

Bloodroot

poems



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In memory of Larry Tolan

and

with love to my children:

Tom, Kathleen, Mary, Sandy, John and William

and their dear families.

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Under the Skin



Focus

At all times use whatever means expedient to preserve the power of concentration, as if you were taking care of a baby. So advised Chan Buddhist master Cijao of Chengdu in eleventh century China.

– In *For the Time Being* by Annie Dillard.

How does one begin? If you were taking care of a baby, you would not sit cross-legged, eyes cast down, breathing slowly in and out, in and out. You'd look at the baby, breathe in the baby scent, put his cheek against your own, walk back and forth across the room to soothe him if he cried. You'd sing and talk to him. You'd not turn away till he was clean and fed and safely in his crib. And still you'd listen. Even if you sat cross-legged, eyes cast down, breathing slowly in and out, in and out.

c. 2002

The Man Who Loved Trees

In memory of my grandfather, Louis August Maier

By 1932 the depression had hit the lumber business, and he had left Mellen and Medford and Antigo and the north woods behind him. He'd brought his family to Milwaukee.

But he still loved trees. Even when he had worked at the tannery which gobbled hemlock bark to make leather, or at the lumber mill which slashed through miles of white pine to make boards, he loved trees.

I remember a snapshot of him in knee boots, old fedora pulled down almost to his big German nose, left hand on his hip, right hand stiff-armed against a huge jack pine.

He loved pieces of wood. He had a wood burning kit. It had an electric stylus with which he'd write mottoes and draw designs – and once a perfect portrait of our house – on slabs of cedar. He showed us grandchildren how to use it

and watched us burn our names slowly into the wood.

He must have always known wood. His father had made church doors, picture frames and parquet flooring in his factory near Munich back in Germany.

Grandpa had a pack of stories about lumber camps. He told us about the lumberjack who licked the common butter knife. When the other men complained, he said, Well, I licked it *clean*. He taught us

I eat my peas with honey.
I've done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny,
but it keeps 'em on my knife.

When I went off to college in Massachusetts he told me,
“Be sure to go to Concord to see the biggest, oldest oak
tree east of the Mississippi.” I wish I had.

1983–2006

Beaumont Avenue

I can't remember
if the summers were long
or short, but it seems
I spent them sitting
in Kinnler's tree –
an old box elder
in the empty lot across
the alley – talking girl dreams
with Eleanor Joys.

Some days we explored
the lake bank or hid
under the weeping willow
halfway down,
spying on the bootlegger
who lived in a barred house
on the beach and kept
his rattletrap in a tin shed
up top. We read his signs –
Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted –
and shivered at images of
dungeons and electric chairs.

When it rained we played
Michigan rummy on the Joys'
screened front porch or read
Nancy Drew mysteries.
Mostly we tried to ditch
the little kids.

Once we big kids decided
to stage a murder –
I was the corpse. Garnished
with ketchup, I lay on the grass
in Barbara Witte's back yard
while Eleanor or Sally Gute
went to fetch the little kids.

When my sister saw me
with all that ketchup,
she began to wail.
So, uncorpse-like, I sat up –
glad to know
she'd miss me.

c. 1983

Lawyer's Wife 1955

I want you to notice the shine on the stove,
the order in the refrigerator,
the clean sheets on the bed,
and on the hall table
the stack of stamped envelopes
paying bills from my balanced check book.

I want you to see the children's clean, brushed hair,
smell their soap-fresh skin,
see sun freckles, hear new words,
turn the pages of their picture books.

Then you can tell me about your new client,
the pre-trial hearing, change of venue,
and I'll listen to what the judge said
about your brilliantly written brief.

c. 1983

Hospital Room

We arrive in Sunday quiet,
the evening sky pink, first scattered stars.
From the window I can see the spire
of the church where we were married.
For him the relief of bed – clean, ironed sheets,
Sleep.

Next day a deeper sleep,
rousing only to discomfort.
A cigarette lit, extinguished.
T.V. switched on, then off,
too tired to read or listen.
Sleep.

The children come, gently,
attempting cheerful heartiness.
Their father's humor, courtesy
flicker above near-coma weariness.
Sleep.

They move in for the night watch.
Sock-footed, they transform the room,
an annex of home: parkas, boots,
magazines, flowers, books,
milk cartons, tea bags in plastic cups.

Friends come.
We whisper outside his door,
or walk through sharp air
along snow-packed streets.
We wait.

Liquid drips into vein.
Oxygen eases breath.
Pulse and breathing slow.
I hold his hand –
he should not feel alone.
Sleep.

1981

Leaving

It was so quiet, gradual.
Then the nurse was there,
with a young staff doctor,
who asked us to leave the room
so they could examine him.

We stood looking out
the north window until
the doctor emerged and said,
“Your husband has passed away.”
“As if we didn’t know, you
pompous ass,” I wanted to say,
but instead answered questions
about the eye bank and the autopsy.

Now we packed up for home –
top coat, money, watch, books,
wheel chair. The flowers
could stay, and clothes for burial.
And he.

1981

After Words

The living room was full
of law partners, neighbors,
friends of his, of mine,
of ours. One had brought coffee
cake and orange juice, another
daisies and wine, another
matzoh ball soup.

Talk glazed the air. There
was always some one with
a reminiscence to collect
or with condolences to add
to the growing bouquet.

Our ten-year-old came in
from the park, where he'd
been tracking his sister
in the snow. Now he pulled
me to an empty room.
He had two questions.

Are we going to move?
Are you going to get married again?

c. 1981

Birthmark

On my face I bear
the mark of birth –
not my own, but
our child's.

The dark blotch still
seems new there,
on my right cheek,
though the boy nears
twenty.

Each child has left
me marked, thickened,
stretched, long
after the umbilicus
is cut.

Still, a thin tough thread
stays, reaches across
miles, slack or taut –
links me to dangers,
conquests, joy
and pain.

I could no more cut
those threads than
I could bleach out
the shadow on my face.

c. 1984

To my Father

I didn't think of you yesterday
as I skied through the sunshine,
pushed each ski along its shadowed track,
saw tight buds against the blue, blue sky.

I didn't think of your hospital bed,
wheelchair, boredom, loneliness
as I breathed deep, felt sweat rise,
stretched muscles, shifted weight
from ski to ski, enjoyed the hour.

c. 2000

Under the Skin

To Mary Maier Bitter (1929-1994)

I sit here, unwashed and weary,
in my old blue bathrobe and wool slippers,
wishing we could have been friends
as well as sisters. Wishing I'd learned
sooner that you could drop anger
and accept what came, that you'd
long ago found courage. And that I
could stop judging and just love you.

When I told you you were brave,
you said no I'm not. But you were.
I learned from you. I, your older sister,
who always thought myself wiser,
braver, saw how brave you were.
How patiently you endured treatment
you thought necessary. How strongly
you resisted any that seemed pointless.

If there is that heaven you believed in,
is that where you emerge to call to me
in my dreams? Ah, Mary, I find
I miss you, but your beckoning finger
frightens me. I'm not ready to follow.
I'll stay here in my untidy life and try
to dream into being a tardy link to
you, my sister, not just under the skin,

but in our freckles and troubles,
our memories of skinned knees and
hurt feelings. Of fights and secrets.
And in our membership in that
involuntary fraternity of family
and women. As a small penance
for my resistance, I remember daily
that in the end you taught me.

1997

The Question

It was different then.
A husband coming home –
good reason to put away
laundry, sort the mail, wash
lunch dishes and myself.

Alone, I can wear
the same baggy t-shirt
I slept in last night, leave
newspapers strewn on the couch,
skip showers for two days.

Solitude my silent companion,
I wake early and read late,
seek company and conversation
when I want them. The question is
how would we be if he still lived.

c. 2004

El Niño

This summer in my backyard city garden
a mob of purple clematis crowds the fence,
and near them pale peach poppies wave
dark-centered, ruffled paper faces.
Dandelions and creeping charlie vie
with grass. But in the front my lawn is gone.

The stiff blue spruce is also gone,
and growing in their places a native garden
where butterfly weed and purple coneflowers vie
with shadblow, dogwood, columbine. No fence
hides wild ginger or black-eyed susan's faces
or keeps out wind where native grasses wave.

And when the children come and go – first wave –
the garden's here as comfort when they're gone.
Later when we meet, I look into their faces,
their eyes blue green or brown – a garden.
Their mothers and I work to fell a fence
that sometimes forms as generations vie.

But soon we find mostly pleasures vie
to walk or read a book, or ride a wave –
such happy choices. We don't need a fence
between us. Boundaries, yes, but hurts long gone
should not like weeds intrude into our garden,
where mornings start with children's sleepy faces.

Yet there's a darker theme each of us faces.
This is a friend's last summer, and we vie
with time to cup in joined hands a garden
of summers we shared, wave after rolling wave,
the books and bonfires, picnics and losses, not gone
though we lose her, as she breeches the fence

between this land and what's beyond that fence.
We know we'll not forget those summer faces,
alive in snapshots, though the years are gone.
El Niño's floods and droughts still wildly vie,
but here in fast cool water, we ride the waves,
later recall her wild and tangled garden.

Of course, some gardens seem to need a fence
where grasses wave and flowers show their faces –
privacy and love still vie when those we love are gone.

c. 1998

Connie's Hilltop

I hope I'll remember
standing on this Wisconsin hill,
the earth a bowl around me,
leaves rust, gold, red
in the evening-tender light,
holy hills against the sunset.

My field glasses find
the church's gothic spires,
pull barns and silos close,
pick out water towers
and antennas my naked eyes
have missed these weeks.

I spy on each car or truck
that winds up the road
and past the hill, heading
to town or farm. I follow
a small plane as it floats by,
lights blinking.

That pilot can't know that on
this hill below, I watch, wondering
who he is, where he's flying –
into that flaming western sky?

1983

To Harold

Sometimes looking out the window
is not enough. You have to go out
into the night to see the moon,
see the high-lit clouds scud by.

Some days you can't stay in.
You need to feel the wind,
raise your face to the sun,
stretch yourself skyward.

But though you've gone,
your stories, your blunt
truths, your open hands
stay here with us.

2001

For Larry Shue

Boneset, wild asters, cosmos,
a few tattered phlox hang on
to summer in this sad September
of hurricanes and earthquakes,
car bombs and falling planes.
And now you – smashed
on a Blue Ridge mountain,

lines unspoken.

You had a mission.

Your kind humour lightened time,
your sane eyes saw true.

Through fools' caps and putty
noses – even foul words –
your goodness gleamed.

1983

Making Soup

I rinse the lentils, slice the carrots, chop the onions, mince the garlic; and as I do, preoccupations drain away, and peace comes drifting in. I pour the oil into the pan, saute the carrots, onions, garlic; and as their odor fills the kitchen, remember other soups, the family round the table.

And I wait for my youngest son to come to this house that never was his home. It's been so long. How will we be?

I dump the lentils into the pot, pour broth and water in. And think of him – the one who only knew his father ill – no memories for him of playing ball or raking leaves with Dad. I know his father loved him – I wish he knew it too. And so I try to stir that love into this sacramental soup for us to share.

c. 1994

Bloodroot



Spring Cleaning

Leaves up my sleeves,
twigs in my hair,
smell of warm earth.

Under last year's dry duff –
red spears of emerging
peonies, surprise

of blooming snowdrops,
yellow daffodil leaves,
starving for chlorophyll.

c. 1998

Weeding in the Rain

Gray and damp – perfect morning
for staying in and reading
the Sunday paper, then lunch.
By the time I'd geared up to weed
a small quiet rain was falling.

All week the sun had felt too hot,
the ground too dry and hard
for pulling weeds. Then last night's
showers soaked the soil, making
weeding easy. So in the mild, misting
rain, I dug up a menagerie – crab
grass, pigweed, dandelions,
creeping charlie, goat's beard.

I wiped my muddy hands on my
jeans, my dripping nose on the back
of my wrist. Water from my wet hair
trickled down my neck, on to my damp
t-shirt. Ah, weeding in a warm July
rain – damp Sunday pleasure.

c. 2000

Fall from Grace

She used to tend her seedlings,
write poems celebrating
shadblow, shooting stars,
prairie smoke.

Now mornings she reads
stories of war and terror,
combing the news for
flecks of hope, wonders

if diplomacy can stand against
the hunger for revenge, if
peaceful resistance can blunt
the spears of terrorists.

The news answers. Bombs
and missiles prepare an ancient
war-rent land for seeding
with special forces.

A misdirected rocket kills
four civilians, wounds more,
and rubbles their stone houses
in Kabul.

Back home postal workers wear
masks against Anthrax; each day
school children must recite
the pledge of allegiance.

She goes out to rip creeping
charlie from her flower beds,
untwine subversive bindweed
from flower stalks.

2001

Weeding in the Rain 2

I started digging this cool,
cloudy Wisconsin morning.
When it began to drizzle
I was plunging the digger deep
into my prairie garden, through
the maple-leaf duff and soil,
extracting huge dandelions.
I hardly noticed the rain
until it fell faster and
soaked through my porous
windbreaker. I was cold and wet,
but always one more
stubborn 'lion to attack,
and I was enjoying the battle.

2000

Marsh Marigold

In spring the basement leaks.
The dog and we track mud
into the house. In the soggy back
yard, a marsh marigold blooms.

Its yellow flowers gleam
against round, dark leaves –
green-gold toughness, making
it in the city, reminding us

of wet woods where clumps
of marigolds flash their light
past shadowed tree trunks,
and masses march along

watery ditches beside
the road, edging the woods'
shaded mysteries with
their bright bravery.

c. 1981

Bloodroot

All week we'd passed the weedy patch,
lugging grocery bags into the house,
going out to close the cold frame
against night frost, carrying kitchen scraps
to the compost heap.

Saturday morning we saw it, among
last fall's dry day-lily stalks –
eight narrow petals forming a white
star, cupping yellow stamens in their
sculptured, fragile perfection.

A scalloped, veined leaf, moss green,
framed the solitary flower. Sunday
the blossom was gone, leaving
a shiny, pale green pod.

Sanguinaria canadensis, cousin
of the orange-red poppy, non-narcotic,
shares the human tendency to bleed.

1981

Lilacs

Armsful of lilacs make me
feel wise as Minerva,
young as Persephone,
beautiful as Helen of Troy

I breathe their languorous scent
pin them in my hair,
crowd them in vases,
let their perfume fill my rooms.

1982

Henry Checks his Garden

June third, at least a dozen tomatoes in already,
cabbage four inches tall, and tiny spinach leaves
and peas. The clumps of chives are thicker,
have spread, and the camomile has begun to feather.
We've eaten asparagus four times, small portions,
but it's ours – and fresh.

That crazy mustard is everywhere; grass,
bindweed, and burdock fight for the strawberry
patch. But the new herb bed thrives, and
transplanted black-eyed susans fend off
the dandelions on the bank below.

There are still basil, cantaloupes, marigolds,
and more tomatoes to move out. Those hours
with seed catalogs, peat pots, grow lights,
those quick visits to the potting shed
are past. This is almost better than the harvest.

1981

Common Milkweed

Unpretentious, sturdy plant, *Asclepias syriaca*,
your Latin name gives no clue to your seductive
odor – lilac laced with gardenia.

Wafts from the tiny flowerlets of your round umbels
seduce not only me, but flies and bees and wasps;
beetles, moths and butterflies.

Especially the Monarch – milkweed butterfly – who
sips your nectar, lays her eggs on your leaves or stems
which host the chrysalids

where the pupa grows silently, passively and one day
emerges as a butterfly, *mariposa*, *papillon*, product
of metamorphosis.

She soon forgets you and begins a long migration
to Texas, California, or to Mexico, where millions
cluster in their new hosts – oyamel firs.

And fly, alight, lift off again in sunshine with
nary a milkweed in view. Do they ever
remember you?

You who nourished and supported them?
Benevolent plant to butterflies who beat their
wings as they suck your sweetness,

hovering safely above your flowers as their feet
do your work, dragging pollen to take to other
blossoms. But some insects

become your victims, their feet caught in clefts
at the base of your flowers, while the stronger
pull hard and escape,

loaded with your pollen. They've done your work.
You've been exploited too. Your floss filled life jackets
in World War II,

and plumps Ogallala Down comforters and pillows.
That sticky milk you ooze is latex, your crushed fibers
make paper, fuel and furfural.

You're looked on as a botanochemical crop,
planted in rigid rows in western agro-fields
and scientifically harvested.

Last summer two or three of you appeared
in my front-yard prairie. This year
twenty-six – a colony.

Ah, *Asclepias syriaca*, dear common
milkweed, come back to my front-
yard prairie and this time

entice the monarch to lay her eggs,
and from the chrysalis perhaps –
kings and queens –

regeneration.

2003

Henry's November Garden

Behind the vegetable garden
dry goldenrod and wild asters
the color of worn pennies
bend in the gray wind.
Muddy tires that held heat
for cucumbers and muskmelon
weigh down the black plastic
that covers the compost heap.
I've piled rusty maple leaves
where broccoli, spinach, green
beans, and lettuce grew.
I've dug in cabbage leaves and
squash vines to soften the clay,
put rabbit wire around the berry bushes,
stacked away the tomato towers,
coned my wife's intruding rose bush,
spread straw over the strawberry plants.

Now the long sigh of winter
until the seed catalogs trickle,
then flood in with their gaudy promises.
And finally the seeds arrive.
I'll plant them in pots and flats
and watch them sprout under lights
in the basement, then harden off,
days on the porch, nights in the back hall
until, at last, I can move them out
into the garden of another summer.

1982

September 14, 2001

Flocks of sparrows are eating elderberries from the bush next to my back door. The bricks beneath are spotted with purple, littered with bits of pulp and skin. I try to ease into the pleasure of watching. But the purple is too close to the color of blood.

2001

Elegy for a Garden

It was time to move
away from twisting
stairways, a house
hungry for repairs,
a garden crying out
for more time & muscle
than I could give, but out front

what a garden – wild geranium,
blazing star, prairie smoke, New
England asters, bee balm, black-eyed
susans, cone flowers, wild ginger,
shadblow, red-stick dogwood and gray,
high-bush cranberry, milkweed, fleabane.

I thought the buyers liked it, but now
there's a conventional lawn in a tidy front
yard and a backyard fence-to-fence Kentucky
Bluegrass. No wild strawberries, no sunflowers.
The compost bin is gone, the witch hazel
bush with its wispy yellow October flowers.
The small, struggling American beech tree gone.
And, of course, the big, messy elderberry bush,
whose small fruit spattered the patio bricks purple.
How the sparrows must miss it.

2006