

The Living Arts

dedicated to my sister, Kimmerle,
and to my mother, Rita

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for support of
the Living Arts and Science Center

Z°A

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Press

Walking
the neighborhood
again,
I am still learning
to get
to where
I did not know I was going.

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The Living Arts

Part One

We are all looking,

all trying to figure it out.

Lord knows how Mom afforded the classes.

Lord knows how old I was
or where my sister lurked.

Lord knows.

Now I'm calling my sister and Mom,
doing what families do,
remembering where
we were, why we went, and how we survived.

Returning decades later,
the street renamed
Waller to Martin Luther King,
I am looking
for the building I dreamt within,

the warping windows
and the long wood staircase climbing
into the reaches. The front rooms dressed
with a thousand pictures;
red-smelling paint coated fingers;
dark spirals of string.
Colors rubbed thick on construction paper
burst through every surface.

Art waited there, coiled
in its magic lair.

Sister, take my hand,

here we go!

Sister.

Take my hand. Here
we go
again. Let us climb in
with our single working Mom
into the gur gur gur
of her 20 foot catalina convertibleC

Winkin, Blinkin, and Nod
sailing in their shoe
the wrong way at 4:00 down
Nicholasville Road
find Living Arts and Science.

Here we set off again.

Dragon Dreams

The child dreams a dragon
who rides a full-recline
Israeli bicycle.

Blue and green, eager
to get the feel of his wings,
the dragon comes to fetch

the boy from the school yard.
He unfolds another bike.
They ride away clad

in safety helmets. They glide
by star-gazing denizens gathered
on platforms, grazing the sky.

Dark-sheened young women
(whose woven dresses roll
into desert sands) smile.

They pedal past undying
brush that coats all the level
land woody-stalk green.

Soon, along the river, the ever
present river, they reach
a dragon's golden flank,

where a tall woman waits.
She climbs the Gold's graceful
legs, sits astride the neck-saddle

and they are off, hair
and tail lashing behind.
Dropping bikes, boy and beast

break into air, filled with sweet wanting.
Who knows how far they will go,
but they are flying still.

How I scraped a Frankenstein-werewolf-cyclops that dwelt in me during my parents divorce

There are images we keep,
more real than any admit.
I find a monster's face
folded in a tattered file.
It survived all my moves.

I was a Little Jackie Paper
who grew and drew dreams
under the care of nameless
teachers. Once mom rode away
atop her grumbling elephant-car, I rested
on an island,
moated by a stone wall.

Its trees loom large in my mind as I climbed
steps toward the dry-blue smell of paint.

I remember no other children's faces, no talk,
only the presence of working hands,
of developing pictures in the dark.
I scratched my monsters from goo
coated paper with a nail.

Dragons opened spined wings
and looked out on the world.
Their bodies glimmered red; fire
spouted from their shoulders.

And afterwards, painting in hand,
peering down the long drive, I waited
to show Mom what she had left me to find.

Puff, the magic dragon

Puff, the magic dragon, lived by the sea
And frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honalee.
Little Jackie Paper loved that rascal Puff
And brought him strings and sealing wax and other fancy stuff.

Together they would travel on boat with billowed sail
Jackie kept a lookout perched on Puff's gigantic tail
Noble kings and princes would bow whene'er they came
Pirate ships would lower their flags when Puff roared out his
name.

A dragon lives forever, but not so little boys
Painted wings and giants's rings make way for other toys.
One grey night it happened, Jackie Paper came no more
And Puff that mighty dragon, he ceased his fearless roar.

His head was bent in sorrow, green scales fell like rain
Puff no longer went to play along the cherry lane.
Without his lifelong friend, Puff could not be brave
So, Puff that mighty dragon sadly slipped into his cave.

Puff, the magic dragon, lived by the sea
And frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honalee
Puff, the magic dragon, lived by the sea
And frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honalee

By Peter Yarrow and Leonard Tipton, On Peter, Paul &
Mary's MOVING, IN CONCERT

What Mom Taught Me To Carry

Not weights on my head, nor my back
straight. Not the burden of her world.
But to net with eyes the sun lispig
between the oaks. Or green surging baths
of flower leaves, casting off dependencies
to drift like foam on waves. Not huge piles
of orange Fiesta-ware plopped on my head!
But how to hold my sister-s heart in my hand,
how to put mine in hers. And from my mouth,
at dawn, like families of birds, out fly
her words. Her words. Her words.

Photos of the Wreck

The black and white photos speak still
of the wreck we saw ourselves through:
I snapped off pictures of match-box cars
careening down the tracks, piling at the bottom.
I lined them up to spell my name.

When my mother's boy friend moved in,
my world fell apart. Our family
had been living in wreck and clutter
ever since the divorce, and he made us put
everything up! His knife flashing, he cut
onions so fast your eyes could not even burn.
He stood, long oven-side, broiling and baking
pork-chops and biscuits. I washed dishes
as he crept upstairs for his news and quiet.

We were not allowed to explore his room
where he kept his cameras—their long hoods
and quick shutters crowded shelves.
His flash popped as he caught mother's flowers
with their long stems on film which hang
still on their kitchen wall. After drying,
I played downstairs with match box cars:
every day was my wreck-em-up derby.

As my parents reshuffled lives, I built forts
with blocks where good guys would win.
But before I could show Mom the smashed
forts and brave toppled combatants, I had
to straighten my mess for him. I hated
his call to clean the messes made as I saved the world.

Then he loaned me a camera, the first trust.
I was learning to uncap film and develop
images in the quiet dark of the Living Arts
and Science Center. Those photos still lead
me back to places I'm always learning to leave.

Who would have guessed

a child who failed hand-writing,
who could not say Ar@
and was in speech therapy for six years,
Who would have guessed
this child who could not spell and still cannot,
who took basic grammar his Senior year,
Who would have guessed
that he would find a home in a lair
of words and images,
a home in the beauty of human consciousness,
in the human need to make and create,
to discover
and surprise?

I mean, of course.

Of course.

Of course. How easily
we are shaped
by what we are allowed to love.

Fall

When the sun did its work,
he would creep under the fruits
drying on the rack
garlic, mom-s bras, towels,
his own tattered cords, holes
in knees. He lay as they swayed,
feeling shadows splashing
over his face. Those seamless days spun
like maple helicopter seeds.
He threw them hard as he could
and they always landed near.
He danced beneath, uncut bangs
whirling out. How many times
he flipped them back. How many times
they fell over his eyes.

Looking back,
rain rolls down the panes.
Pressed against the bright outside,
his face peers out, pockets packed
with helicopters and red Ano-no@ berries
from the shag-bush. Untried hope,
mashed and poisonous. Yeah, he got it good
once mom washed those gooey cords.

It is that child, that rack, I lay beneath.
As he sways, I throw him up again.

In a Wheat Field, Celle Germany

Feel the head of life
held, like a berry, in our mouths:

a berry. A berry.
Child stands chest deep in a pool
of spring wheat holding
a sprig of green
in the jump of his fingers,
spreading the seeds and their long
ends into a knotted arc,
(the back of a life diving whale)
and the child squeals. Caterpillar!
A berry in the mouth.

A berry, a berry.
Two men halt in a pine forest,
hear the creak of trees and
find two bees caught in a sweet trap
of roots and sap, two bees pushing
their way roughly up the side
batting wings against the tiny
root net.
Looking, they find only their own
tight silence waiting to burst.

A berry. A berry!
Look, the head of life
held in our mouths

And our mouths, berries too,
hung on the end of a thorny bush:

compact, red life-seed
of what may be

we hold you in our sun-dried lips

with eyes blooming
as we are held in your mouth,

we also going to seed,
food for what ever will be.

The Living Arts

Part 2

If I Were Wind¹

If I Were Wind I might visit Africa or the South Pacific.
I'd go to Chicago for a while just because it's called
the Windy City. I'd blow slowly through a beautiful
woman's hair. Then I'd leave and never come back.
In March I'd swoop down and pick kids up by their kites
and give them a joy-ride they'd never forget.
I'd follow the birds to their mountains and stir pine trees.
If an old Indian woman called, I'd come across the world.
I'd go anywhere I pleased. I'd go anywhere I was led.

¹This poem was written for special education students whom I was teaching how to write poetry.

To the Winburn Sixth Graders, Poem #1

Your poems converse,
beginning the world. They give
a celebration that few dare hear
in the quiet after thunder has split
the sky. When the first rhyme
rose from a young man's lips,
splitting words in the silence of the night,
the star that shined felt welcomed.
He caught their light on his tongue,
and for a moment spoke with a sun
in his mouth. The way is long,
but he was strong & started off.
He sung to The Sky who replied:

O, Tell me of your life,
tell me of your strife.
Tell me of the heights
from which your voice
has called.
Tell me of your joys,
of young people
coming into their own.
Tell me of swimming
in the sea,
Tell me of my sun.

Now he has begun.

For those who Listened
(To Winburn Sixth Graders, poem #2)

First thing, a young woman proclaimed,
All hate poetry words!@ But after a week,
she let her heart speak and decided
that she liked what it was she heard.

Pushing and joking, playing and flirting,
when they stopped banging on desks,
I saw young poets dare to play
with keeping time and trying rhyme,
transforming pure energy into lines.

I saw young ones bend their ears
over the wall of time, drinking in
the sweet voices of their grandmothers.
And I saw a young man dare
to reach through bars
and touch the heart of his father.

Mad at a teacher, another
wove a net of words to hunt his anger:
he would be stalked by it no more.
It had strong ways, but he was smarter,
so he snared, wrestled, and caged it
in a poem so others might be unhurt
when they heard its mighty roar.

I heard the joyful song that young sisters sing.
Their hands picked up the ring
of the telephones that sounded inside,
penciling down the beat of heart-heard words.

They hardly wriggled in their seats,
and I read about how good it was to be alone

in your own room talking on the phone
as much as you wanted.

At first, poetry seems no easy task,
no fun at all, but when a young woman
pulled up to her desk and tried,
she saw the lights of stars in her mind-s eye
and caught them like snowflakes
that dissolved into water on her tongue.
Yes, sometimes, I heard the harp
of words playing at your hands,
and sometimes you heard each other.

Field Trip

Barbara, leaving the teens to their own,
we walked toward the trees marked
"virgin wood" on the map
and took the long way there.

We stopped at sunny cemeteries, wild
flowers, and found a cave where light
cooled over a river that streamed
from the earth. Perched
in the quiet alignment of its mouth
of stone, we felt with faces and hands
what the coolness proposed.
So we paced late toward the promised
stand of trees and had to turn back
to the parking lot just in time to meet
the clustering kids who were doused
from delving up the river into the cave.
One had lost his watch under a stone
though it shined.

Why did we step
toward trees we had never seen?
Maybe we were searching for what
had not been cut, whose presence
we feel and traverse each day. Even
unshorn trees will not wait. Eternity gives
and flows, but maybe the trees grow
in us, or we grow on them, and our lives
are leaves that gather the leeway of light,
that cluster to nurture what we cannot deem
but feel deep within us.

Piled on board
the bus back that afternoon the kids
were joking, tossing hair, smiling,
and swapping stories. The wind blew

everyone's hair dry, and they were open
to each other's light.
They felt the wonder of sap
within their veins and fed the roots
that support us all.

Vent¹
To my fellow poets

Have you ever smoked
alone? Have you ever needed
a minute outside,
away from your mother's
kitchen? Perhaps for a long
time, you held all
the smoke in, seeing how long
you could do it. Then at last
you blew the smoke out
like it was smoke
from your heart's furnace.
Yes, the heart
can be a closet
where we sit sweating
it out, and sometimes

to bake quietly in a ball
of flame is good. But tonight,
let us show strength and lift
these smoldering coals
out from of our chests
with bare hands.
Let's feed the flames
and let our hearts fill
the air with burning hot
laughter. Though eyes
water, no one will need
to cough because
when smoke is words
and struggle, smoke is

¹This poem was written for the young men I was working with at the
Bloomington, Indiana Juvenile Correctional Facility.

like light and pure air.
Tell your mom this smoke
makes you smell clean.

So let us speak now
of what is yours and burns
with life like nothing else.

Allen Street Run-off

Along the concrete embankments
of Allen Street run-off
I am shifting
through the November day,
smiling at the sway created
by some half-crazed
Buddhist who-s planted
long stalked reeds
that look topped with feathers
enough to billow us all away.

It-s the driest day,
and I-m roaming
through post-raking remains
of leavesCall neighborhood yards
more clear than ever
before spring-s burgeoning.
My only company is a lady,
the first to hang her lights,
and an old man scraping the ground,
three whole days behind.

This quiet is like the silence
in the poems I might write
as our lives cycle by,
cycle by like Christmas-eager
knee-bent children whose feet drag
from too old dirt-bikes
as they race past
their neighbor-s stone stairs.
Jenny, let our love be simple
like the way people pile
rocks into altars in every yard.
Simple like the sheer shapingness
of backs and sweat.

Here amongst the warmest
November world, waiting
for you to return, I've sought
out the beautifully fooled early
blooming elms, and I'm thinking
about all the things
we might do outside
in the warmth on a sheet, and
I'm thinking about next spring
and a future of two story
houses with fields next door.

Now listen, love,
to all the great baying ones
who greet me
from their back yards fences
as I lope by,
hands blushing promise,
on my way home.

Old Ladies Who Drive Caddies

I love the old ladies: their heads perking
over the bend of the dash, like a turtle's
creep and rise above its turret's edge. Love
the danger they put us all in with white
bobbing scarf-tied bouffants, striving
forward for another day of joy.
I love them for their meticulous seeking.
Food for the cats, to the studio to shape
clay, ranging the mall, or one last trip
to the liquor store. I love how their humps
bend as they park at the grocery, how they back
into parking and cross the lines anyway,
how they start slow from the red-light driving
an entire line of lunch-crazed workers
behind them mad, buzzing with impatience
and fear. How they take their time.
How they make it precious. This world loves
them in the stylist's massage, in the roar
of the gleaming hair-dryer. I love how they
take care of themselves, seeking the good way
to go in Lincoln-Continental's and Caddies.
How they take it fast at a curve on the way
to their sister's, their cardiologist's,
their churches, their yoga classes, or glance,
again, too long at deer on the road-side
as they streak past wind-torn trees bent
to their passing on their way to meet God.