lot,
even the start of the trail. Scrap metal must have fallen

off a truck. On the shoulder of Highway 88—
masses of glinting triangles on wire, bundles big
around as the space between outstretched arms.
And tin cans—the labels say honey, beeswax,
empty and shorn, scattered by wind. Miles and miles:
bundles, cans, bundles, cans—no one knows

from where. Pacific Crest hitchhikers hold a sign
for Tahoe, dirty clothes packed beside liters of water,
strapping a bedroll beneath a pack, smell of clean smoky sweat.
We offer them a ride, hope it's on our way somewhere
clear. They call each other Giant and DB, trail names, reunited
now that her foot is healed, healing that gave him time
to find her a diamond. All she has to say about *Wild*
is no one would ever throw a hiking boot off a cliff.

We let them out at the grocery in Stateline, hope we can rise
above the smoke up Kingsbury Grade, once there, hope we
can out walk it. We try north, then south, our clothes
glow the colors of sherbet or Easter eggs, the blue
of the lake we won't swim obscured in the distance.
A phone in a mesh bag rings, the voice tells us ash
is falling in Carson. Soon coughing turns us back, smoke
in our throats, our lungs. Our eyes are beginning to sting.

Down in the valley, invisible sun—on Foothill, someone
on a mountain bike, the man who got a DUI. No choice
but to ride. Cars with headlights on, lawns and roses an eerie
bright. At home a bird must have mistaken sliding glass
for air, streaks of blood mark the window.

Snow Child

Perhaps I mean to flout expectations,
call into question whether a snow man
is allowed roses for arms.

Now that spring is near, the odd
insect braves the expanse of my torso
with hardly a toe hold. It nibbles

the red petals in my eye-dents, crosses
the bridge of my misshapen nose.
My stem arms and blossom hands droop

toward the snow pack while asphalt
creeps nearer and nearer. Nights,
I find refuge in the freeze, the stillness –

yet I know that before long, nothing
will be left of me but this stone
for a mouth, a thorny stalk, a few dried petals.

Portrait on the Lost Coast

I bring a photo of myself, a past
haircut to a new stylist,
to show her what I'd like.
In it, my niece, six or seven,
sits beside me on a desolate beach, both
of us looking off toward the Mattole
River, its mouth on the Lost Coast.

We have the same big smile, a similar
shape to our lips, our hair the same
shade of brown, hers sun-bleached,
mine beginning to gray. "Is that your little girl?"
the stylist asks, for I had not
thought to explain. Before
I answer, in that pause that is
not even a pause,

I feel like I do when my niece
and I are out at the museum, or
a birthday lunch—when strangers
give us that smile, presuming I am Mom.
When I glimpse the unspoken approval
in a glance, someone's tone, I feel
a sudden weight lifted, a weight
I never remember is there—

and a sense of comfort that disappears
as quickly as it comes; it is as if
I had gone ahead and chosen what was expected
for me, what I had grown up expecting
of myself. And just as fleetingly—
like that day on the Lost Coast, jagged
shale, black sand, the camera angle
that lent itself to what likeness
my niece and I possess—I feel greater
than my share of credit for her grace, my share
of responsibility for who she may become.

Last Winter

-Carson Valley, Nevada

Cross-country skiing on the golf course, I catch
sight of coyotes on distant pond ice. Lithe and quick
against the dusk of sagebrush and Sierra,

what can they possibly be after on that slick
surface? No place for anything to hide.
Last winter, skiing here in the stark light of noon,

I followed a trail of blood spots until I saw an injured
Canada goose. She had dragged herself up a hill, collapsed
near the wall that is the back fence of houses on Long Drive.

Watching her from twenty yards distance, I held still,
not wanting to scare her any more than I probably
already had. I thought of what I could do—

I had taken a jackrabbit to the wildlife rescue
one summer, a jackrabbit I could not bear to let starve
and dehydrate by the side of the road. One of a thousand

jackrabbits that are born and die every day, but one
I came upon out walking and could not let alone.
The rabbit had been easy enough, despite

his weak struggle, to lift into a shoe box—
he weighed hardly anything at all. It turned
out his leg bones were crushed

beyond hope—all they could do
was give painkillers and then lethal injection.
Likely his suffering would have ended soon enough

in the jaws of a coyote, the father or mother,
perhaps, of the very coyotes now darkening
out on the pond ice, oblivious of my searching eye.

Last winter's goose I did not stop
to save. The goose I could not imagine
how to restrain, the goose I knew anyway I should

let go. I was failing to save her, I told myself—
or was I? Why not think of it as saving
a different goose, one who still enjoyed

the use of its wings, a goose who could live
another day or two because its injured sister was easy prey.
Whatever reasons I gave, I soon skied on,

into a cloudless afternoon, imagining her
relieved to have me gone. I skied toward the end
of Long, home to my errands and papers,

my things to be done. And later lying in bed,
when I heard the wild, howling coyote song,
I looked out at the waning crescent moon;

I tried not to think about the Canada goose
beneath the cold stars, how at noon
she had already left a trail to herself, she was already bleeding.

After Another Two Years

I am getting used to a distance, finally,
expanding before me like the time
it takes to reach the water ahead,
a mirage—illusion brought on by thirst
and tricks of light in the desert.
Above, the overturned bowl of sky, a trap.

It used to be easier:
Going through the motions, acting a part.
All I had to do was nod. I would smile
in case she looked, she seemed to believe me.

To have that filament, a thread so fine
as to be visible only from a certain angle.
The dried carcass of an insect, the abandoned dusty web.
She always was fond
of making something up and pretending
it was true.

Mother Motherland

A dream journey: this time Russia, where we pick up a six-year-old boy—my husband and I—it's part of a tour, to spend two days with a child. He is blond and thin, sweet and good.

On the Moscow subway, he holds my hand. He rides on my husband's shoulders at Sokolniki Park; points at kitten-size bears that climb the linden trees; squeals from dizziness on the tilt-a-whirl.

When he gets tired, he lies on my lap beneath a pile of mail, advertisements mostly, a few personal letters. One from my mother in prison,

both sides of a postcard, pencil writing I can hardly make out. Something about not getting her frequent flyer miles, something about my poems. The boy does not complain, but I know he would rather rest in bed

as I had promised we would. My mother is with me then, there in Russia—pleasant, groomed, neatly dressed. I ask her, would she treat this boy equally among her other grandchildren? She says, "You won't be able to manage,

if you take him home. Your sister could do it, but not you." This is the truth, but I don't like her thinking so. My husband is nowhere to be found, and we have to decide—would our marriage survive this?

I'm afraid it would ruin what we have, reduce us to trading off childcare. I would be Mom, he would be Dad, any time I took for myself—I would owe it back.

I go searching for my husband, and when I return, the boy lies in bed, sick or injured—a doctor comes. And to this doctor the boy mentions his mother, he wants to go back to her,

not desperately, not even very strongly, only because that's where he's always been. *Mommy*, he says, and I fear he might mean me. But he closes his eyes, he does not look to me.

Triolet for the Earth's Future

Go round and round a young rainbow

We can't undress a unicorn

This all must be in mind for show

Go round and round a young rainbow

Fossil fuels will soon run low

We'll try to get by with our crop of corn

Go round and round a young rainbow

We can't undress a unicorn

Note: I wrote this in response to an assignment to write a triolet including terms that the class agreed we were unlikely ever to put in a poem: rainbow, unicorn, and fossil fuels. The purpose of this assignment and other such assignments was to treat writing a form as pure exercise and not to try to write something "good."

Kindergarten Triolet

A When **I** grow **Up**, I'll **BE** a **MOM**
B What **I** can **dream**, I can **achieve**
a At **church** each **week**, I **give** my **alms**
A When **I** grow **Up**, I'll **BE** a **MOM**
a At **age** sixteen, I'll **go** to **prom**
b My **favorite** **games** are **make-believe**
A When **I** grow **Up**, I'll **BE** a **MOM**
B What **I** can **dream**, I can **achieve**

Note: This is my attempt to write a triolet that relates to the theme of many of my poems: motherhood, childhood, and pro-natal propaganda. I included the letters before each line to remind me of when the refrain repeated and when to include only an end rhyme. I also used bold lettering and capitalization to remind myself of when syllables are stressed.

Maitrī

- during a Mindfulness Meditation Retreat, Washoe Valley, Nevada, led by a disciple in the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Begin with the aspiration for this to be:
May I approach my experience with openness.
May all beings from suffering and its root be free.

Legs crossed, spine straight – often not ease.
Drifting thoughts – again and again, anxious.
Begin with the aspiration for this to be:

Each palm upturned gently on each knee,
Would that joy in the joy of others be my solace.
May all beings from suffering and its root be free.

My eyes – downcast, open to what is before me.
Breathe what I feel – loathing, restless, hopeless.
Begin with the aspiration to for this to be:

Stop stoking the cycle of cruelty. Let it cease.
My recurring story – notice it with gentleness.
May all beings from suffering and its root be free.

Wonder about everything, for instance – trees.
Not just a tree but this one, here. *This* cypress.
Begin with the aspiration to for this to be:
May all beings from suffering and its root be free.

Maitrī : Sanskrit for benevolence

Note: I wrote this poem in response to an assignment: write a strict villanelle using found language.

Now I Know

“When I grow up,” says Annabelle, “I want to be a mother.”
“And,” says Caleb, “I’m going to be a Fire Man or Police Man.”
We’re told to sit quietly and keep our hands off one another.

Lily, Caden, Mia, Hannah, Gabriel, Heather.
Each name neatly penned in our teacher’s hand.
“When I grow up,” says Annabelle, “I want to be a mother.”

Days, months, seasons, a calendar of weather—
My own Costco card! And I want my own van.
We learn to sit quietly and keep our hands off one another.

Cut, trace, paint, mold and sing what we’re forced to remember.
We help our neighbor, pretend no wish of “better than.”
“When I grow up,” says Annabelle, “I want to be a mother.”

We learn our letters and numbers, the primary colors.
“A doctor,” says Landon. “Or a soldier. No, a stunt man.”
We learn to sit quietly and keep our hands off one another.

First grade, second, a new grade after summer!
I’ll get a good job and I’ll get a retirement plan.
“When I grow up,” says Annabelle, “I want to be a mother.”
We learn quietly and keep our hands off one another.

Note: This time I tried writing a villanelle that related to my subject matter.

Sestina: A Right-Aligned Love Triangle

She
told
him
that
she loved
him only.

Only
it was she
who loved
another who told
that
in turn to him.

He
only
guessed that
she
had not told
the other of her love,

for love,
for him
was not something told.
Only
she
knew that.

That
it was a secret love
she
had for him,
only
one man was told.

Who told
that
only
she loved
him?
None other than she.

Yes, she told
him that—
she loved him only.

Snow Flowers

-after Sylvia Plath

Come spring, or before
Redly, brazenly,
Unexpectedly

Our inflorescence
Stirs through needles,
The moist forest floor.

Melting snow hides us,
Waters us, soothes us;
Soon to disbosom

Our theft from the pines.
We feed on decay:
Cones, bones of raccoon,

Chickadee, junco;
Abscond with sugars
Lightless and guiltless,

Utterly blameless.
Jostle the last drifts
Of pink-dusted snow.

Friend of the fungus,
Azalea cousin,
Bold-natured, luring

Regard and esteem.
One of us here, one
Or two over there...

Rarely in clusters,
Rarely ever seen.
Named for a bloody

Flesh-like thing, we are
Safe-guarded, treaded
Past at a distance

All spring, all summer,
Until our petals
Languish under late

Sun, a bumblebee,
A monarch, the weight
Of our young heavy fruits.

Note: I wrote this after reading Sylvia Plath's collected poems, specifically trying to imitate "Mushrooms." My restriction was five syllables per line. A professor suggested that my poem should be significantly shorter, and free of these words: disbosom, inflorescence, friend, and pink-dusted. I took that advice and rewrote it as snow plant (on the next page).

snow plant

in a few months you could watch me languish to muck: dull strands,
drained pigment. carcass of a hornet that once alighted on my petals

yes, a yellow jacket weighed me down and probed me
the monarchs were here: they brushed the heft and the fruits. They listened

with their clubbed antenna: you could actually feel the buzz

look at the ruin you've done to my name: it split on your tongue
common words unrelated to *sarcodes sanguina*: a bloody flesh-like thing: shoots stirring

redly, early, often before spring. snowmelt watered me minerals

see me, how I've stolen lightless sugars. no, ignore me, let me keep
feeding on decay, withered cones, bones of raccoon, what's left of a junco's wing

Notes: This draft is in response to an assignment to imitate a D.A. Powell poem. If I keep this poem, I plan to revise again.

Permission

“Young poets, write as you will.”
-Nicanor Parra

Nicanor Parra has given us permission:
All we have to do is be an improvement
over the blank page. We don't have to make
our private worlds public for Allen Ginsberg, or,
as Brenda Shaughnessy would say, “risk something big.”
We don't have to—in fact should not—rhyme
(even if it would please my grandmother).
We can smear random words across the page;
basically finger paint, if we want:
Moon, Snow, Who...
and call it a poem.

My husband always has ideas for me—
that I should write, for instance, about the new poetry app,
the crack-smoking mayor of Toronto, or the infant child
who was strapped to the train of her mother's wedding gown
to be dragged behind her down the aisle.

He only forbids me from exposing his fears, or
mentioning that he drives an automatic using both feet,
even though it's not his fault that's how
his father taught him. I am welcome
to write about his family
or the fact that recently, he has added objective tests
to his anthropology courses: a hundred and fifty
multiple-choice questions, true false,
matching, fill in the blank—instead of only
essays, where it was easier to doubt himself
rather than his students.

Now there is one right answer, except
if there's a typo or some sort of mistake,
in which case he's agreed to give everyone
credit. He showed them twenty-four
of the questions in advance, word for word,
and still, when many students failed,
he gathered statistics from each test:
how did someone do on the twenty-four questions
as compared to the other one hundred twenty-six.

He has a hard time believing
some students don't want to study, let alone
get A's. In college, in my dorm,
kids would say about essay tests:
"All you have to do is wipe your ass on it and you'll get a C."
An improvement, perhaps, over the blank page.
But there's no wiping your ass on a scantron—
all the bubbles look the same. And really, no wiping it to make a poem,
either. If you have something you want to say.

Note: I like some of the elements of this poem, but the argument doesn't work at the end. I plan to keep the elements I like, possibly in new poems.

Green Smoothy

I don't mean avocado milkshake, the kind
we drank in the Philippines, couldn't make right
at home. I mean orange roughly, the reddish fish
of deep ocean waters—neither one a delicacy, really,
neither the opposite of the other, if opposites
of milkshakes and fish can be said to exist.

Idioglossia: an idiosyncratic language
invented and spoken by only one
or very few people.

Twins are thought to engender these,
as couples do. In our case, lovemaking
was beans. His thing was Junior, mine, Little Sweet.

A dead language may remain in use
for scientific, ecclesiastical, or legal purposes.

A petition for the dissolution of marriage
between Husband and Wife due
to irreconcilable differences—the only cause accepted,
infidelity being lawful; neglect being reserved
for pets, children, vulnerable dependents.

An extinct language no longer has any speaker
having undergone a language death
and subsequent replacement by another tongue.

Green smoothy, orange roughly, one of few
remaining keys to the lost grammar by which we referred
to things in terms of opposites—or attempted to.
Sweetheart, we said. I want you. This is enough.

Note: In this poem, I need to set up the idea earlier that the secret language of the couple includes referring to things by their opposites. According to one professor who read this, that is not clear.

At Age Seventy-One, My Father Gets an iPad

Born in Bad Aussee, Austria in 1941, three years after the Anschluss, my father took his baths in the farmhouse laundry room, ate meals cooked on a wood burning stove, sledged to the all-boys public school, avoided beatings from teachers, ate meat not-so-well-preserved in jars, bread and milk when meat was scarce. He ducked beneath covered wagons when war planes flew over, accepted candies from American soldiers. At age six, he lost his father to pneumonia, carried wooden skis up hills. As a teen, he took a typing class but never typed again—no need for it at Austrian Steel, waiting tables in England, teaching Americans to ski, framing their luxury homes and lodges.

In 2013, at the age of seventy-one, after years and years of hemming and hawing, having never in his life owned a computer, my father announces he's getting an iPad.

When I offer to help him shop around, he declares, *No, I like Apple*, goes to the Apple Store, and pays cash for a twelve-inch. His granddaughter takes a picture and sets it as his wallpaper, Charter comes over to install the line, a friend gets his modem connected,

and my father proceeds to open fifty-six Web pages. He calls me asking how to get things off his screen. I try to walk him through, but he claims he cannot find a single "x".

"Do you know where you are?" I ask. "Are you on a particular Web site?"

Yeah, yeah, I'm surfing the net, but every time I type something in, I get Wikipedia.

"Do you know where it is you're typing? Are you using a search engine?"

Yeah, yeah, a search engine, or Wikipedia.

I tell him Wikipedia's an online encyclopedia, like the World Books we had on the living room shelf when I was growing up.

Oh, so Wikipedia wouldn't be the place to look for newspapers?

Finally, he finds Google, and from there, *Der Spiegel*,
but then a mortgage ad pops up and won't go away.

When it comes time to set up an e-mail address, he can't believe
Austria@iCloud.net is taken, and so is *Austrian*.
He settles on his legal name, but his American friends complain
it's too long, plus they only know him by his nickname.
He comes over for help getting an alias for a new e-mail, tells me,

Go to iTunes, that's where you find it. On iTunes.

And he won't be dissuaded
until we go to iTunes only to learn that he has no music.
I teach him how to reply to e-mails, how to forward.

He sends me a video of a dog riding ocean waves to the tune
of "Surfin' USA." The Beach Boys blare through the phone
when he calls to ask if I got it.

Next time we're out hiking, he says, *Apple saves everything*
—and glancing skyward—*Up in the clouds. Everything is saved.*

*Notes: This is an example of how poetry is a way into material for me. I wrote this with
line breaks, as is shown here, and later I removed the line breaks and published it as an
essay. I found in removing the line breaks that some of the content changed, too.*

On Father's Day, Instead of a Greeting Card

"Great Dads Get Promoted to Grandpa"

*-engraved on a picture frame in one of those fonts
meant to look like a child's scrawled handwriting*

I say a great dad lets his kid be who she is, a mother or not a mother. In place of grandchildren, a great dad will embrace a new pursuit brought to him by his offspring. A great dad, who would love nothing more than to ski with his daughter who doesn't like skiing, will drive over mountain passes and through snow storms to attend her poetry readings. A great dad, whose television is tuned to the tennis channel, whose coffee table is covered with sports magazines, will make a permanent home for her publications.

Best of all, a great dad will begin to bring her ideas: the overheard "Goddammit, I want me bottle!" from a toddler, or entertaining English phrases from the Tibet Kailash Hotel brochure:

*sunlight city
beautiful scenery gives way
to person if facing a wonderland...*

He will, for example, bring his daughter the label of a store-bought cake called "Strawberry Fields," a cake whose nutrition information he does not think to read until he tosses and turns nearly all night with a stomach ache. In trying to recall what he might have eaten, a great dad digs the cake box from the trash and finds the list of ingredients:

Sugar, cream (cream carrageenan). Water, wheat flour bleached (enriched with niacin, reduced iron, thiamin mononitrate riboflavin and folic acid), whole eggs, canola oil, strawberries, vegetable shortening (palm oil, canola oil and/or soybean oil, mono diglycerides, TBHQ (Preservative) 1, glucose, enriched bleached wheat flour (wheat flour, niacin, iron, thiamin mononitrate, riboflavin, hydrogenated palm kernel oil, sanding sugar (sugar artificial color), dextrose, corn syrup, margarine (palm oil, water, soy oil, salt, whey solids (milk), vegetable mono/diglycerides, soy lecithin, artificial flavor, Beta Carotene (color), vitamin A, palmitate, corn starch, modified food starch, non-fat milk, modified cornstarch, soybean oil, whey, artificial color, natural and artificial flavor, high fructose corn syrup, butter, salt, mono and diglycerides, sodium caseinate, artificial flavor, potassium sorbate, phosphoric acid, polysorbate 60, locust bean gum, guar gum, citric acid, leavening (sodium aluminum phosphate, baking soda,

*aluminum sulfate, fumaric acid, mono calcium phosphate, sodium acid pyrophosphate),
propylene glycol, propylene glycol mono diglycerides,*

and on and on and on in such fine print he needs a magnifying glass
to read it. A great dad brings this label, wiped off and neatly folded,
to his daughter, saying, “Look, no wonder I couldn’t sleep,
there was propylene glycol in that cake. That’s anti-freeze.”

A great dad laughs heartily about this and suggests, practically insists,
that she write a poem about it. And because she’s touched, because she loves
that he actually dug an idea out of the trash, an idea spurred
by a painful, sleepless night, she writes a poem, and in the last line,
she says, Thanks, Dad. Thanks for letting me be who I am.

Nursery House

"She lives in a nursery house."

-My student, Devi S., age nine, speaking of her great-grandma

I imagine my great-grandmothers, none of whom lived to meet me: the four of them, together in a glass-walled structure, flooded with sunlight. Ferns, hibiscus vines, lounge chairs beside a fountain. Glasses of iced tea on little tables. Aloisia never smiles. Despite flare-ups of her shingles, she's never seen a doctor and won't now. In somber dress, she walks to Mass at dawn each morning, returns to chop wood that piles up unneeded. Maria—if that is her name—stays out of sight but somehow manages to keep the orchids misted. Sadie wears polka dots, even to dig in the garden afternoons. She harvests root vegetables; her favorite is horseradish, fresh and raw. She vacuums the marble floor and dries the dishes, always bumping into things, even breaking a plate or two now and then. From a coffee can, she offers homemade chocolate chip cookies, rock hard. She sits down only to write in a leather bound journal—about the weather, Aloisia's snoring, cards games—mostly solitaire, these days. Essie is the only one who reclines, a small white dog in her lap. A wide-brimmed feather hat shades her eyes. She brought along a swimming costume and tennis dress, though the fountain pool is too small and no one else plays. She has nothing to say to Sadie and the others speak only German. Essie wonders how it is she ended up with these people as she leafs through issue after issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, searching for her name.

Note: In workshop, I was advised to deal with the Essie character such that it's understandable why she is looking through the newspaper. From family stories, I understand that Essie was concerned about her image (e.g., she was proud when her eldest daughter married a physician). And I'm told that she often looked through The San Francisco Chronicle hoping to see her name in Herb Caen's column.

I Am Your Mother

I don't even know what I said.
I was reprimanded by my boss
for working backwards
with a kaleidoscope between my eyes.
I would say I'm sorry
but you're the one
who has the problem.
I was trying to explain
when a frog jumped out of my throat.
It's a good thing amphibians
can live on land and water.
I am not the cape woman.
I am the vulture
scavenging road kill
on your destiny's chipped highway.
I'm on edge
because I have soul cirrhosis.
I am your mother
covering up your portrait.
I am her letters pricking
your conscience like needles
on a tattooed torso.
I am a slim-waisted whisky.
I am releasing doves
from the cage of your guard dog.
You're going to have to work
on your perception.
I am repainting your cellar,
glossing over the murals
of everyone who shows you otherwise.

Note: I would like to include something here to prepare the reader for fantastical world of this poem, possibly in the title or the first few lines. I'm not in favor of spoon-feeding a reader, but given the voice of many of my poems, I believe this one would be jarring.

Once It Was Otherwise

When my mother was a vegan, I was to blame for all the world's problems. Now she's born-again, she believes I'll go to Hell along with the socialists who run our country, along with the president, killer of babies. I'm tired of hearing good-bye before every end of the world, never knowing what will be next. I conceded her point about eating meat as earth destruction, but I can't bring myself to pretend I fear God or Hell or the Rapture.

I fill the tub in our guest bath, find comfort in knowing I could lie for hours without hope of being lifted from this pool of hot water, its aroma of jasmine and green tea. Back resting on an inflatable pillow, I shift as soon as one knee cools, one mortal breast.

A candle flickers on the countertop beyond the curtain; the skylight overhead reveals a rectangular patch of black, a single star's tiny illumination.

My mother's prison cell is shared by twelve, same as the number of jurors who found her guilty, the number of months in each year of her sentence. She is unlikely to have a window, unlikely to see the night sky, much less my particular star. All I wonder is if she'll ever let go her claim: *I'll always be your mommy.*

I've heard of people reenacting their births, not something I've ever considered, not until the master shower needed repairs and I'm taking my bath here in the guestroom tub, not until now, lying in the warmth of what I might consider thinking of as amniotic fluid.

My mother used to soak in a tub, deeper than this one, with Jacuzzi jets, a frosted glass door. She read paperbacks, the pages curling and bubble-flecked. Her Porsche was parked downstairs; she planned to retire on a luxury liner once she made the next deal, once

she paid off her debt. Now she washes dishes
for pennies an hour, pennies that go toward her keep.

I am wondering how I would reenact the forceps
that drew me into this world, or Dr. Donnelly's slap
to bring forth my first cry. I once lay this way
in my mother's dark womb, not knowing
I would even be born. I once lay
as I now lie, looking up through
the skylight at the one visible star,
breathing in the steam, the jasmine,
the candle's scented warmth.

Before my first air, my amphibian self
breathed the fluid of my mother's body.
Before I knew I was hers, before I could be said
to know anything at all, for all I might have known,
I was her.

Note: I need to include something about the mother's crime, perhaps in the title. "Taking a bath during my mother's second week in prison due to her conviction for the crime of elder exploitation" seems like a mouthful. However, when I read this to an audience, I always begin with some background information.

Uterus

Karen didn't seem to hear
when I said I didn't want children.
She and I were teachers in the same district;
we had sat through a few meetings together, eaten
brown-bag lunches at student desks during the break.

After I said I didn't want children, she said
Have you ever thought of being a surrogate?
She was looking for a volunteer.
You seem really healthy. You take care of yourself.

Karen had revealed she was living hand to mouth—
her mother had died, she had lost her inheritance, her house.
Bankrupt, she was single mother to a son, born pre-mature,
who had barely survived.
Once home from the natal ICU,
he could not leave the house for weeks.
Karen paid the baby sitter to stay until she could shower
and change clothes after school—
she could not risk the germs. As for another baby,
the doctors warned that another might not be so lucky.
Another baby might not survive at all.

The father was a donor from somewhere in Texas, she had chosen
him out of a catalog because he was strawberry blond,
shared her pale coloring.

*I knew it was going to be hard enough for Jacob, Karen had said, not to have a dad.
This way, at the very least, he was going to look like me.*

She wanted me to carry the next child for her, to give
me her eggs, to order more sperm from the donor in Texas.
She wanted me to explain to my husband
that I would have these implanted in my uterus.
I would undergo extensive physical and psychological testing,
sign a legal agreement, quit my medications, abstain
from alcohol, roller coasters, certain yoga poses.
I would take the risk of suffering from morning sickness,
gestational diabetes, high blood pressure, etc. I would heed the warnings
on product labels, drink plenty of water, get plenty of rest,
visit the doctor, attend birthing classes, support groups,

practice breathing, somehow explain to people
that I was pregnant, but I wasn't
keeping the baby because it wasn't mine.

I would grow a fetus in my body, watch my belly and breasts
swell and weigh me down, feel the ache in my hips,
in my feet, in places I never felt aches before. I would sleep
with special pillows, then maybe not sleep
at all. I would grow tired, very warm, unwieldy.
The baby would kick me from the inside, people
would feel my belly and ask when I was due.
I might have false contractions. Soon I would have real
contractions. When the real ones came, I would time them,
I would make notes, and when the contractions
were a certain distance apart, I would call the hospital,
or the midwife. I would have a birth plan
that would involve painkillers or no painkillers,
I would brace myself and then try to relax
as much as one can relax into what I am told
is unimaginable pain.

When the time came, I would labor, likely for hours,
and I would push the baby out, endure hands or forceps
inside me. If all else failed, my belly would be cut open,
and the baby would be lifted out.
However the baby came, Karen would be standing
by. Karen would be the one to hold the baby
because it would be hers, and she would name it.
I would give her a human being,
Jacob's brother, or his sister.

I would be sewn back up, if necessary.
I would have a hard time
walking, using the toilet, I wouldn't even think
about riding a bicycle.
I would be exhausted, maybe depressed.
I would deplete my sick leave, my family
medical leave, take time off, and hopefully, eventually,
I would heal. There would be questions about my absence.

"Hell no," I said to Karen. "No."
And, fortunately, we both laughed.
Later, I looked it up, just to see
how surrogacy actually works. I learned

that volunteer surrogates are rare, and professionals are paid, at minimum, greater than a teacher's salary. Extra for certain procedures: \$750 for "fetal reduction," \$5000 per baby for "multiple birth," no price was listed for a stillborn, but loss of uterus would be \$2500. The going rate for breast milk is \$250 a week. As it happens, I would be ineligible—only mothers who have born and are raising or have raised at least one child may partake. They are the only ones who understand what it means to be pregnant, the only ones who can be trusted.

Note: One professor who read this thought it worked as a poem, another suggested that I try this material as an essay. I plan to try it as an essay and see which I like better.

Mother of a Young Boy, Burnt Cedar Beach, Lake Tahoe

He calls her Mommy, but that's about all
I can hear of the group's conversation; too many
motor boats, kids, radios blasting. So I can't tell,

is the man the boy's father, are the two women sisters?
They look alike—olive skin, dark hair—except the mother
walks on prosthetic legs, exposed by running shorts.

They raise an umbrella, drink light beer, smoke Marlboros
from a shared pack. She removes her prostheses and tee-shirt
to reveal a pink string bikini and a runner's build, lean and toned.

She smiles at her boy digging in the sand, looks as happy
as anyone else, makes it seem not all that bad. I'm ashamed
even to think such a thing, me on summer break from my job.

I'm reading magazines at Burnt Cedar Beach, named
for the charred stump at the edge of the lawn, victim
of a lightning strike some fifty years ago. I glance up to see

her help the boy undress. On her shoulder a rattlesnake tattoo
coils and uncoils as if to slither away from the deep scars
down her side and arm. Mortar fire? IED? I know nothing

about weapons of war. A college friend served as JAG in Iraq,
had some close calls in traffic, but came home unharmed
with funny stories about setting up headquarters

in Saddam's Baghdad palace. Janeen slept under chandeliers;
this woman was lucky even to survive. She rubs sunscreen
on her son's shoulders, tousles his hair. When the man

brings down a paddle board, a lifeguard warns him
not to launch it in the swimming area. But they don't seem
too concerned with the rules; already they stood the boy

in the lake to pee. At lunchtime, they eat sandwiches
on white bread, apples, and barbeque chips. Then they go ahead
and launch the board, the woman scooting to the water;

her mid-thigh stumps look tender, pinkish. The lifeguard's

whistle doesn't blow. I want to shout. I want to rally
the Burnt Cedar crowd, lead a cheer as she climbs

on board, but I avert my eyes, turn the page of *Real Simple*
to skim the recipe for a sensational summer salad.
My suffering is invisible, buried beneath my shoulder blade,

buried in the soles of my feet. I cannot see the suffering
of anyone else at the beach, the pains, the wrongs that weigh upon them.
I look at a man reading a paperback, the children playing catch,

teenage girls face down on a rainbow towels, their bikini tops untied.
Only polyester and spandex to cover our vulnerable parts,
dark lenses to shield our eyes. Who must I think I am, wanting to applaud

this woman for what I imagine to be her courage? Wanting
everyone else's scars to show, afraid to claim my own. They paddle out
past the yellow buoy line, toward the open water. Really, all I know

is that she is mother to a young boy who wears Marvel Heroes
swim trunks. He crouches near the shore, he and the woman
left behind, to build a castle out of the sand.

*Note: My plan is to put this poem aside for a while and then revise again, as there are
some problems that I can't see how to fix at the moment. Two different professors who
read this commented that it sounded like a novel.*

Multi-Lingual Blessings

At someone's wedding, I am in charge of the blessing. Several of us have roles and this is quite a minor one, in my mind, as compared to being the officiant or singer. It shows I am less important to the bride and groom, although they are nowhere to be seen and I couldn't even say who they are. The wedding is large, a few hundred guests on the patio of a grand hotel. For the blessing, a phrase has been provided for me, a few unremarkable words printed on half a sheet of typing paper. Instead of saying these words, however vacuous if appropriate and succinct they are, I decide instead to teach an interactive language lesson. On the fly, I demonstrate with a friend:

"Everyone, here's what you do. Grab your yoga mat and find one of the tags." (The yoga mats are wedding favors). "The tag writing may be faded since the mats have been washed. You'll see cleaning instructions, product information, and a blessing printed in English, German, Spanish, and on some tags, French." I search my tag and find my blessing. "See, mine says, 'Serve a sweet_____.'" I read it in Spanish since that is the foreign language I know best and the one I want to practice. "Once you find your blessing, wander, mingle, partner up with someone, and tell it to them in the language of your choice, filling in the blank. To use mine as an example, 'Serve a sweet *every day*.' See how I added 'every day' to complete the blessing? Listen to your partner's blessing, switch mats, find a new partner, and say your new blessing in the language your last partner chose."

I'm losing them. A few enthusiasts are with me, yoga mats in hand, but my friend disappears partway through, along with much of the crowd. Some guests board a bus, others sit down in lounge chairs to chat, clearly uninterested, even unaware of my plan. I press on: "Take your yoga mat, find the blessing on the tag..." I know it's too much, languages they may not speak, phrases they may not be able to complete on tags that may not be readable, may not even include blessings at all. It's poorly planned. I did no formative assessment, gave no context, failed to make it relevant. It is doomed. I know that, yet it is my job to do the blessing. It is my job. I decided to do it this way, I decided to do it so I try. I try.

Note: I've never quite believed the statement that the minute you start telling about a dream, you lose your audience, but maybe that's only because I find my own dreams interesting. This prose poem is based on a dream. I haven't decided whether or not to keep it. I may want to try playing with line breaks instead of making the sentence the unit of meaning.

Anikas

Mother Anika cuts my hair, tells all
about Daughter Anika, early thirties,
Fortune 500 six-figure earner, “author”
of photo-illustrated travel journals,
wife of an Italian Boeing engineer, soon to be mother
of The Million Dollar Twins.

The Million Dollar Twins, a boy and girl,
cost tens of thousands to conceive. I am subject
to ultra-sound images whenever my bangs
get too long. “I think I saw those,” I say, pretending
to scrutinize. Anika says, “No, no, this is from December.
Look at the difference between them now.
This one resembles the mother and that one the father.”

The grayish blobs are barely recognizable
as human. Anika says, “See the eyes on that one?
And those nice full lips—I wish the girl
had those instead of the boy.”

I wish she would turn the photos around.
Do I really need to see the fetuses inside
Daughter Anika’s womb? It’s enough
to know she’s eating only organic and sterilized
foods. Won’t touch an apple with a bruise or a nick,
breathes only HEPA purified air.

The twins arrive prematurely with help
from six physicians and five nurses.
Someone builds a shrine on Mother Anika’s
mirror: Ribbons, pictures, and the names
Klazina Tatiana Di Rossiani
Constantino Sebastian Di Rossiani
“Welcome Little Angles” it reads,
“Angles” struck and “Angels” penned in.

Mother Anika spends her vacation
shopping and cooking for Daughter,

which leaves me, selfishly, for seven weeks
without a trim. I'm getting tired of Anika's Anika stories
anyway—should I divorce and find someone new?

I resolve instead to refrain from asking questions, even one.
It's my own fault for being so inquisitive
these nine years. When Mother Anika summons me
to her chair for the last time, I peer at the shrine
through my bangs. *I will resist, I will resist, I will...*
But how can I politely ignore the quasi-
Anne Geddes-style photos of The Million Dollar Twins
donning pink hats and blue? I succumb. I say, "How *cute!*"

Unsolicited, Anika goes on about The Million Dollar
Father, who gets up at night to comfort the twins, who bathes
them, changes them, and spoon feeds Daughter Anika
his own homemade organic chicken soup while she breastfeeds.
Anika snips my hair, her scissors nicking the soft spot
below my skull. "You see," she says, "babies bring out the best
in a man. Your husband wouldn't do that."

*Note: The ending of this poem comes as the wrong kind of surprise. There is nothing to
prepare the reader for Anika saying something mean to the speaker. I need to include
more content earlier on in order to make the ending believable. I may want to try this out
as an essay, also.*