

PERIHELION

A Thesis

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by

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The poems in this thesis are organized around the role of memory in our lives--how memory recalls experience and, thus, works on us at varying levels throughout our lives. An experience may be more clearly understood or more sharply felt than was possible when it happened, as Wordsworth claims in his notion of "recollection in tranquility." Memory is not reality; it recreates experience not as it was, but as it might have been. My poems, through memory, attempt to shape a reality for the duration of the poem and seek to salvage the meaning from experience, to find the positive in the negative. Whether my poems are based on actual events or invented ones (or a combination of both), they share the underlying belief that the power of memory shapes who we are and helps us to endure; though memory may cause as much pain as joy, poems that work through memory shape and record experience and so find meaning in it.

The title, *Perihelion*, refers to the point at which an orbiting body is nearest the sun, which might be seen as reflecting the essential nature of memory working to process and re-process experience. The four sections are a movement from childhood through adolescence to adulthood.

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"in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh."

--Toni Morrison *Beloved*

"[The poet] drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet . . . says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you."

--Walt Whitman "Preface" to
Leaves of Grass (d.1855)

I. At White Creek Farm

At White Creek Farm

You choked the tractor
and trodded into the barn
to see the rats I thought were kittens.
Cupped in my hands, their pulses
beat like rain, and I held them
like the water you prayed
would cover your crops. You said,
babies or not, they were rats
and snuffed them under your heel,
skulls giving way beneath you.
You rubbed your feet across
the floor, on some hay, to clean them.
As you walked across the field,
your shoes sprayed mud. The tractor
belched, wrenched smoke,
made the earth red and pungent.

Before Knowing**--for Granny Jean and Papaw**

Mom says Daddy can't hear too good
sometimes, and it must be bad tonight
because the television blares louder and louder.
I can't find friendly shapes in the shadows
on the walls, so I pop the screen
and climb out my window. The night
takes me bare feet first, and I hit
the ground running hard
toward my grandparents' house.
As I hum, my voice scurries
like that little bat did that got in,
the one Daddy had to throw a sheet over
to catch. Lightning flicks and I stop,
count five until the thunder. Behind me,
our house is a tiny yellow square
but squinting just right makes it disappear.
I outrun the rain, stirring the frogs to sing
as I pass, and I make it in nothing flat,
grip the knob and go in to where they are
kneeling by the stove on newspapers,
cracking open walnuts. Grandma says
Why lawsamercy child
and wraps me in her nine-patch, rubs
blood into my feet while the fire sighs
and chirps, breathes orange from the vents.

I stretch my length as they make low
pleasant thunder and dig out
the hard brown kernels that ting into the pan.
Gravels crunch louder than the fire,
headlights flash in through the blinds,
and Daddy's voice comes in before he does.

Welcome Fire**--for Mom**

The sun through the lattice-work
makes criss-cross patterns

of light on her face
and popping and shifting,

the ice in her drink reminds me
of that night Dad, whiskey crazed,

thought we were leaving him,
wouldn't allow a visit to the doctor.

While he yelled
That-goddamn-kid-ain't-sick,

she put me in a tub of ice chips,
light filtered through

the shower curtain, glowed
on her arms and face.

When I asked about him later,
she whispered they were fever dreams,

and I know she wished it were true.
Now, with no reason to say it,

I cannot tell her that her hand
on my forehead was welcome fire.

Thief**--for my father**

You killed a man in Vietnam, cut off his ear
because they believed a soul cannot leave
this world without a complete body. Back home
you hung it on a string like an ornament,
took it with you when you left us.
I never saw the ear, but you showed me
your knife once, the well-oiled handle, the blade
so shiny I could see my weak warped image.
I imagined that ear as it would have looked
in our basement, ashen, and that man trapped
inside a broken body, straining toward the great sky,
and I wanted to take it back, carry that ear to him
and mend him, feel him stop straining, close his eyes
to see his lashes lie dark against his skin. And from you
I want to take those years so that you would not have
these sordid souvenirs--that ear, the bracelet
from the first man you had to kill, the one
you have worn every day since they urged you
to glean it from his wrist, the memory of Pleiku
when out of the tangled forest came the ambush,
and you saw your friend Cashmere blown apart
by a mortar and still you had to crawl on. I want
to transform you into that grainy boy in uniform
who smiled unevenly into the camera (as if he knew
what was to come) and give you a reason to stay
in this small town where at least you could sleep
without shrinking from the relentless noises of night.

Clean Out

I was five and didn't like the black blood
that oozed from the gash, so he threaded
the worm until the hook came clean out
the other side. He'd toss my line way out
and tell me to hold tight as the red and white
bobber jerked on the black-green surface
of the pond, yelled Don't fight it, let 'er run!
My pole arched tense with the weight,
the thin line streaked through the water,
connected to some thing at the bottom,
and my arm ached until I fell back
with the weight of victory to see the dark
finned fish on my hook. I breathed quick
to Dad's words: See, they always tire out.

They always did, and cleaning our catch
for dinner he'd cut the body in half
with one broad stroke, show me
the pulsating heart shrinking
in the foreign light. Even then
the cancer coursed in him,

would soon force him to bed,
his eyes wet electric blue.
The bile in the bedpan smelled thick,
chunks of his lungs drowning in it.
Tubes ran in and out of him,
and I could see him try to pull away,
flinching at the sharp points of pain
and, without knowing, I thought don't fight it.

Flight of the Swallows

Those days you came home drunk
babbling, pounding on the walls,
yourself, or Mom I had to wait
the whiskey out and would hide
in the barn for hours, but your voices
staccatoed to me. Once I went
to listen to the rustle of the swallows
above me, and I heard you in the garden--
Mom had come to help you dig potatoes.
She went to your row, knelt beside you
and sunk her fingers into the earth
while you kneaded the ground, worked it,
pulled the potatoes out, carefully
turning them over in your hands like eggs,
Then with your pocket knife you peeled one,
cut it into pieces of moon, held one out
to Mom and fed it to her with your wide hands.
The swallows flurried, and I traced their flight
circling, spiraling up and out
through a hole in the roof. Your voices
shimmied to me, hung in the air like fruit.

II. Next of Kin

Next of Kin

You slid out of her like a lump of wet clay,
pretty as you please after three days of labor.
She knew you'd be a hell child then
and, lordy, wasn't she right about that?
And now, seven years after you left home,
Brother, they have sent us your remains.
As I dig this hole, Mom rips open the box
that carries you. I say this is the right place
for you to rest, here in the family cemetery

where some Sundays while the sky
bulged gray with the promise of snow,
I would straighten the stiff flowers
while you lay on the ground, feet propped
against the headstones. You imagined
the dead--child killers who were hung
from trees, Gypsy women who dressed
in reds and golds and sold pistachios
for a living, one-eyed pirates killed
for stealing treasure. Before we were ready,
Mom called us in to scrub our faces hot
and lead us off to church, where I sat back
against the pew, afraid of the deep Amens
and Hallelujahs, and you dangled your legs,
swung them to some song you hummed.

She taught me to turn a yolk
without bursting it, to wash and mend
and fold the linens, but because you
were the son, the oldest, she packed you off
to school in Tennessee. As you drove off

down the driveway in that '57 Rambler,
you looked over your shoulder at me.

To Mom, you were the one who went bad
and drank yourself to death for spite.
She heard somewhere, she says,
that bodies are burned together and doled out
in people-size portions, that it might not
even be all you in there. But I know it's you,
at least that. If I could, I would have put
your body aboard a burning ship
and sent it to sea or flung your ashes
into the Ganges. But it has come to this.
The trip has shattered the urn, and as she
lifts you, you spill out. She says
she can smell the whiskey on you still
and brushes you off. I think that she may
carry part of you away in the crevices
of her rings, under her nails.
I scoop what's left of you into my hands.

Baptism Along Route 7

I've tried to age you, tried to grow you up
in my mind, but you are eternally twelve.
I wonder at the ease of it, how a thought
of you comes with the dying leaves,
with the moth that got in last night and fluttered
in the lamplight until I caught it, flung it
gently back into the night. Today driving
along Route 7, I saw a baptism
and you were there in the blues, yellows,
whites of clothes shining out from between
the trees the way we believed souls looked
when we were little. At your baptism,
you weren't afraid of the water
but of going backward, blind into the creek.
But when they brought you up in a great
gushing of water, you were laughing, searching
the bank for me. And this I can remember
but not what you said or even the sound
of your voice, only that the cold had drawn
the color from your face, that you wanted
to pluck the daisies from the towel they placed
around you, that the breeze raised chillbumps
on your skin as we sat beneath the birches,
chewing on the bitter yolks of hard-boiled eggs.

Perihelion

The smell of hay conjures you
from the dead, reminds me of how
we flung it into the air, and you said
the hay fell like stiff clumps of sunlight.
You yelled Hi-O Silver and climbed
up on the cool metal stallion
of the pasture fence, rode it back
and forth across the worn grass,
waited out the daylight.
That night when the stars came,
you showed me how to hunt
constellations, crowned me Pollux,
yourself Andromeda, and we lay
down in the cool grass, paced
our breathing, strained to hear
the stars sing. You said
you could feel, if you tried hard,
the earth slightly turning beneath you.

The Lessening

You ask me to brush your hair, Mother,
and when the fine strands pull out
I smooth them into a bun, pin it
squat at the base of your neck
so you won't know it's missing.
That night you wandered out,
I found you on the icy driveway,
picked you up and carried you,
wondered at your very lightness.
It's as if you're being stripped
of what's not necessary--
a ritual lessening. This moving
toward death takes more and more
of you, though I calm you like a child
afraid of a shifting house, bathe
and dress you, goad you to take
in food, arrange coarse hair
over your naked head.

Expecting

You have grown into yourself
since years ago I moved you in
with me after Dad died. When you say
you are expecting, stroke your stomach
and tell me you can feel her kicking now
(you're sure it's a girl), I wait it out

like the rest. Once you put on
your best dress and started off
to your wedding; the next year
you told me to drive you to Ohio
because you believed Dad had run off
with some harlot up Cincinnati way.

You pull your blouse up, put my hands
to your stomach and ask me to feel
her move, to listen to the heartbeat.
Putting my ear to your belly, I hear
it gurgle, let your breathing move
against me. How you must have looked

back then, your stomach etched
with veins and full of me, and how
you must have broken open
like a melon to spill me out.
Saying soon now, it's almost time,
you cup your belly and wait.

Bleed Rich

The earth sucks the life right out of you,
Dad told me once, because it has to.
He had to make the dirt bleed rich
in his fields, and the dust stirred
to cling to him for spite. When he ripped
the onions from the ground, their roots
hung pale like bloodless veins.

We found him sitting against the sycamore.
He must have died while the corn stalks
wavered in the distance, to the wailing
of the pregnant cow, her hooves
stomping up the dust. He must have watched
to make sure she made it, must have sat
to rest while the nose of the calf inched out
toward the light, heart twitching in its chest.

While I held the newborn Black Angus,
they carried him up from the field
on a stretcher. Warm birth stink
rubbed into my clothes, and I buried
my face in the slick black squirming flesh.
Its spindly legs hung over my arms like grass.

Breaking Through

His silver-toned harmonica
(Corn-on-the-cob great-grandad called it)
sits in my hands, dull as the earth
that covered him, thud, thud,
and then no more. I blow on it now,
taste the stale metal; the note hums
in this widowed farmhouse, circles
like the crows over his land.
The note buzzes in my head
as the sounds spouted from his harmonica,
each note hovering, growing, bursting
and I thought that the music leaked out
to feed the corn. His burnt-orange
chair creaking under his weight, the moan
of the cow as he helped her birthing
(wet calf steaming in the new dawn)
still linger over his overgrown fields
as the crows did when precious rain
came little, and he fought them
from his slumping stalks. Still he played
his mouth harp, (This is one ear the crows
won't get), and I blow on it once more,
notes break through, new leaves through dust.

III. Emergence

Deer Jumps From City Bridge

The paper said you must have stumbled in
from the woods or some neighboring park
onto the rain-slick bridge and, for a few feet,
you ran next to the traffic, then tried to bolt
to the other side and were hit, jumped
into the river out of fright. You should have died
in some dark forest, gut shot even, but back in
some knotted shade to cover you, anywhere
but this rigid bedlam of cars and railings and lights.
This was not an enemy you could smell,
though it made your eyes bleed
and your stomach gape open
like the red windflowers you have slept on.
Below, you sensed the fish that undulated
in the solitude of the river. It murmured,
offered, and you leapt to meet
the consuming quiet that welcomed you.

On Highway 10

The call came in--
woman walking through traffic--
and I found her wandering
out on Highway 10, tearing out
pages of her Bible. Jesus,
she said, I'm Jesus Christ.
I cut the devil from my boy
like my Father told me to.
We drove to her house

and on the living room floor
I found her baby, one long
gash covered the space
of his chest. Late sun
burning her hair, she stood over him,
crossed herself like a priest.
I've seen a man crazy on LSD
tear out his own throat
but this. I handcuffed her, took her

to the county jail where, arms extended,
she sang Guide me O thou great Jehovah.
So help me I wanted to shut her up.
Looking straight at me, she said
that God would let her save my soul
if she could see the body.
Those blue lips, she needed to kiss them,
taste him, make sure he was clean.
She would take the devil into herself.
She would do that for him, she would.

Dragging

The lake ripples like a rib cage
as we enter to search for the body
of a child who drowned yesterday,
my neighbor's boy gone one full day now.
We drop the steel treble-hooks and watch
to see what catches. Since this is my first drag,
they ask if I'm okay. I say yes, a little nervous.
Someone says a little hell, and we settle

into watching. As we drop in more claw hooks,
the boat slices the water. The lake narrows
and from each side the tops of trees touch.
Leaves fall to the water, their tappings
want to drown out the engine. I move
to check the ropes, pulling up, watching
them break through the darkness.
I hold my breath until a tree limb surfaces.

As the lake widens, the trees reach out to us
until their shadows pass behind. The morning
fog hovers close to the water, and I think
he could be just under it, floating
ahead of us, blanketed. The water swirls,
quiets the buzz of a locust or dragonfly,
and I imagine the ripple print left by its wings.

The new weight tugs the hooks, drags us
a little bit towards it as I catch
a glimpse of white cloth emerging
like children out of hiding.

Third Miscarriage

At first I thought she was on the floor
praying, until I heard her sobbing,
saw the blood on her legs and she raised
her hands up to me. I cradled her,
helped wash her clean, whispered
we'd try again if she wanted.
But what do I know of this emptying--
that image of her curled into herself,
hands between her legs to hold something in.
There are things I can't let out,
like how come every damn body but us
or forget this hell, we'll adopt.
When she's ready, I'll slide into her,
love her, fill her, and lay my head
in the sweaty curve of her neck. God,
I loved how she thought she was growing
fat and showed her belly proudly
even though it was too soon; she hummed
lullabies in the shower, asked me
to read to her stomach at night. And it's even worse
this time because, though we said we'd wait,
we hung his murky image on the refrigerator door.
We named him.

Funeral Quilt at the Highlands Museum

Something is better than nothing
so you gathered and pieced this quilt
with all you had left of them--sheets
off their beds, part of the navy slacks
you dressed them in for kindergarten
graduations, scraps of the shirts
they wore that day, the day

that the search boat hooks found them,
latched onto them, and they were laid out
on the bank like rugs stretched in the sun to dry.
You could only wonder what happened,
maybe one thought he could save his brother

but couldn't. You knew too well
what's done is done, no matter how,
so you cut stars and Dresden plates.
And what did you think about
while you secured the stitching--

once when the three of you scattered
the living room table with fleshy
tissue-paper flowers you had made
or the night they were warm with fever
and you, with a wet cloth, cooled them?

As you cradled the sewing frame,
night after night, pulling each stitch
tight, placing each piece just so,
the clean squirming smell of them
must have tiptoed around you.
And when you were finished
you might have almost forgotten,
walked to their room to tuck them
snug underneath this quilt and raged
against the neat and silent room.

Motherfriend**--with love**

I might have been the child
you cannot mention when asked
how many children you have
and you answer two; the one who died
when she was seven cannot be offered,
must be left to the steely predawn calm,
loosed by the hum of friends
when morning doesn't matter.

What was the worst of it--
how she died in the night
while you slept or finding her
gray in her bed that morning?
Giving her over to strangers
who tended her, dressed her,
combed her hair? Or the day after
you released her into the earth,
when you wanted to part the soil,
lift her out and shake her
into life, as she tried to do
with the cat that was killed in the street?

Because two were left, you breathed
out your grief, clipped construction paper
bracelets, washed sleep from their eyes,
charted their growth on the laundry room wall.

There is no logic to it, that barely
six months inside my mother I lived,
when your child didn't, though seven years
strong and familiar. And for what reason?
I wish I could give you that daughter back,
motherfriend, swell out your belly
and have her grow there, thrive
on your sustenance, lull
at your body music,
and be born to know you.

The Dress They Would Have Buried Me In

The humid attic air clings to me.
I long to raise my head, stretch,
but the cramped ceiling will not allow it.
I sort through relics--a stuffed animal,
gargantuan, a pair of crutches,
high school yearbooks. Inside a trunk
I find, the tags still on, a small pink dress.
Mold has turned the white lace collar
green as watercress. When I asked
my mother why it was never worn,
she told me that the doctors had said
I was born three months too soon to live,
that it was my burial dress. If my life
had been so brief, this dress
would enclose me, the pink lost
to dark confinement, and I cannot help
but wonder how death fits anyone.

IV. The Flesh

Dare

My brother dared me
to stay a full five minutes down
in Grandad's cellar. He called me
chicken: he'd seen the light
shining from under my door at night.
I eased down the stone steps, small
rocks sharp under my feet,
as my brother yelled a reminder--
No light or that's cheating.
In front of the door, I stopped
to pick up a feather, light brown
speckled with white, and carried it
inside where the damp air stank.
Only a small chink of light
lilted up from under my door,
and my heart flitted like a sparrow
trapped in a house. I traced
the feather with my fingers, rubbed
it over my feet, two numb things,
and stared at the narrow light
until I was a bird lighting on ash trees,
wings flailed out. I grinded the grit
on the floor, edging my toes as close
as I could to the light without touching it,
trying to see if I could feel
where the light ended and my flesh began.

**The Night We Decided to Cross Stoner Creek
and Take on the L & N**

A long dark fish, the train sliced
through the dark and lashed its tail
against the ground we stood on, smooth
and loud as a rolling white current.
It quivered like a muscle pulled taut
and screeched like an animal speared
clean through the middle. The crickets
hushed and the moon greased up
with the thick blue smoke it spewed.
Death pulled at us, glinted in the water
beneath us, longed to cover us like a skin.
All heartbeat, we leapt to the water
that swallowed us whole like bait.

Backseat

As I sat in the backseat singing
I'm a steamroller, baby,
I wanna roll all over you
my mother told my aunt,
up in the adult front seat,
She doesn't even know what that means.
But I knew it had something to do
with the low laughing voices
that I anticipated each time
my mother called Colleen who asked
her stickly mustached boyfriend over
and exiled me from my bedroom,
who sent smoke unfurling from under my door,
sweet smoke she always covered
with Country Scent just before she left
and washed from my sheets just in case.
Later, after my mother White Shoulder shuffled
in to kiss me goodnight, Colleen sidled up
to her boyfriend and drove off, their two
silhouettes come together, like the merged shadows
in darker corners of the cafeteria on Friday nights,
the daylight lunchroom clamor and serving windows
taken over by the pulsing music. One night
while I sat in a line of folding chairs, on a dare
slick-haired Danny Beamer asked me to dance,
led me out to the colored lights, kept his hands
skimming just above my shoulders while we turned
too slowly to There's gonna be
a heartache tonight I know.
Resting his arms around me, he scooted
his feet between mine, and I breathed in the salt

sweat scent of him for the last of the song,
when he cleared his throat to say Catch you later.
I sat and shook to the music
but didn't know the words, tried to place
Danny in the clusters out on the floor, saw him
gathered into a stick-legged group, rescued.

Blood Hunger**--for Tabitha**

1

The prickly pear bush grew so close
to the schoolhouse, it made a doorway
for us to crawl through--our witch place,
private voodoo house, land of Oz,
where I was Dorothy, you the Good Witch,
where we wished for the attentions
of twelve-year-old boys, plotted
the destruction of the girls who had them.
You wanted to be sisters and I was afraid,
so you plucked a prickly leaf, pushed
its point into your finger and then mine,
squeezed out drops of blood and held
our fingers together saying Our blood
is one, Blood Sister. We said Amen
because it sounded right, leaned
against the hard warm brick,
tasting our wounds.

2

One night when you slept over,
I held my breath and pretended
to be dead. I'd planned it out,
told you that my chest hurt
so you believed, screamed Wake up
and hit me to life with your fists.
You made my mother drive you home
and yours wouldn't let you come back
for weeks, even when you asked.
The bruises you gave me whorled
like geraniums, shone in the bathroom mirror
that we had steamed to conjure Bloody Mary,
sang the spell three times and watched
for her to materialize.

3

All summer danger
hadn't made an appearance
so we walked the three miles
to White's Grocery, hoping a car
would come while we crossed the bridge.
We lay down on the pavement, slid
until the double yellow line ran
straight through our middle
but nothing came. You had to pee
and squatted over some flowers
saying You can't kill a dandelion.
Reaching our arms over the edge,
we made the fish dance and arc
silver in the sunlight.

4

You were blood hungry
and finally got yours first, bragged
how you were a woman now
and could have babies of your own
if you'd a mind to, your mother said.
When I got mine, I cried until you helped me
hide my panties in some brush, promised
it would go away until my mother found out
and told me that I was a young lady
and had to act like one. We stuffed pillows
under our shirts to pooch our bellies
for practice, slept that way all night.

5

We painted our nails coral rose,
played Truth or Dare in corners
of the sweat haunted gymnasium
with thin, wire-haired boys named Kyle
or Todd, tried to settle into ourselves.
But there is always an unsettling.
Your mother told you to go wake Daddy
for breakfast, and you found him dead
under the sheets, looking pale and kind of mad,
not peaceful at all. His eyes stared off
to the right, like he'd seen it coming
and didn't want to go. They had to loosen
his hands from the covers to move him.

6

I worried about my very breath,
every meticulous inhale and exhale,
held each one as long as I could
and took my food in smaller bites,
chewing more before the swallow,
left my cover off at night, away
from my face, drew my knees up
for warmth. You wore grief
like a clunky corsage, then shut it up
inside your *Living Bible*, talked
of sun-starved insects living
on ocean flowers, faceless people
dying in some multitude of ways
every second, houses falling
from the sky like Icarus.