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DOMESTIC DISTURBANCES


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MARGARET ASHBURN KRAJESKI





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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Margaret Ashburn Krajeski entitled "Domestic Disturbances." I have examined the final copy of the thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

  
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# **Domestic Disturbances**

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Margaret Ashburn Krajeski

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## INTRODUCTION

“Domestic Disturbances,” a multi-genre collection, explores the fears, losses, celebrations, and loves in life. Through poetry, essays, and fiction, I have attempted to articulate everyday emotions from the point of view of a young woman who is a wife and mother. In her relationships with family, friends, and community, she experiences the fragility of life. Out of her heightened awareness comes not only anxiety but also a new sensitivity to the blessings and sacred moments found in daily living.

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## A Note for Miss Pritchard

When I think of high school English classes, one face comes to mind. Miss Pritchard was my composition teacher every year from tenth grade until graduation. She was the chairperson of the English department and always assigned herself the honors classes. I'd love to say that she was warm and mentoring and instilled in me an abiding love for language, but she was, in fact, grouchy and cantankerous. She was a tall, unsmiling woman with salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a chignon. In her sensible, blunt-toed pumps, Miss Pritchard epitomized the spinster English teacher. She only needed a cardigan about her shoulders and a pair of pince nez to complete the effect.

Her classroom was a morgue. Each semester she wagged her bony finger at us, admonishing us to work hard if we wanted a good grade, if we had plans to go on to college. She made it clear she was prepared to have a row with anyone who dared cross her. A true old-guard teacher, Miss Pritchard was a force to be reckoned with. Nobody could remember a time when Miss Pritchard wasn't on the school staff. One could only guess at her age. By her teaching style, however, I surmised that she sincerely missed the days of willow switches and colleagues named Ichabod.

I didn't learn the joy of written expression from Miss Pritchard. Liberating creativity wasn't a priority for her. She was the sit-ups of the writing process, the drill sergeant who forced correct grammar and punctuation on me. She made us diagram sentences on the blackboard until we collapsed. By doing hundreds of practical exercises, we internalized the difference between a gerund and a verbal, *affect* and *effect*, when to use *who* and when to



use *whom*, and how to make a possessive out of a word ending in *s*. Every week we memorized a list of vocabulary words and composed sentences using them. Whenever I hear the words *sacrosanct*, *iconoclastic*, and *anachronism*, I think of Miss Pritchard.

It was a composition class, and boy, did she make us write. I labored over the many assignments, only to have her return them to me covered in a bloodbath of spidery handwriting. I corrected and pared and clarified. One time I revised my theme using her suggested wording, and she even edited that. “I believe I could have improved Shakespeare’s writing,” she once sniffed in her nasal tone.

From her years of teaching, she had compiled an entire page of common grammar and usage errors. Each one had an abbreviation next to it. Early in the semester, we were given a ditto sheet of her “hit parade of mistakes.” When she graded, she underlined the offending phrase with a sprawling red skid mark, annotating it with the appropriate abbreviation: *MM*, *DP*, *WP*. These cryptic notes sent me scurrying to the grammar Rosetta Stone. Aha! Misplaced modifier. Dangling participle. Walleyed pronoun (her phrase for a pronoun whose antecedent was unclear.)

By the third year of being Miss Pritchard’s student, I had learned the basic rules of the English language. As a senior I was bored in her class. At the PTA open house, Miss Pritchard admitted to my mother that the class was too easy for me. “She gets all A’s without even making an effort,” Miss Pritchard reportedly said. I took that as implicit permission to start skipping class. English was my last class of the day, and I was eager to get to my friend’s house and watch *General Hospital*. But Miss Pritchard was by-the-book

when it came to class attendance. When I could produce no parental excuse for my absence, she sent me to the assistant principal. I served two hours of after-school detention for my delinquent behavior.

The next time I got a paper back from Miss Pritchard, she had attached a page-long theme of her own. In her perfect cursive penmanship, she delivered a scathing lecture. "You should be able to adapt better to situations you don't like," she wrote. "That is part of growing up and being mature." The principal, Miss Pritchard, and my mother had a conference about me, and Miss Pritchard said if I were really bored, she would let me read Shakespeare silently during class. In my opinion, that was no solution. I was skipping class to watch a soap opera, keep in mind. I decided I would spend class time writing long notes to my girlfriends. I continued to answer questions correctly when called on, so Miss Pritchard and I had an uneasy truce.

A few weeks before commencement, Miss Pritchard took it upon herself to teach us some practical etiquette. "If you have sent out graduation announcements, you are saying one thing: 'Send me a gift.'" she primly preached. "Now if you get a gift, the proper response is to send a thank-you note. You all need a lesson in how to write thank-you notes." She diagramed the format on the chalkboard and passed out ditto sheets of prototype thank-you notes. We had to write a mock thank-you note, turn it in, and re-write it after she corrected it and we had decoded her trademark commentary. To my worldly eighteen years, this seemed supremely stupid.

Twenty years later, with my own undergraduate degree in English and a Master's degree in progress, I am grateful for Miss Pritchard's diligence and commitment to teaching. Several of my feature articles and essays have been published, and I aspire to be a full-time writer one day. I am aware of her enduring influence on me. She could be a little parrot sitting on my shoulder as I write. *Sounds choppy. Too many prepositional phrases. Not parallel construction. Get rid of those negatives.* Her imprinting runs deep.

I wanted to write her a thank-you note, double-checked for accuracy, to tell her how much I appreciated what she taught me and how useful it has been. I asked my sister, who lives in our hometown of Indianapolis and works at the high school, to get Miss Pritchard's address.

"She died a few years ago," my sister replied.

I was too late. Miss Pritchard would have taken off a letter grade. "Promptness is important when writing thank-you notes," she would have said, pointer in hand, wanting for all the world to bring it down on my knuckles. She didn't make writing fun. In truth, she probably turned off a lot of people with her severe methods. No doubt Miss Pritchard wondered if she were getting through to us. I wish I could tell her that she did.



## **An Afternoon With Doctor Locket**

One afternoon when my son was six, I visited his kindergarten class. The children and I gathered around the teacher as she read Eric Carle's book, *The Very Lonely Firefly*. The class "oohed" and "ahhed" when she turned to the last page, where the fireflies actually light up, thanks to a watch battery embedded in the book cover. Suddenly a woman's calm voice came over the intercom. "Dr. Locket, please report to the office. Dr. Locket, please report to the office." Immediately, all eighteen children stood up and shuffled quickly to a corner behind the teacher's desk. They crowded in there and sat down together. A file cabinet parallel to the adjacent wall formed a cave-like space. The teacher jumped up from her rocking chair, locked the classroom door, and turned off all the lights before joining them.

Curious but confused, I knelt down with the children, putting my arms around the ones who leaned against me in the dark. Nobody was allowed to talk. I wondered how long kindergartners could stay quietly in one spot. I remembered reading that during the air raids of World War II, elementary-school teachers in London kept children occupied with finger songs while they were holed up in bomb shelters. I thought a round of *Where is Thumbkin?* might be appropriate, but we were forbidden to make noise. Soon that same, measured, female voice spoke again over the intercom. "Okay, teachers, you may resume your classroom activities. Everybody did really well. We have a few people we need to talk to, but we are very pleased."

“What was that all about?” I asked the teacher afterwards. As she explained, I realized that Locket was *not* some physician with a name like a necklace. It was a two-word command: Lock It. I had witnessed a post-Columbine disaster drill. The school system used a harmless sounding catch phrase to initiate it because “Take cover! Someone is firing a gun on the school grounds!” would cause panic.

When the students and teachers hear the phrase “Dr. Lock It,” on the PA system, they move to a corner of the classroom away from all doors and windows. They crouch or sit so that they are hidden from anyone outside the building. The teachers lock their doors and turn off the lights. Any children in the halls or bathrooms or office are quickly moved to safe areas. Then everyone must stay in place until the principal and her team walk through and ensure complete compliance.

Teachers in Montgomery County are expected to explain the “Dr. Lock It” drill to their students without frightening them.

“I want them to feel comfortable with what I am asking them to do,” said Mrs. Gallivan. “We practice it in a safe situation, so in a real emergency, they’ll know what to do,” she said, adding that the drill actually pre-dated the Columbine tragedy. It was instituted after the shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, when two boys tripped the fire alarm and then began shooting the teachers and students as they evacuated the school.

When I questioned the teachers and the assistant principal about the “Dr. Lock It” drill, they asked me if it scared my children. I confessed they seemed unaffected. To my son Stephen, a tow-headed six-year-old, it was just another instruction, like walking quietly in

the hallway or lining up for the bus. He thought it was a nice diversion from coloring and pasting.

My daughter Elena was a tall, earnest fourth grader at the time. Her classroom was one of the portable buildings outside the main school. Elena and her friend, Lauren, described the “Dr. Lock It” drill to me.

“We have to get underneath our desks and the teacher turns off the light,” Elena said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, we used to get in the corner closet,” Lauren chimed in, “but the walls in our portable classroom were so thin, a bullet could go right through.” Both girls were very matter-of-fact in their explanations. I was partly relieved, but partly concerned by their nonchalance.

Elena’s fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Bagby, told them the unvarnished truth about violence in schools. “They’ve seen the news,” she said. “We have to teach them to be smart. They lie flat on their stomachs under their desks, which is the same thing they would do if there were an earthquake. I don’t think we are in any danger, but we are required to have a plan,” said Mrs. Bagby.

She pointed to the bank of three windows in her classroom. They let in a lot of natural light, and the red valence added a cheerful accent to the room. The principal has determined that all those windows compromise safety. They can’t be covered quickly enough in case of a shooting, so she has ordered full-length curtains to be installed, which must remain closed at all times.



I was shaken after participating in the emergency drill. Tornado drills and fire evacuations were familiar to me from my school days. Armed intruder procedures, that's a new one. I had watched the Columbine coverage and the documentary on Kip Kinkel, the Oregon student who shot his parents, drove to school, then killed two students and injured twenty-two more. Still the threat of violence to children seemed distant, diffuse, to me, until I participated in "Dr. Lock It."

"We have to do this," the assistant principal told me, "because we never, ever know." School shootings have taken place in many states, among them Kentucky, Oregon, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and Georgia, according to the ABC news website. Random and unpredictable, they don't have the reassuring improbability of a natural disaster. "Dr. Lock It" was a response to a crisis, but not a solution. I wondered if we could ever get the curtains opened again. Is it possible that "Dr. Lock It" could become obsolete, a cultural relic like the "duck and cover" drills of the fifties and sixties? How and where do we begin?

On the afternoon of my visit to the kindergarten, I waited at the bus stop for Elena and Stephen. Normally I stayed in the house until they showed up, shedding backpacks and lunch boxes in the front hall. But that day, when they tumbled off the bus, I gathered them in my arms for a long hug. They didn't know why I held them so tightly. I held them for the parents in Paducah and Littleton and Jonesboro who no longer had a smiling young face to greet at the end of the school day.

## **Porches Don't Pay**

I have a modest solution for the alienation and isolation of modern society: lots and lots more front porches. We need to bring them back into vogue. We need their ambience; we need their message. Without porches, how can we hope to relax and reconnect with one other?

I developed my philosophy after sitting many hours on the front porch of my rented duplex last year. My townhouse porch was big enough for one wicker rocking chair and a pot of red geraniums. Under the pretense of keeping an eye on the kids, I sat outside and flipped through catalogues, read paperbacks of dubious literary merit, and chatted with my neighbors. Our townhouse was in a cul-de-sac, so I could watch our two children ride bicycles, skate, and learn the finer points of kick-the-can.

What was so alluring about that slab of concrete called a porch? For one thing, it got me outside for a while. Just being exposed to fresh air, sunshine, green grass, blue sky, and bird calls restored a positive state of mind.

For another thing, idleness was mandatory on the front porch. The space said "Pause, sit a spell, sip a cold drink." Call it escapism, but I did a whole lot of nothing on my porch, and the world stayed on course. I was blissfully removed from the stacks of messages and paperwork, the dirty dishes and laundry, the telephone calls beckoning for help with the latest PTA project. Modern life imposed a code of constant motion on me. Porch life took it away.

If we had more porches, we might even bring back the lost art of conversation. Talking to each other was what we did before television and web surfing gave us minor speaking parts in our own lives. Visiting took place on porches. “I can hear . . . echoes of porch talk on the long summer evening when affairs were settled, mysteries solved, the unnamed named,” author Walker Percy wrote. But every conversation doesn’t have to be weighty. Reconnecting begins with casual exchanges, when we do the important work of getting to know each other.

In college, I rented a room in a house near campus. The house was tiny and plain, but it had a wide front porch. The other renters and I drifted out there after dinner for our end-of-day conversations before heading off to study. Historically, the living room was the gathering place, but CNN was always on in there. On the porch there was no electronic dictator competing for our attention.

Having a porch enabled me to feel closer to the college community. Every Sunday morning my roommate and I sat on the swing with the ten-pound issue of the *Washington Post* between us. Coffee mugs in hand, we worked our way through each section of the paper. At intervals, I glanced up to see the church-goers in their Sunday finery heading to the Baptist service. I waved to my friend Kurt who, tennis racket in hand, was picking up his girlfriend for their weekly match. I saw folks walking by with white paper bags and knew they were returning from the bakery with croissants and bagels. This was Sunday morning leisure, but from my look-out, I got a sense of connection, a sense of belonging.

In the new suburban development where my family and I now live, we count few porches. They have been replaced with double garage doors jutting out to the curb—“snout



houses,” as they are called. I rarely see my neighbors, except when I am walking my dog at the same time they step out to get their mail. Occasionally we pass each other in our cars and nod. The atmosphere seems cold and uninviting.

We homeowners suffer from a condition called phantom porches. We wish they were there, we act as if they were there, but they are not. Our house has a puny landing pad at the front door. With a little poetic license, it could be called a stoop. It’s the width of two adult bottoms. My husband and I sit there uncomfortably at dusk and talk. Next door, the four-year-old girl settles on her postage-stamp porch surrounded by Barbie dolls. The house across the court has a porch that is barely two feet deep. It is a pleasing visual accessory, not a usable space.

If people long for porches, why don’t new houses have them? I asked our builder that question while we were doing the closing inspection on our house. “Porches just don’t pay,” the builder said. He explained that they were expensive to build, but the additional square footage didn’t figure into the appraisal value of the house. Just then, the Realtor interrupted him. “Make no mistake about it. Porches sell houses.”

Porches are essential props for community life. Cultural observers note that now people have decks behind their houses. Supposedly, the socializing has moved from the front yard to the back, but I don’t see many back yard get-togethers either. There is a different quality to socializing if it is in the back yard. It is not drop-in, incidental neighboring. It is organized ahead of time for fairly close friends because of the work involved. Most of us wish we got together with friends more often. We talk about it more than we do it because we are all so busy. Porches make houses part of a community by

providing an effortless forum for conversation. They are an extension of our homes, but also a transition to the outside world. What better place to watch a thunderstorm or linger for a long good-bye?

Lately I've seen our builder at the lot up the street. He is constructing a house just like ours except it has a porch. I talked to him about adding a porch to our house. He warned me that we will never get our money out of it when we sell the house. "Porches don't pay," he said. I don't listen. I am too busy planning where to place the ferns and the wicker chairs.

## What She Carried

When she was a single woman aged twenty-two, she carried a small pocketbook. She carried lipstick, powder, an address book, and a wallet with six credit cards. She carried this purse shopping. She liked to buy shoes and blouses and make-up. She carried her new purchases when she met her friends for lunch at the trendy bistros they loved. When she went on a date, she also carried a toothbrush in case she spent the night away from her apartment. This happened often.

On her wedding day she carried her grandmother's handkerchief and a blue garter and something new, her engagement ring. After the ceremony, she carried her wedding pictures around for months in her purse.

Once she was a married lady, she quit going to the trendy bistros. She started carrying her lunch to work. She made her husband's lunch, so she made one for herself, too, and ate it at her desk. They were saving up money for a house. Before she left for work, she planned what to have for supper that night. Once a week, she carried a grocery list to work and stopped by the store on her way home. She carried milk, apples, ice cream, chicken and bread to the car. She carried a mental list of what her husband liked to eat--pot roast and barbecue--and what he didn't like. She quit eating Chinese food because her husband didn't care for it.

On Saturdays, she carried Comet and Windex and paper towels to the bathroom to clean. She carried four pairs of dirty pants, six pairs of dirty socks, seven dirty undershirts, three bras and one half-slip to the washer. She carried two suits and four dress shirts and



three dresses to the dry cleaners. She carried one large bag of garbage out to the curb on Tuesdays.

She carried her first pregnancy to term. After their son was born, she carried the baby out to the car whenever she went out to the post office or the drug store. Then she carried the stroller out and then she carried the baby bag out. Inside the baby bag, she carried baby bottles, diapers, wipes, burp cloths, pacifiers, toys, a blanket, and a set of extra clothes for the baby. She carried the phone number of the pediatrician and the pharmacy and the poison control center with her at all times. In the glove compartment of her car, she carried Band-aids, Wet Ones, and Kleenex tissues. She quit carrying powder and lipstick in her purse. In fact, she no longer wore make-up. She cut her hair short because she didn't have time to fix it in the morning. She carried a coffee cup out to the car, too. She carried coffee because she was always tired.

She carried her second pregnancy to term and had another baby boy. Then she started carrying twice as many diapers and bottles as before, although she didn't get out of the house much because it was difficult.

When they went on vacation, she carried sunscreen, a night light, a baby thermometer, formula, rice cereal, jars of baby food, and children's Tylenol. She carried portable cribs and baby seats and bibs and strollers and a baby monitor. She carried blankets and bathing suits. She carried road maps and AAA Trip Tickets and directions to the hotel and the phone number of the next-door neighbor and the family doctor. She carried change for the toll booths. She carried a baby on her hip as she loaded the car. She carried pain

killers for her backache and her headaches. She carried a little extra weight, too. She carried it in her stomach and on her hips. She didn't carry herself as gracefully as before.

She carried another pregnancy to term. And another. When the fifth child was born, she carried her around like a football or a loaf of bread. She carried children to preschool and she carried them home. She carried children to the park and to swim classes and to piano lessons. She carried them to church and she carried them shopping. When she went to the grocery store, she carried all four children in one shopping cart and she carried food in another cart.

She carried the weight of the world to bed with her. Sometimes bad dreams woke her up. The babies woke her up at night, too. She complained to her husband that he wasn't carrying his share of the load. She resented him for that, but she tried not to think about it. When she brought it up, her husband rolled his eyes and said "Not this again." He didn't like it when she carried on. After awhile, she carried her problems in her heart. She carried a desire for her life to be different somehow, but she wasn't sure how. She missed that young woman who carried an extra toothbrush and six credit cards in her purse.

Her purse was much bigger now; in fact, it was a tote bag. She carried a calendar to keep track of doctor's appointments, school programs, and soccer games. In her wallet, she carried three family photographs, two receipts for gas, a note to herself to get the oil changed, one library card, one long distance phone card, one video store card, two grocery store club cards, and a coupon for two medium pizzas. She carried phone numbers for the dentist, the orthodontist, the pediatrician, and the ear, nose, and throat specialist. She carried anti-biotic cream, lip balm, a ball pump needle, a comb, and shot records. She carried a

cellular phone and a claim check for film and a dry cleaning ticket. She did not carry a makeup bag in her purse. She did not carry birth control pills because they were against her religion.

One day she carried herself to the doctor. She told him she was tired, so tired. Something was wrong. She felt weak and sick and unable to carry out her responsibilities. He listened to her and then he told her she was just bored. "Go get a job," said the doctor.

She went to three other doctors. One said to start exercising; the next said she had a thyroid problem. The last doctor said, as he reached for his prescription pad, "Another stressed-out mother. I see so many of you."

She started carrying prescription drugs with her. She carried Wellbutrin and Zoloft for the depression, for the nightmares, for the headaches. She still carried sadness, but nobody noticed. She carried it off. The pills made her feel so much better that she decided it was okay to quit taking them. After that, she carried on conversations with the voices in her head.

One morning she carried the newspaper in from the curb. She carried the empty cereal bowls into the kitchen. She went into the bathroom and she filled the tub with water. Then she carried the children into the bathroom, one by one, and she drowned them.



## Animus

If she were rude instead of polite,  
if she slammed doors,  
didn't tip, cut in line,

If she shouted in the library,  
forgot the soccer snacks,  
never sent thank-you notes,

passed school buses  
unloading children, swore in church,  
didn't RSVP, would the outlaw

virus infect her? The bikers,  
the terrorists, the cowboys.  
Mercenaries send tracer bullets

to her tame gut, strum  
her reptile brain.  
She's wired for the bad-ass

with a rap sheet. Watching him  
stomp the other suitors makes  
her ovaries crackle.

She wants his mud, his blood,  
his smells. She wants his madness,  
fresh from the fight.

## Blood Lines

I bare my inner arm,  
a blue veined bouquet.  
In a few months  
it will curl around  
the seahorse softness  
of a newborn  
adrift in my heartbeat.  
Right now the nurse  
taking my pulse worries  
that forty-eight beats  
a minute is too low.

This primitive pulse  
kept my grandmother alive  
for a century  
on Canada's frontier.  
Her cells are my cells.  
They flow through me  
in a subterranean stream,  
spring-fed blood,  
glacial drift blood.  
It is not my blood alone  
that washes over me  
forty-eight times a minute.  
It is enough.

## Cave Fish

Become a cave fish  
erase my eyes  
enter the earth with me  
dark wet slice  
cellar cool  
the language  
of ourselves is braille  
your fins like threads  
of glass, I know  
each blood vessel  
in your milk-white body  
our cells hum  
this the first  
place we whisper  
chants of the unborn  
a sacrament  
for shining embryos.



## **Christening with the Monarchs**

On the day you were born, a volcano erupted in Nova Scotia  
and a pageant of monarch butterflies  
streamed down the continent to the sea.

They rested by the Gulf of Mexico with us, torches  
in the trees, tiger lilies in the shrubs.  
You in blue receiving blankets witnessed the miracle.

At that moment of water and sky, we lifted you  
to the molten pulse and named you  
Stephen, which means crowned one.

## The Doctor's Diet

Having dinner with him is like  
being pulled through the corridors

of the hospital where he worked  
for thirty years. Over candlelight,

linen napkins, Chardonnay, he  
discusses bunions, diarrhea, hemorrhoids.

I bring up headlines, he talks  
head lice, acid reflux, yeast infections.

I present lamb chops on bone china,  
spring asparagus, rice pilaf, he says

"I'm glad we're not having beef.  
It makes me constipated," which reminds him

of incontinence and colorectal cancer.  
Call it the doctor's diet;

he wants to help me lose  
that extra weight he pointed out.

I'll turn up the florescent lights  
and serve creamed corn in a bedpan.

The only one who is still hungry  
will feel right at home.

## Dreamscape

The recital hall is full and  
I don't know how to play  
the piano. Today is the exam  
and I haven't been to class. I'm late  
for the test, the airport, the tournament.  
I'm on a slow bus that stalls  
at every turn. The show is  
starting, I have no music, no  
shoes, no airplane ticket, I'm not  
ready, not where I am  
supposed to be, the Dobermans  
snarl at the gate. I can't run, can't  
scream, can't fight, can't remember  
where I put the blue book.



## Home From the Hospital

From my kitchen window  
across the cul-de-sac,  
I watch them come home.

She gets out from the driver's seat  
of the minivan, grabs  
the suitcase in the back.

He emerges slowly,  
instep, ankle, elbow.  
His pants hang like flags

on a windless day.  
She steadies him,  
slips her hand into his.

They lean against each other.  
I used to see him running  
at 6 a.m. His shaved Marine

haircut looked fierce.  
Now I see his skull  
and look away. It is not far

to where they are. I cross  
the space between us  
with their mail and dinner,

baked chicken, a dish  
my grandmother used to make  
for birthdays and wakes.

## ***In the Morning***

Beside three  
lemons, a  
sunflower.

Just then they  
are the same  
true yellow  
I believe.

## Platform Diver

Poised as an empress, the diver  
glides out onto the concrete tower,  
the height of a two story building.  
Her toes curve over the edge.  
She raises both arms, eases past  
the unforgiving angle, embraces the fall.  
Wrestling four dimensions, she tucks, opens,  
spots the water with precision, gestures  
she knows like the scent of her bedroom,  
the weight of her car keys.

Somewhere in gravity's bid  
she whirls through constellations,  
spirals against infinity, a blink  
stretched warped squeezed dark,  
it is there.

She drops like an icicle  
in this all-out fall,  
arms cradling brain,  
sharpened toes disappear  
in a hiccup on the pool.  
Weightless, she lingers  
in the sobbing water. It feels  
like the part of the dream  
she gets to keep.



## The Priest on My Porch

Icy rain the first night in our new house.  
The winter trees are shriveled claws.  
You have gone out for a loaf of bread  
and cash from the machine.

At first I see no one when  
I answer the door. Then a figure fades in  
like a developing black and white print.  
A priest on the porch. His collar  
is a white minus sign in the night.

Now I am watching from the roof  
where a widow's walk would be.  
I see blue strobes dicing the night  
state troopers in rain slickers, sirens  
and flares and radio squelch and  
one long slide into the guard rail,  
your body through a windshield,  
shattered bones and red blood  
spilling onto the pavement and  
ambulances and emergency rooms,  
a surgeon in splattered green scrubs  
hands a damp wallet to the priest and says  
"Father, can you notify the next-of-kin?"

We are not the same two since the priest  
stopped by to welcome us to his parish.  
He saved you and he saved me.  
All things are made new.

## Blind Spot

I was reluctant to go back to an empty apartment. I had been playing darts with my Thursday night league at Crafty's Pub. We didn't shut the place down like we used to. It broke up early, eleven or so, because the other guys had people they needed to get home to--wives and fiancées and girlfriends. Me, I've never been married, just engaged once a long time ago. I didn't want to go back to my place and be alone until I absolutely had to, so I stopped at the convenience store to buy some beer.

It was one of those combination store and gas station places. There was only one other car in the parking lot. I noticed it because it was an old car, one you don't see much anymore. It was the kind of car I learned to drive in—a Chrysler K-Car. Back then, they were brand new, fresh off the assembly line. This one was rusted and missing hubcaps, but I was surprised to see one still on the road. They haven't been made for a long time. This car looked like it had come to a quick stop because it was parked at a strange, lurching angle, over in the shadows by the air hose. There was a man and a woman in the front seat. Even though it was dark, I saw she was leaning against him and crying hysterically. He had his arms around her, and it looked like he was trying to comfort her. What a scene. I couldn't hear anything but I could tell something was wrong. I wondered what would make a person cry like that. And why here, for God's sakes, in a gas station parking lot at midnight? It was all wrong. It wasn't private enough.

I went inside and bought my beer. When I came back out, they were still there. I've lived here all my life—forty years—and I didn't recognize them, didn't recognize the car

either. We get more traffic since the interstate exit built up. When I was a kid, there were just cornfields around here. Then one gas station led to another and then to a modern truck stop. Before long, we had motels and chain restaurants and a Wal-mart. Now we've got a bright neon strip and signs on the interstate advertising our exit. I was still killing time, not wanting to go home, so instead of driving off, I pulled over to the edge of the parking lot. This gas station was built on a hill overlooking the interstate. I had a good view of it. Even late at night, the lanes were busy with headlights. I cracked open a beer and sat on the hood of my car taking in the sight. Standing on the overpass used to be one of my favorite spots as a kid. Before they built the exit ramps, the overpass was a quiet place to watch cars speed by underneath me. Back then, all I saw was fast cars and open road.

I turned around to see if the old K-Car was still there. It was. Seeing that woman sob so hard that got me to thinking. People cried like that at funerals, not here, pulled off the interstate in the middle of the night. What could make a person so upset? It was tearing her up, whatever it was.

I pitched the can into the trash and opened another beer. I said, "I'm drowning your sorrows for you, lady, whoever you are."

Twenty-five years earlier I crossed this same spot on my way to my first driver's education class. I wiped out on my bicycle right there by the overpass on my way home. Just slid off the road and went down the gravel embankment. My arm got cut bad that day. I still have the scar.

It was summer vacation and I was sixteen years old. I had no trouble getting up early because I had somewhere I wanted to go. The house was quiet. Mom and Dad both worked the early shift, so they were long gone and I was on my own in the morning. I dressed and walked into the kitchen to grab a Pepsi for breakfast. It was my first day of real driver's education, the part where I got to drive for real. In the spring quarter, I sat through the classroom part, where I learned how to identify a yield sign and where to put my hands on the steering wheel—the ten and two o'clock positions. But that day, I was going to drive for real. I was pumped.

I put on my baseball cap and went out to the carport to get my bicycle. It was my only way to get around, but that was going to change. I was saving up money to buy my own car. Since school let out, I'd been mowing lawns in the new subdivision. My dad called it the "oak tree by the river brook" neighborhood. I didn't care what he called it. It was a job and I didn't have to bag French fries.

My high school was only about two miles away from the house, so it didn't take long to get there. I rode on a street with no sidewalks. It wasn't busy, but it had no shoulder. I was good at staying right on the white line after years of riding my bike on that road. The faster I pedaled, the easier it was to keep my balance. About half way to school, I crossed over the interstate. I always stopped on the overpass and watched the cars whiz by underneath. It was cool. All those people going places besides here.

When I got to the high school, I saw a beautiful sight: six of those shiny new K-Cars lined up by the front door. It looked like an auto show. On the back of each one was a big yellow sign that said "Caution: Student Driver."



I locked my bike on the rack and walked over to the group of people standing around the glass doors of the school. They were looking at a sheet of paper taped to the door. "Teacher Assignments," it read. Coach Gannon was my driving instructor. He was the football coach, but I had him for swimming class one semester. While I was standing there by the open door, he stepped out of a room down the hall and walked towards me. He looked like the football coach he was—tough and in shape. He had on what he always wore, winter or summer—running shoes, crew socks pulled halfway up his calves, gray knit shorts and a white golf shirt tucked in nice and neat. This one had a Baltimore Colts logo on the pocket. The coach's hair was cut so short, I could hardly tell where his hair ended and his forehead began. Maybe that's how he hid his baldness. He always carried a clipboard in his left hand, tucked up next to his hip like a book.

He waved at some lady in the office. She motioned for him to come talk to her. Then a few more people stopped what they were doing and joined their conversation. They looked real concerned, like they had just heard some awful news. The coach shook his head and shrugged like he didn't have an answer.

When the coach came outside, he checked his clipboard. "Where's Tom Blakemore?" he said.

"Right here," I said, stepping out.

"Come on. You're my first victim." I followed him to the curb. Our car was the color of butterscotch pudding. I slid into the driver's seat and the coach sat on the passenger side. Those driver's ed cars were equipped with an extra brake pedal on the instructor's side.

Seemed to me an extra brake pedal wouldn't do you much good if you had a real knucklehead driving, but I guess they figured it would help some.

The coach told me to adjust my seat and mirrors and put on my seat belt. Then he said I could start the car.

"Now, before you pull out," he said, "always remember to check your side and rear view mirrors for cars coming up behind you. Then you also need to check over your left and right shoulders. You have a blind spot in a car. You don't see everything coming towards you in those mirrors."

I remembered all that from class, so I did what he said. Then I pulled away from the curb nice and slow. We drove over to the student parking lot and practiced braking and turning and driving in reverse. It was all so easy for me.

"You're pretty comfortable behind the wheel," he said. "Have you done some driving before?"

"Every once in a while, my dad lets me drive around the neighborhood with him," I said.

"In that case," he said, "turn out on Tenth Street. We're going for a little ride." He seemed as happy as I was.

There wasn't much traffic at that hour of the day, but I was still a little nervous since it was my first day. I paid close attention to my driving technique and tried to keep that three-second interval between cars. The coach told me where to turn, and we drove around the hardware store and the apartment complex next to the strip mall. We drove past the "oak tree by the river brook" neighborhood and kept going until we were close to the raceway.

Then he told me to put on my turn signal and prepare to make a left turn, which I did. I waited for an oncoming car to pass, then I accelerated through the turn, just like the book said. We drove along a curving, two-lane road for a while. Then in a quiet stretch of road, he said, "Slow down and show me a three point turn." I knew just what he meant; he didn't even have to talk me through it. Forward, reverse, forward, and boom, we were going in the opposite direction.

The coach pointed to a gravel driveway next to a clump of trees and told me to pull in there. Once I was in the drive, I almost ran smack into a sheriff's car. I hadn't seen it from the road because it was hidden by the bushes. Believe me, the last thing I wanted to see was a county mounty. I got nervous. Coach told me to turn off the car for a few minutes, which I thought was weird. Then I got my second shock of the day: we were parked in front of a burned down house. There was nothing but a big pile of black, burned-out scraps left. It looked like a bomb had gone off. The sheriff's car was still there and yellow "Danger" tape was strung around the house from tree to tree. By the smoky smell in the air, it had happened the night before. It was a creepy sight.

I got out of the car, too, and followed behind the coach, both of us taking in the scene. "Whose house was this?" I asked. "Did you know them?" He just said "Yeah" real quietly and let out a big sigh like my old man did. I knew when somebody didn't want to talk, so I shut up.

When we got around to the back of the pile, there was the county mounty, all wired up with his radio and gun. He looked surprised to see us, and started walking towards us real briskly and official-looking. "This area is off limits," he called "I'm going to have to ask

you folks to leave.” Then when he got closer to us and shoved back his Smokey-the-bear hat, he recognized the coach.

“Oh, hi, Mike. Didn’t realize it was you at first.” They shook hands like old friends

“That was some fire,” the coach said, nodding in the direction of the smoking heap.

“How did it start?”

The sheriff flipped through his notebook. “We won’t know for sure until the fire marshal finishes the report,” he said. “Electrical short, most likely. You know these old houses. They’re fire traps.”

“Anybody hurt?” There was a long pause while the sheriff stared at the coach.

“Yes, Mike, Jack died in that fire last night..”

“So it’s true, then,” the coach said, so softly that I could barely hear him. Then he turned his back on us. “The secretary told me this morning. I had to come out here and see for myself.” Nobody said anything.

Finally, I asked, “Who was Jack?” They both seemed to know him on a first-name basis. I wondered if I knew him, too.

“Jack McKinley,” said the coach. “He played football for me a couple of years ago.”

I knew Jack McKinley. I knew of him. Everyone did. He was the running back on the high school team the year they won the district championship. I was in middle school then, but I went to the play-off games and saw him score those touchdowns. After they won the championship game, the town had a big parade and the whole football team and all the cheerleaders and coaches went by on fire engines. Jack McKinley sat up there on the ladder truck wearing his letter jacket and waving and smiling at all the people.



The team retired his number after that season. I saw it in the glass trophy case at school next to the district trophy and newspaper clippings of McKinley. He went to the Naval Academy after graduation. Everyone thought it was a big deal. Nobody from our town went to places like the Naval Academy. Sometimes I saw him at church during Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks. He wore his white academy uniform and carried his white academy hat under his arm. He looked spic-and-span. The famous Jack McKinley. After church, the old guys surrounded him in the fellowship hall. They'd shake his hand real enthusiastically and say "Jack, how are they treating you up at Annapolis?" They were darned happy to be in the same room with him. Their Jack.

No wonder the coach looked like he had been punched. Jack was his pride and joy. I went back to the car. Coach talked to the mounty alone for a few more minutes. I watched the coach make a slow lap around the yellow "Danger" tape. He stopped in the front yard and looked at the fire. It took him a long time to leave. I wanted to get out of there. That place gave me the willies, like seeing a car that's been in an accident, and you just know nobody lived through it.

When he got back in the K-Car, the coach asked me if I knew the way back to the school. He didn't say another word. He wasn't paying much attention to me. I could have driven to Chicago and he wouldn't have noticed until we got there.

We pulled into the school parking lot a half hour early, but I didn't care. I was ready to call it quits for the day. The coach scratched out a grade sheet and said he would see me Thursday for the next lesson. "Except if the memorial service is that day," he said. "Then someone else will have to cover for me."

That was my first day of real driver's education, the day I had been looking forward to for months. Psycho coach decided to take me by the place where his wonder boy got torched the night before. I couldn't get the scene out of my head on the bike ride home. I was doing my best to ride as close to the edge of Rockville Road as I could. Then some asshole behind me honked just to scare me and I lost my concentration for a second. The front wheel of my bicycle swerved onto the gravel shoulder. Before I could get back on the street again, I totally lost my balance and slid, bike and all, six feet down the embankment into a ditch. A woman driving by yelled out her window "Are you okay?" but she didn't stop. I was shook up. My elbow was scraped and bleeding, and my Levi's were torn. I dragged my bike uphill and slammed it back on the road. Since I was close to the overpass anyway, I walked my bike on the narrow shoulder until I could get hold of myself again.

When I was halfway across the overpass, I stopped and leaned my bike against the railing like I usually did. I looked down at the interstate. I was dead center over four lanes of speeding traffic. It was loud and fummy. The heat was baking off the highway. I got dizzy. My head ached and the scrape on my arm was bleeding a lot by then. I needed to get home.

I rolled my bike off the skinny curb. Holding the front tire between my knees, I twisted the handlebars around until they were lined up again. Then I climbed back on my bike and rode home, fast enough to stay balanced, slow enough to be in control. I kept to the side of the road, and I checked behind me often to see if there were any cars coming. Like the coach said, you don't see everything coming towards you.

I cut my arm bad that day it turned out—six stitches worth. I still have the scar. I rubbed the ropey spot on my elbow. When I checked on the K-Car again, the one with the crying woman, it was gone. Without me noticing, it had slid away, moved down the exit ramp, merged into the traffic, and disappeared. Thousands of cars fly by me every day holding their stories and their secrets and their sadness. Some have it worse than me, like that woman, but we all have it, and we're moving on with it, and it's ours, all ours.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Margaret Ashburn Krajeski was born in Great Falls, Montana, and received her bachelor's degree from The College of William and Mary in Virginia. She is a former Army helicopter pilot. She now lives with her two children, Elena and Stephen, and her husband, Paul, who is in the Army. She has published many essays on military family life. This creative writing thesis represents a decade-long goal of completing a Master's degree in English.