

children CHURCHES & daddies

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wrinkles in the palm of my hand

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poetry and prose
by janet kuypers

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children, churches, and daddies

And the little girl said to me,
“I thought only daddys drank
beer.” And I found myself

trying to make excuses for the can
in my hand. I remember being
in the church, a guest at a

wedding of two people
I didn't know. My date pointed
out two little boys

walking to their seats in
front of us. In little suits and
cowboy boots, this is what

is central Illinois. And my date
said he was sure those boys
would grow up to be gay. And

the worst part was their father
was the coach of the high school
football team. I think I

laughed, but I hesitated.
I remember being in the
church, it was Christmas

Eve, my date's family went up
for communion, and all I could think
was that singing the hymns was

hard enough, I don't know the
words, what am I doing here,
what am I supposed to do? And I

stayed seated, and everyone else
slowly walked to the front of the
church. Little soldiers in a

little line, the little children
in their little dresses walking
behind their mommies and

daddies. And the little girl
said, “I thought only daddys
drank beer.” And I found myself

trying to make excuses.

wedding lost

And she sees herself in the
passenger seat at night, her fiance
beside her, and the lights seem

all too bright, and the rain seems
all too loud, like the thunder of
soldiers running across a field to

war, swept with the drunken feeling
of patriotism, charging toward their
unknown enemy. And so it happened

that night, the lights got brighter,
the car started to spin, and then
she started to dream.

And she sees herself at the
end of the church, the bridesmaids
have just walked down the

aisle, the music changes for her.
She feels swept with the euphoria
of love, and she begins to walk,

but she falls, the bouquet falling
from her hand. And in slow motion,
white roses and lilies

scatter along the aisle. And she
looks up, and the groom is gone,
and the ground is the ashes

of the house they bought together
after they were married. She
sits up, and she's at the desk at the

bank, trying to get the loan for the
house. His job is secure, we're young,
nothing could go wrong. Good thing

he wore the blue tie to the bank, and
not the red one. And she sees herself
waking up from sleep, the oxygen

pipe still under her nose, her husband
there, tie in hand, asking if she'd like
to hold their baby. But she

could have sworn she heard the
baby stop crying. And she panics.
And then she wakes up, her head is
bobbing,

but now she's back, back at the
hospital, looking at the tubes running
out of her fiance's arm.

coquinas

1

I can't imagine
the number of times
I've been there

visiting Florida,
Christmas with my parents
a plastic tree
decorated
with sand dollars
and red

ribbons

eating Christmas dinner
listening to Johnny Mathis

and after the Irish coffee,
father with his brandy snifter
in hand
mother and the other
girls
putting away the dishes

the carolers would come,
walking in front of our home

singing "We wish you a
merry Christmas"
over and over again

we would walk outside
and the cool breeze
almost felt like Christmas
after the hot

humid days

and we would stand on our driveway
smile and nod

you could see down the road
all the candles in
paper bags
lining the street

and for a few lights
the bag

burned

2

and we would take
boat rides
off the coast
my parents and their friends
to a tiny island

dad drinking beer
sometimes steering the boat
control
the women sitting together in the
shade
worrying about their hair

i would sit at the front
sunglasses, swimsuit and sunburn
feeling the wind
slapping me
in the face

and turning my head away from the
boat
into the wind
away from them

to face it again

docking at a shoreline
everyone jumping out
little bags in their hands

the women go looking for shells
the men go barbecue

after an hour or two
the sandwiches, potato chips eaten
the soda and beer almost
gone

we turn around
and head back

we have conquered

3

and I remember
the coquinas

the little shells
you could find them alive
on the beaches north of the pier in
Naples

going to the beach
I would look for a spot
to find them

they were all my own

they burrowed their way into the
sand
to avoid the light
worming their way away from me

I unearthed a group of cocquinas
once,
fascinated with their color of
their shells, the way
they moved

before they could hide

I collected them
in a jar,
took them home with me

what did you teach me
what have you taught me to do
is this it
is this what it has become
is this what has become of me
of you of us

and I took them home

I added salt water and sand
but I couldn't feed them
I realized soon that they
would die

so I let them

the cycle

It all came to her like this:
she remembered when she was a child
coloring eggs

for Easter, wire spoons
dipping into the cup; colors of spring
and happiness

left to dry on a newspaper.
And she would always steal some away
to eat

before Sunday. And she
would hide the pastel shell in the trash,
the evidence,

and she'd hide the yolk,
too. She only liked the white of it. And
then she

remembers the onion skins,
boiling eggs wrapped in layers of skin
dyed them

beautiful shades of brown,
like the amber beads in mother's jewelry
chest, the

variations of color,
trapped by nature, captured by ourselves.

And she remembers
as a child listening to the McKinleys, an
older pair

with stories of
Panama, Mexico. They had so many foreign
stories to tell:

once they gave her an
egg for Christmas, a carnival egg, with the
inside blown

out, filled with confetti,
covered in colorful crepe paper. She
made her own,

relished in cracking
them over people's heads. But she saved
theirs.

And now she stands
in the kitchen, scrambling them for
morning meal,

yellow and white,
the colors in the nursery for the child
still inside

of her. She can feel
the kicking now. And she wants to know
if she can give

the color, the stories,
bring the cycle of life around for her little
one.

And she puts breakfast once again
on the plate.

farmer

And just north of his corn field
there is a college, the university
has bought up the property

right to the edge of his land. And
at that university there is a man
studying plant biology, he wants to

do research in food genetics, create
the perfect ear of corn. And the farmer
knows this.

All he wanted
was to be able to make a
living, maybe save up enough
so his kid could walk over to campus

every morning, maybe meet some new
kids. The government assistance has
run out, the state wants to push the

school south an extra mile, put up
a research lab, another dormitory. The
drought has done nothing good for his

field anyway. And the doctors say the
lump under his shoulder is from the sun.
All of these years

he would wake up early Sundays
to work, and he would find tire tracks
from souped up cars digging in his

property edge. Kids leaving beer cans,
junk food wrappers, condoms. And he
would pick up what he could.

In the upcoming years, would his
little boy do this to someone else?
And this was his labor:

he had sewn the seeds; the plants
running, hurdling the rolling hills,
sprinters uniform in a marathon.

And all the way to the street at the
edge of his property, the green sign
reading "1800 S", all the way to the

end is his life, his little earth,
in straight rows, like the peas
on his son's plate when he plays

with his food. And now the rows of
corn are less straight, as if in recent
years he didn't care. This year it's the

worst yet, he didn't bother with the
right chemicals, and there are weeds
in between the rows. The grass next to

his house is almost up to his waist.
And he's awake now, it's four
in the morning, and he's wandering out

in it all, and he's almost crazy. The grass
waves, almost staggers, like him. And he
thinks:

let the weeds grow.

the flashback

Everyone at work wondered
why she looked so down that day,
and occasionally someone would ask her.
“What’s the matter?” And she’d
say it was just a bad day.

And she went through the
motions, she did her work, she
ate her lunch, even though the lettuce
tasted bad, and then she had to
run an errand for the boss.

And she was in her car, it
was snowing, but not the pretty
kind of snow, not the kind you expect to see
on Christmas day. It was like the
snow was already dirty and gray

before it hit the ground.

And she was driving, and she
didn’t even realize she was going under the
speed limit. She was in a daze, lost, not
because of depression, but because

there was nothing she cared
to think about. And so she drove.

And she dropped off the crate of
flyers and the mailing list for the boss,
and she drove back, but the whole way

she was thinking that she
should drive slower, so she wouldn’t
be back at work so fast. And so she
drove slowly, coasting now, watching the
dirty snow touch her windshield.

And she looked over to her
left, and there was an old man, lowering
his car from the jack it was on. A flat
tire. And then she had a flashback.

And it was no longer winter, and
she was no longer driving -
she was outside, while he was trying

to fix the flat on his rusty white car.
They were driving back from a park, it
was summer in Monticello, it must have been
ninety degrees, and there
she was, sitting on a dirty beige carpet
scrap from the floor of the car. She had
taken the scrap and moved off the dirt
road, about ten feet into
the field. And she just sat there,
watching him, shirtless, fixing the car
so they could drive home. And she
wanted to remember it, just like that.

Then the light turned green,
she followed the procession of cars
through the graying snowflakes. And
she began to forget it was a bad day, and
she didn’t mind her daze.

in the air

Part One

Over Las Vegas with my family, my sister and myself in one row, my parents in the other across the way. We're nearing the end of our flight; mother tells me to sit in her seat and look out the window as we fly over the Hoover dam. Sitting next to father, I watch him lean out the window saying, just think of all that concrete. I look over his shoulder, the dam no larger than a thumbnail, the water, like cracks in a sidewalk, like the wrinkles in the palm of my hand.

Over Phoenix, preparing for another descent at 8:50 p.m., but it's usually fifteen minutes late, as it is now, I'm getting used to the schedule now. The mountains look like the little mountains you see on topographically correct globes, little ridges, as if they're made of sand, if you just lean your head down a little bit, your exhaling can make them all blow away in the breeze. And I know that what I'm looking for is out there, somewhere, I think this is where it is, I better not be wrong, I just have to search a little harder and find it. I love the city lights from above at night. Have you ever thought of how much power it takes to light all those buildings? All that energy. And every time I look, look out that little window with rounded corners, I see a string of yellow Italian Christmas lights strung across the ground.

And little Champaign, Illinois, and those little airplanes that 25 people fit in. The airport there is really nice, actually, it's made for a bigger city, a city of dreams and tall buildings, that's what I think. The roar of the planes are so loud, though, not like those 747's where you can sleep during the flight. But they fly low enough so that I can see the building I live in

from the sky. And where I work. There's the store. Neil Street. Assembly Hall. The bars.

Over Fort Myers, the city always looks different from any other place, all those palm trees, the marshes. Like you've just landed somewhere foreign, and pretty soon the big tour will begin. You can feel the heat, the humidity sticking your shirt to your back between your shoulder blades, and your neck, sticking to your neck too, from inside your cabin, before you even land.

Chicago looks grand from the sky with this huge expanse of lake next to it, like civilization crept up as far as it could but finally had to stop. The power of nature stopping the power of man kind, for once. And I cannot decide which one looks more evil. The lake does, looks evil I mean, at least at night, at night it looks like two spheres: a string of lights and a huge void. Daylight, and the snow on the ground looks dirty, too many cars have splashed mud on it as they drove by. And the sky always matches the shade of grey of the snow: fitting for the city of the Blues. Maybe the snow is already that color, that perfect shade of grey, when it falls from the sky in this city.

Part Two

Have you ever noticed that the air isn't normal air in an airplane? I mean, I know they have to pump in the air, and pressurize it and all in order to keep us alive up there, but there's just something about the air in the cabin that's different. It's got a smell to it, that's the only way I can describe it. A smell of all these people, going places, running to something, or running away from it.

When I go on vacation and I promise people I'll write, I usually write from the plane, just so I don't have to worry about

it for the rest of my trip. And I write their letter on an airsick bag. It's more interesting than paper.

I like the window seat, I like to look out the window. Clouds look like cotton balls when you're above them, and when you're landing cars look like little ants, on a mission, bringing food back to their hill. Little soldiers, back and forth, back and forth. And the streets look like veins, capillaries in some massive, monstrous body. And the farmland looks like little squares of colors. I wonder why each plot of land is a different color, what's growing there that makes them different. Or maybe it's that some of them are turning shades of red and brown because some of them dying.

Once I was bumped from my flight, but on the next available flight they gave me first class. And I sat there, feeling underdressed. And afraid to order a drink.

And it always seems that you're stuck sitting next to someone that is either too wide for their seat, or is a businessman with his newspaper stretched out and his lap top computer on his little fold out table. Once, when I was on a flight back from D. C., a flight attendant walked by, stack of magazines in her hand, Time, Newsweek, Businessweek, and I stopped her, asking what magazines she had. And she replied, "Oh, these magazines are for men." This is a true story. And I asked her again what she had. I had already read Time, so I took Newsweek.

slate and marrow

I

No one could understand, it was like every morning I couldn't find a reason to wake

up. The world felt cold, like slate, like the marble tiles in the front hallway of my

parent's house, that floor was always cold, oh, how I'd like to feel the cold against my feet

now. But there I was, in some eleven by twelve apartment, room, running from my past, my

present. Every morning I would wake up, and I would wake up from that night again -

when he came uninvited, or did I invite him? The haze of the drunken nights from then on,

wearing the dress, knowing the faceless faces couldn't care less, as long as they could have their way

with me later that night. What would my parents think of me now? I'm no longer their little girl.

I could feel myself getting older by the minute, I could feel my skin wrinkling, my joints getting

stiff. I could feel my bones, the marrow drying up, my bones crumbling away. And every morning

I still put on my clothes, got my work together, headed out the door. Could I ever get out of this

cycle? And it was if I had never realized that all this time I was looking for a purpose. And it was

you.

I I

When I strolled up to the street singer, I stopped because I saw your face. Why on earth did you

think you could tell me your secrets when we only met fifteen minutes before? And just being in your

presence made me break down, made me hate everything, made me love everything, made me want

change. I'd hit you in rage, I'd lean on you, my slate, and you let me. And it was as if the marrow was back.

I could just lay in bed at night and feel the blood running through my body, I could feel the oxygen as I

inhaled hitting my bloodstream. I could even feel the marrow, all the cells in my body moving faster and

faster. My skin would tingle. I suddenly had power - I could make blood move to any part of my

body, I could make a pain go away, I could turn myself into stone, not so I was cold and unfeeling, but so

I was strong, immovable. And I did it for me, but don't you dare think for a minute that I didn't do it for

you.

the fourteenth

grade school, lace and construction paper cut outs -
mimicking our hearts with school glue, a
sixty-four pack of crayons,
a doily, perhaps, and a child's scribblings,
"Be My Valentine." The beginning of every cold February
the classes of children are taught to make enough little hearts
for everyone, so that no one may be disappointed,
so that everyone can be your Valentine.
Nonetheless, one little child's construction paper mailbox
come February fourteenth
always had less than everyone else's.

And then it gets easier as the years go on
mommies buy little packs of Valentine cards
for their children to sign and give away to all the little
children at school. Saves them from having to
make all those cards,
the glue and the glitter and the cut-outs are messy.

Every fourteenth, second month
when I was little
I remember daddy bringing heart-shaped boxes
home for all the girls -
myself, my sister, my mother. I can remember mother now,
her candy box on her ironing board, thanking him once again
for the lovely gift. And so it goes.

And the card shops get fuller this time every year
husbands saying "my wife will kill me
if I don't get her a card" or young women complaining
"my boss told me to get a card for his wife"

And the flowers seem the same, don't they? Carnations
arranged in a big ball atop a little basket. Red,
yellow, pink, white. Lovely.
All the adornments of the holiday. Don't stop short of the best.

A girlfriend said to me once
she's sure boyfriends break up with you by the

beginning of February so they don't have to
buy you anything. So they don't have to say they love you.
Last year I spent Valentine's Day
taking those chalky hearts with messages on them
and scribbling my own on the back.
"Screw You", "Go Away", "Leave Me Alone." I never
liked the taste of those candies.
And the Valentine's Day party,
where all the single people were thinking,
"Please give me someone to go home with. Don't let me
be alone tonight."

And the women getting lonely
and the married couples arguing
and the suicide rate going up

And the woman looking at the carnations on her
dining room table
holding the card in her hand that says "love, Jake"
wondering why it doesn't feel good yet

the page

to inspiration

and you would still appear, appear in
the paper
I held in my hand,

rippling waves in the pages before me,
a dorsal fin
of a shark circling my head,

watching its prey. I could touch
the page
and still feel

the rose I threw over the mahogany
box in the
November cold,

the grass covered with ice, cracking
every time
I took a step toward you.

I could feel the pain in the paper, and
I could
still feel the cold

marble, freezing my fingers. And the
etched message
on the stone could still

took hold of me the way you did.
All I had
to do was look at your

writing and feel the blood rush, feel
your breath
on my neck, feel

the fist jumping out from the page
and hitting
me in the face. I could feel it.

I could feel a thousand wars fought
and won
on your page, in

your words. I could feel your hot
breath
pushing up against

my neck, I could feel your hands
taking my shoulders,
throwing me back in the chair.

I would look at your paper and see
out the window the
masses rising, rioting in the

streets. I can feel the tide rising from
your thoughts.
What do you possess? What

have you been through, to give you
such a gift? I
look back at the page,

and I begin to feel your hand from
under the page,
from in the desk, razor

in hand, shoving up through the fiber,
slicing at the air,
trying desperately to get to me.

And I get up from my chair, walk over
to the bathroom,
almost like memorization.

I feel nothing but the drive you felt.
In the mirror,
there are cuts on my face.

the muse, the messiah

I

I can see you now
hunched over, pouring yourself into
your work, scattered papers,

dim lights flooding
white over the glaring screen, in
your otherwise

darkened corner of the
world. And I know you can feel me
now, feel me rushing in

through the window
that you leave only slightly open
at night,

rushing in with a faint
whistle, circling around your neck, curling
up around your

jaw, opening your mouth
so slightly. You can feel my rush
chilling your teeth.

You tilt your head
back, closing your tired eyes
from your problems,

from your future in front
of you, on those pages, on that screen,
under that white

light. You let me open your
mouth more and more, you feel me
swirling around your tongue,

down your throat, into
your lungs, like smoke from a clove
cigarette when you hold

your breath to feel
the high, feel the ecstasy just a little
longer, or like steam rushing

down your throat when you
take a deep breath the summer morning
after a heavy fog.

You open your eyes.
You lick your lips. I make you
do that, I make you

forget your world. You can
feel me there, you can't escape me. I'm
there. I'm your muse.

I I

And I'm sitting in my
apartment, and when I reach out my
arm
shadows of my hand

stretch across the wall.
There is no music, but I begin to
move my hands, like

a ceremony, as if to
a drummed out rhythm, like the pant
of a mistress as she

walks down the hotel steps
into her car after seeing her savior, like
waves at
the sea slowly crashing

continued

at the shoreline.
The phases of the moon are changing,
and the waves are crashing

with more and more
intensity, with more and more
power, faster and

faster. And at this very
moment you walk down a street somewhere,
it is daylight,

and you see the white moon
peering toward you from the sky. The
moon was looking

for you. It wanted to
watch you. You divert your eyes,
step off the curb,

and for no reason walk
in the middle of the street. There is no traffic.
You are safe. And

the moon watches the stride
of your step, and the moon watches my hand,
and the moon hears

the rhythmic pant of
intensity, and the moon rises the water.
We feel the drumming beat.

The phases of the
moon are changing. There is no reason why
you should question this.

You can feel me. I
will keep you safe. I will keep you
alive. I'm your messiah.

one summer

1.

Kevin. You went off to work, I was alone in your
apartment, an apartment on a street corner
in Washington D.C., my first
trip alone. You gave me your key,
said you'd be home after work. And so I left,
closing the iron gate door I was so
fascinated with behind me. I walked through
campus, stretched out in the sun. I tucked the map
in my pocket, walked through
M street, took the correct turns. I remember someone
on the street complimented my shirt. I was almost sure
I had been in this town before.

And then I met this fellow, tall, unlike you,
and we went out, and I knew I didn't
have a care in the world, all my ties were
almost broken, I was almost free. And I'd never see
this man again. Maybe I'd let him kiss me.
And as I walked down the street that night
with him, I skipped. And he liked me that much more.

2.

Sheri. The heat of Arizona smelled like burning flesh.
I met your roommate, your friends, drank at the Coffee
Plantation, iced mocha coffees. And I met
you-know-who,
I still don't want to say his name.
He kept me occupied, no, he made me feel alive,
alive to someone who had never lived before,
alive those long five days. I could still mark the day
on my calendar, the day my life was supposed to
change, the day I was supposed to be free. But
it was supposed to be something
good, I was
supposed to start caring for myself. Then why

continued

does a part of me regret it?

He bought me a rose the day I left. And you took pictures of us. I thought that morning that it would be justice to never hear from him again. To leave it at that. But then I had to call him from the airplane on the trip home. Why?

3.

Joe. You had to be cruel to me, just this once. I thought we had been through enough, went through our own little hells already because of each other. I know we had our differences, but I was looking forward to seeing you, to seeing southern California, the stores, the glamour, the beaches, the commercialism. And you, you had to cart me away with your religious troops to the wilderness, leaving me at the campsite while you went off to church. And I sat there for days, watching us, watching us become bloodthirsty, we were trying to hurt each other, we were like animals, you starting your life with me in tow.

And I saw the redwood forests.

4.

Douglas. I never imagined how beautiful the east coast could be, rolling hills curling one state into another. We'd drive up a hill in your truck and I would lift my head, my chin as high as I could in anticipation to try to see the other side, the sloping down of those hills. I remember walking along the beach in Maine, restored buildings lining the rocky shore, the fog so thick you couldn't see fifty feet in front of you. And people

were suntanning. And I photographed the lighthouse - how do they work in the fog like this?

It's so thick, thick like the cigarette smoke coming from the inside of your truck when we would drive to antique shoppes in New Hampshire. Thick, like a powerful force overcoming someone, that holds you there, that doesn't let go. Like us.

5.

A week before the smoke and the hills I was in the Midwest and my father was screaming at me, two weeks before I was thousands of miles away dreaming of someone else. And it wasn't a month ago when I was skipping past the old Kennedy house, where movies were made, where this all began. And now, in this truck with you, I lean back, watching the scenery travelling past me streamline into blurred lines of color, and I think of marriage. Maybe with you, if time wears on, but probably not, I just think of marriage, to someone. Marriage, streamlining life into a blur. Settling down. Settling. It's funny how your surroundings change you.

And soon, I know, I will go back home, carrying my possessions in a tweed bag with duct tape on the handle, to get back to something. Driving through the plains to go back to life, it will all be the same again.

continued