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WALKING TO KEY WEST

STACY SMITH SEGOVIA

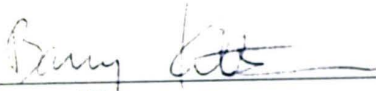
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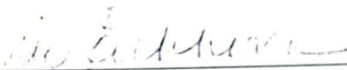


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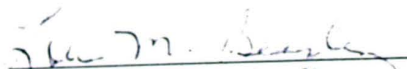


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WALKING TO KEY WEST

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
Austin Peay State University

Stacy Smith Segovia
2003

To Arriba, Bonita and Zapata—

the kind of friends we all should have and all should be

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Abstract

In the tradition of confessional poets like Sharon Olds, this thesis aims to expose elemental parts of human life that are often kept hidden. By considering events and emotions from different angles and retelling them as poems, a writer can uncover truth, a vein of understanding that helps us to appreciate each other, appreciate the undercurrent of loveliness and pain that is in us all. It is my hope that some of these poems will have that effect on readers. The primary subject matter is a girl's growth from child to woman to wife, and the implications of each stage of life. A substantial section of the work addresses the pain that comes from giving less love than we want to give, and receiving less in return.

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WALKING TO KEY WEST

Teeth

Small animals live in my toothbrush.
They sing to me
while I brush.
They hide in the black bristles
at night
and wait for me to come
to them each morning.
I hear their screams
of tiny delight
as I touch the rubber handle.
They sing
to the rhythm of my strokes
in a language
of loss that pulls me into
the deep black bristles with them.
Alo! Alo-ahh! they sing.
Theirs is a song
of dirt removed—
of exposure,
of white enamel
shining
like a false limb.



Fair trade

It wasn't a game we played
down by the creek—
he just wanted to see
the wet nipples poking through
my bathing suit—
and I
the fleshy roll
balled up
in the netting of his trunks.
No one was near.
The tiny hairs stood up
on our necks.
I pulled down my straps,
watched him untie his shorts.
Five and six, we
already sensed
something
hungry something
naughty something
we wanted
to see
for ourselves.



Learning

I'm gonna be the first female President
 of the United States, I used to say—
 not that I even liked the idea.
 Everyone told me I was
 eons beyond
 the other kids— what did I know?
 In second grade I learned to spell
 encyclopedia
 and catastrophe. No one else did.
 I could read Nancy Drew
 in a day.
 I hated math, but they
 put me in the fast group.
 A lady came in to test my brain.

Now I look
 at my college classmates
 and know there's not a cell
 in my brain that could hold even one
 sophomoric attempt at organic chemistry.
 I lust for all these things
 I'll never know—
 they do not come easy
 to the mind of the poet freak.

Now I wonder
 if it's safe to say
 I'll someday be elected President
 of the Suburban Ladies of Poetics
 or at least Secretary—
 I'm good at making lists.

But in those days
 when I drew Super Pickle cartoons
 and studied biorhythms
 because I liked those machines
 by the pay phone
 in the mall

nothing was too big to fit inside my head—
to grow there, fertilized
and lush,
secure in the hope
that there was nothing
I could never know.

E-n-c-y-c-l-o-p-e-d-i-a
C-a-t-a-s-t-r-o-p-h-e.



Growing Out of It

Age 7 to 11
 I was fat for a lifetime.
 I digested "Two Ton"
 and "Chubby Chubby Choo-Choo"
 with bites of furtive chocolate,
 appositives for "me"
 held all day in my stomach
 like gum swallowed
 and held for seven long years.

Only now
 can I look back
 on pictures of myself at thirteen,
 coltish and long, in size 8 jeans,
 and know only my brain
 remained fat
 after puberty played its jig
 on my blood and bones.

Only now
 that this same body's long bones
 unfold and crack me into
 each new day,
 can I look in the mirror and see
 not less or more than I should be—
 only me, flesh and angles
 that are mine alone.



Musclcd Butterfly

Musclcd butterfly
 stretches spotted wings
 beneath my skin—
 prism wings,
 holding splintered
 light, poised for flight
 bloodless.

Look close,
 see its colors
 pouring
 from my pores—

Its muscles
 are my muscles,
 its paper wings
 are mine,

It
 stretches,
 reaches—

I hold my breath
 and fly



Bullies

When my hair is white
from roots to brass-orange
tips, I will still see the imprint
of that tiny slap across my face
twenty years ago.
The sting is forever.
They are trying to teach us
not to stand,
there's no such thing as
a fair fight,
to be quiet,
to be meek,
to be bullied, or else.



Ancestral Breasts

"put a pat of silicone
up against her breastbone
teach her she's a man-made thing"
— Dave Wilcox

I always loved my mother's breasts,
curving inward on top,
softly outward on their bottoms
dark gnarl of nipple standing
on cream brown skin
—the realization of my own breasts' potential—
slopes infused with life, with the woman I'd become.

She complained
I'd sucked them flat, fat baby
always hungry, never satisfied.
I looked for what she missed in them,
tried to imagine them rounder
as if I again put her nipples to my lips,
this time blowing, expanding them
like balloons.

I knew she was unsatisfied.
I watched the blush rise
as she stared into her handkerchief drawer,
me quizzing her about the foam triangles
she pinned in her bikini.
What for? I asked.
So they won't come out when I dive.
Dive she did,
back arcing through the air
perfect as the moon,
breasts balanced
on triangles of foam.

When I was eleven,
she opened her shirt, braless like never before
to show me the scars.
They were swelled, like I'd imagined,
but looked like the balloon
held tighter on top

and gave way to the pressure
 on the rounded underside.
 The changed contour of my mother's
 breasts paled
 under the radius and curve
 of scar, a gash
 from the center of each nipple to its bottom,
 attached to a rim of red.
 Whatever guilt I felt for sucking them flat
 was gone.
 I never did this!
 I saw her lying in bed,
 tubes draining blood
 from under the covers,
 her face twisted,
 no Icy Hot to bring the smile back easy,
 no three-set victory to celebrate
 over the pain.

She was a beauty queen,
 an iris with a crown, when she decided
 finally, at forty,
 Bigger is Better.

What's worth this?
 I already knew I hadn't sucked her flat--
 I found triangles
 pinned in teenage swimsuits, too,
 long before her favorite age, 27, the year
 she was pregnant with me.

She had never been less
 than herself, and I knew it.

Richard Dawson kissed her goodbye
 when she lost the national pageant,
 my six-foot mother,
 one-hundred-twenty pounds of breast and bone.

She's been through a husband since then.
 He never knew her saline secret,

never suspected that firmness in his palm,
his mouth,
to be anything other than my mother.

Now, she lets me touch them,
her post-fifty breasts
standing taut like the girls'
in Playboy.

Mine never did.
Each year, my breasts will sag
a little further, grow a little softer.
I can only guess
what they'll look like at fifty.
My ancestral breasts, the map of my mother
that shows what comes next for me
is covered over, sewn inside.
The echo of her lives
in my own small slopes.



Jumper Girl Star

"My jumper! My jumper!"
my mother shrieks,
but rubs my hair back easy
from my face, still hot with sleep.
"Are you going to do this one today?
Do this one today!" she begs,
and half-asleep I glance
at the wrinkled map she holds,
her long finger resting on the Eiffel Tower,
like an oil rig.
"Sure, Mom," I answer,
unfolding myself and stumbling to the shower.

"Star, come on!" she urges,
calling me by her own name.
I follow her through the huge glass doors
out into the street.

Standing on the tower
I don't see the angles made
by the dark steel girders beneath me.
I look up and out
into the blinding bright sky
and jump . . . Rush of air, the sky,
I hold my arms straight out,
give way to falling.

My heart seizes
when cold, quick water
rushes up to meet my fall.

Though a thousand feet away
on land, my mother's voice
is at my ear, whispering "My girl."

I push through the heavy water,
her face sending a column of light across
the cresting waves to guide me.

I ride this rail of light
toward land,
toward my mother's face *beaming*
North Star
bringing me home.



Why her mother cried

Danielle thought she knew
why her mother cried
at her wedding.
The sight of her
in her white pouf gown
walking into a new life
made her mother want
the soft weight of her,
crying baby,
in her arms again.
No more boys would
come to the door for Danielle,
boys her mother knew were
wrong,
but said nothing.
Her mother knew she would
shrug them off
like prom dresses,
perfect
for only one night.
Now that she has chosen
one man,
she will leave her mother
to love him,
Danielle thought,
looking back through her veil
at her mother's tears.

Thirty years later,
Danielle knows how
wrong she was.
Her own daughter stands
straight, dark curls down the back
of her white dress,
flower petals trailing.
It takes Danielle back
to the day her own mother cried,
mothers after mothers

crying themselves through
the memory of themselves at 23,
shining, white brides,
so young, so sure
that the world will take
nothing from them.

And then it does.



You are a beautiful woman

I look up and see her,
 leaning into her stride.
 We meet at the corners of the sidewalk—
 she smiles at me, pink-lipped—
 I don't stop.
 Short legs, moving like gentle pistons
 pass me,
 her back bent into her walk.
 I look over my shoulder to watch her go:
 jeans turned under at the ankles,
 simple white shirt,
 black hair falling in feathered waves
 at her shoulders,
 leather bag flapping on her hip
 like a tail.
 She looks nothing like me.

You are a beautiful woman—
 the words form inside
 like a cord, thick and predetermined.
 You are a beautiful woman
 I want to say, but some part of me
 won't let me.

You
 are a beautiful
 woman! I tell her—

she presses
 a smooth brown
 stone
 into my
 hand.



I ain't doin it. I ain't doin it. You do it.

He picked the broken antenna out of the carpet and jabbed. Nothing. He jabbed a bunch more times and she still didn't move. No one wanted to call 911, because we knew the cops would come and then we'd all be in it. At least we could tell she was breathing, so we knew that was a good sign. Her arm was getting red and scratchy from him poking her so hard. Stop, I said. He kept poking. Is anyone okay to drive? Verdell said he could drive but couldn't drive a stick. Well, damn, Verdell, that's all I got. We looked around a little longer then decided what with the amount of X she took we had better get her to the doctors. They helped me shove her in the passenger side, then sat her up a little so there was room for me on the driver side. I pushed in the clutch and cranked down the window. That's it, I said. I'm not hanging out with you people anymore. In the rear view mirror I saw the glow of their cigarettes in the yard get smaller and smaller. All I wanted was to dump her off somewhere and go right back where I came from.



Roseland

They come in here every night and it's the same thing. They're dancers. Every one of them's a dancer. Look. Her. She could be a crook or Godzilla when she leaves here and I will never know it and don't want to know it. At first, they're just bodies, and I'm looking at the way they move, take off their coat, to see how much they've already got and how much I have to work with. Some of them take right to it so easy I know I'm just an example of what they can do if they practice. I still charge \$25 an hour, but those are easy, like you unlock the door, you walk right in and the place is yours. Other ones move like lumps of dough. Like her—there, see what I mean—she's fat and puffy and slow and doesn't feel good and probably nobody has told her she's pretty in twenty years. If ever. But she'll come see me. We have a lesson at 2:30 tomorrow. She wants to be out there, on the floor, spinning in the silver dress or whatever thing she has hanging in her closet she's had hidden away for years. I can help her. She's a dancer.



They say, Stella, we want it hot.

Some of the boys started wearing legwarmers and I'm thinking, what is this anyway, Fame? I'm gonna live forever? But they like it and I'm not going to laugh at them, so I put them in pairs and teach them the hottest moves I've got. Their bodies start to fit together like parts of a machine. I tell them you have to work every day. Every day if you want to win Dance Masters. I'm not old yet, but some of these kids, especially, it seems like when they're fifteen, their skin is almost see-through and it's like a moment in time when their kid self is meeting their adult self in a doorway, and they grab each other and dance. It makes me miss Sam so much. We used to turn out the lights and dance in the studio in the dark, and the thing I could feel most wasn't even my body doing the steps, they were habit by then, but I could feel Sam's breath, like I could feel him being alive even when I couldn't see his face. Sometimes I dream about that, and when I first wake up in the dark, I can feel him breathing.



Brandy gives

I go in her house
I round the corner
I know that Troy and Brandy
are together
I watch him clutch
her, flesh goddess
his body pressed against hers
at every round instant.
He holds her breast
in his mouth, sure
that's where it always belonged.
I lean in close to him
every nucleus of every cell of my body
paying attention
and know what he feels
to be pulled in
to her fire.



The Things You Give Me From Your Pockets And Purses Are So Rare

This is just to say
I'm not as good as your treasures,
your full pack of gum, all 17 pieces,
your used bookstore credit,
your matches,
your nail file,
your Valentine chocolate,
your editorial board ribbon,
your Neutrogena hand cream,
your Dead and the Living
your lone Camel light,
given with love.

Forgive me,
I ate your attention
like a prize at the bottom of a cereal box
that didn't advertise a prize at all.



Good for me

I lie on the couch
with my hands between my legs
images of penis heads
taut, pearly, stalked
flashing through my head
like backlit filmstrips.
Then — a flash.
My eyes snap open.
The escalation sinks down
and my body sags.
I am not alone.
I tense and close my eyes
waiting to hear his feet on the stairs,
imitating sleep.
But the only sound
is the steady whush of the air conditioner.
I am
alone.
I look down—
my hands are not
wedged inside my skirt
where I left them.

This is the first time I have
dreamed of pleasure
I could give
myself
and want to go back.



Warm spot

The warm spot I leave when I rise
is the best spot in my whole life.
It does not fit like a tailored suit.
It fits like a down blanket,
like a pillow-top mattress
like a tongue fits in a fold of skin,
like a whisper fits
in the tiny hairs on your ear.



Package

I fold myself
into a tiny
package that I
hope to give
to you.
My sketches
turn inevitably into
sperm and egg
unions—spiraling
globes surrounded
by curvy-tailed
periods.
I want a baby and
you know it.
You want a baby
and let me know
it, every morning
rubbing my belly in circles
telling me *I want you*
to have my baby.
And again
I knot myself into
yoga shapes that
have no name,
hoping that along
with my baby you
will take me
folded
in your pocket
wherever
you
go.



No one taught me

My hands shake
my heart hammers in my chest
as I dial the number of your voice mail box.

Is it the secret that titillates
married men?
Is it having a tiny slip of paper
tucked in your pocket
so I'll find it in the laundry—
a tiny reminder
of your secret life.

Drugs, I think. I could benefit from a sedative, a good
night's sleep I tell myself as I dial those numbers for the
first time, the little rectangle of carefully-cut-out notebook
paper shaking like a mad leaf in my hand— but today,
twenty-four hours later, my fingers dial the numbers by
rote.

How long until I hear her
cooed love words
in your secret voice mail box?
Will I dial these numbers
fifteen times before I hear them,
or fifteen hundred, or will I
never hear her voice? It's easy to think I'm crazy
when I'd rather be crazy than right. Maybe
you just chose her name
as your password
to be cute.

Maybe
her words land like feathers on your lap
weightless and warm,
everything you ever thought you needed,
and more.

Between us

For weeks,
nothing added up.
I looked at you and knew
you were lying, wished I could be
oblivious. The stories you told
went from improbable to absurd,
and I asked you "How can that be?"
Street corners don't match up,
motives and meeting places
ring of the ridiculous
and you are at it again.
You are at it again,
each lie a shim
wedged



Water

I'm thinking of leaving.
Tomorrow I'll check my
company's web site for openings
in the Virginia Beach area. Maybe
the North Carolina coast. New water.

I won't stay here

with all the sweet people
who have known me since kindergarten,
with your 15,000 throbbing fans.

I will leave you

by leaving this place. I've learned this
through years: physical separation
is the way to say goodbye.
It's the only thing that has ever
pried my white knuckles loose.

And I took you

in. Drank you in like the coldest drink
in summer, deep. I saw myself brilliant,
the best parts of me clutched
in a hand-tied bouquet
you held in my face.

Like any living thing

we need water. Days without
shelter, pouring rains, blacktop runoff
collects in rivulets. It makes muddy
the source. We are sick and suspect

we are making each other.

You stopped kissing me a long time ago.

Thinking of new maps, fresh water,
wide streets, an unfamiliar place to call home,
distracts me. Surely
it means something is wrong with you

or me.

I know you dream you are drowning
in my mouth, a dank, windowless
basement filling with liquid,
eating you as it steals your air.

You drown like dread.



Broken

When I met you, my life fell open
like my jaw, unhinged.
I saw your eyes widen when I danced
under a flock of blackbirds
and I loved myself more for you loving me.

Now, our lips are tight—
the nights I stayed out one hour after another
and came home drunk
are shadows across your eyes.
Your eyes show me more
than I want to see.

I make chicken casserole for you
and we sit on the couch and eat
in front of the ten o' clock news.
We're older now.
We hurt each other
more thoroughly
than we loved each other.

Five years ago we held a crystal ball in our hands
welled up with thoughts of all that could happen
for us, the children we would have, the love we would
make as if time never mattered.

The chicken sticks in my throat.
I get up to take my plate to the kitchen
each step deeper into a carpet of crystal
soft and sharp, like powdered glass.



Odds and ends

It is his first night
in his new apartment.
She packed up all the unmatched
silverware, the plastic
plates, the chipped
glasses,
and sent him on his way, smiling.
A few minutes before, she had held
his face in her hands
and told him, I feel acutely
in this moment how precious
you are to me.

She held their dog
in her arms in the doorway.
She stood, watching him go,
his car packed with odds
and ends of their life together.
His taillights got smaller
and smaller
turned a corner and were gone.

Nothing he took did she grudge him.
She just hoped they were
things she could stand
to lose.



Walking to Key West

We have states to cross
into evening,
south, south,
I reach
for your hand
to keep me moving.

In the Keys
you'll tell me
about the Cuban woman you met
over fresh Cuban bread
in a little restaurant called Rosie's.
You'll laugh as you tell me
about her red apron,
her two daughters playing jumprope
in the kitchen,
the pineapple soda you drank,
sickened by its sugar,
to be polite.

I'll look past the image of her face,
beyond your story
to the story of our steps,
steady, onward,
and I will love you.

If we keep walking
a little further,
three thousand miles will fall away
like seconds—
we'll come to the
edge, the water, the beginning.



Vita

Stacy Smith Segovia was born February 15, 1973. She was always curious, and was fortunate to have parents who encouraged her creativity. Someone taught her that in the end, the love she takes is equal to the love she makes. And she believes it.