

CREATIVE NONFICTION

True stories, well told.

Beds

Author(s): Toi Derricotte

Source: *Creative Nonfiction*, FALL 2010, No. 39 (FALL 2010), pp. 49-59

Published by: Creative Nonfiction Foundation

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44364909>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Creative Nonfiction Foundation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Creative Nonfiction*

JSTOR

Beds

Toi Derricotte

You say I should go down further still, but I am already very deep down and yet,
if it must be so, I will stay here. What a place! It is probably the deepest place there is.
But I will stay here. Only do not force me to climb down any deeper.

—Franz Kafka

I.

THE FIRST WAS A BASSINET. I don't remember what it was made of; I think it was one of those big white baskets with wheels. When I couldn't sleep at night, my father would drag it into the kitchen. It was winter. He'd light the gas oven. I remember the room's stuffiness, the acrid bite of cold and fumes.

My father didn't like crying. He said I was doing it to get attention. He didn't like my mother teaching me that I could cry and get attention. Nothing was wrong with me, and, even if I was hungry, it wasn't time to eat. Sometimes, I screamed for hours, and my father—I do remember this—would push his chair up to the lip of the bassinet and smoke, as if he was keeping me company.

After a few nights, he had broken me, but when he put the bottle to my lips, I was too exhausted to drink.

II.

My second was a crib in the corner of my parents' room. We moved to the attic when I was 18 months old, so it must have been before that. I still didn't sleep at night. I'd see a huge gray monster outside the window, swaying toward me and side to side. I was afraid that, any moment, it would swoop in and get me. But I couldn't wake my parents. What if it wasn't real but only the huge blue spruce outside the window? I was more afraid of my father than I was of the monster. As long as I watched, it couldn't get me.

III.

My aunt brought home a present for me every day when she came from work. I'd wait excitedly by the kitchen door as soon as I could walk. Sometimes, she'd fish down in her pocketbook, and the only thing she could find was a Tums, which she called candy. But mostly she'd bring colored paper and pencils from the printing press where she worked.

When I was 2 or 3, I began to draw things and to write my own name. I wrote it backward for a long time: "I-O-T." I drew houses, cars, money, animals. I actually believed everything I drew was real; the house was a real house, as real as the one we lived in. I held it in my hand. It belonged to me, like a chair or an apple. From then on,

TOI DERRICOTTE is a professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh and the co-founder of the Cave Canem Foundation, North American's premier "home for black poetry." She is the author of a memoir, "The Black Notebooks," which received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. She has four books of poetry: "Tender," "Captivity," "Natural Birth" and "Empress of the Death House." A new book of poetry, "The Undertaker's Daughter," will be published in 2011.

I did not understand my mother's sadness or my father's rage. If we could have whatever we wanted just by drawing it, there was nothing to miss or to long for. I tried to show them what I meant, but they shrugged it off, not seeing or believing.

(This sideways escape—the battle between my father's worst thought of me and this proof, this stream of something, questioned and found lacking, which must remain nearly invisible—pressed into what leaks out as involuntarily as urine, a message, a self, which must be passed over the coals, raked, purified into a thin strand of unambiguous essence of the deep core.)

IV.

When I was 7, we moved to the Forest Lodge. We lived in D12 on the fourth floor. My mother and father slept in the living room on a bed that came down out of the wall. I slept on a rollaway cot kept in the same closet and pulled out at night. I helped my mother roll it into a corner of the kitchen, push the kitchen table back and open the cot, its sheets and blankets still tight. (Whatever I had, I kept nice. I had to. My bed was my bed, but it was in my mother's space. If she needed the space, my bed would go.)

Someone had given me a green blackboard with a sheet of see-through plastic to paint on. In the morning, my mother would set it up in a small area between the dining room and the kitchen. She didn't mind if the colors spilled, if a few drops fell on the newsprint she had put down. After she scrubbed every Saturday, she liked to put newspaper over the linoleum to keep it clean of our footprints. Halfway through the week, she'd take the torn, dirty papers up, and, underneath, the floor was like new.

V.

Most times I liked my food. I didn't mind eating until my daddy started making me clean my plate and either struck me off my chair if I didn't or lifted me up by my hair and held me midair if I was slow. He wanted me to eat faster; he didn't have all day.

He'd hold me off the floor until I pleaded. I'd sputter in fear and humiliation—I don't remember pain—but I had to button up before he put me down to do exactly what he had told me to do, fast.

Slowness was a sign of insubordination. If I missed a pea or a crumb, I was trying to outwit him. I must have thought he was stupid. And if I pleaded that I hadn't seen the pea, he'd know I was lying. "Your story is so touching till it sounds like a lie."

I swallowed it down; I wiped that look off my face. But still he would notice my bottom lip beginning to quiver or a single tear slide down my face. These were personal insults, as if I had taken a knife and put it to his face. If my brow wrinkled in a question—"Do you love me, daddy? How could you hurt me like this?"—this implied I was pursuing my own version of the truth, as if I was his victim.

It was a war of wills, as he so clearly saw, and these were my attempts to subvert him, to make my will reign, to plant my flag.

He was the ruler of my body. I had to learn that. It had to be as if he were deep in me, deeper than instinct, like the commander of a submarine during times of war.

VI.

Thinking was the thing about me that most offended or hurt him, the thing he most wanted to kill. Just in case my mind might be heading in that direction, here was a stop sign, a warning: "Who do you think you are?" But the words weren't enough. They'd bubble out of him like some terrible brew exploding from an escape hatch, a vortex that pulled in his whole body, his huge hands, which grabbed me up by my hair. I cannot defend myself. My jaw is locked.

Where could I go? I was trapped in what my father thought I was thinking. I couldn't think. My thinking disappeared in case it was the wrong thought.

It was not the world that I needed to take in, but my father's voice. I had to see exactly what my father saw in me—and stay out of its way.

VII.

In the morning, I'd fold up my bed and put it away. On those days and nights when my father didn't come home, we didn't need the space in the kitchen for breakfast or dinner, so we didn't put my bed away. I'd make it without a wrinkle, the little pillow placed carefully on top.

Maybe the black phone had rung saying he'd be late. Or maybe she had put him out.

I didn't know how they slept in the same bed because they never touched. Once, I saw them kiss. Maybe it was her birthday or Mother's Day. They blushed when they saw I saw them.

VIII.

"Those caught in such a vicious abuse-reactive cycle will not only continue to expose the animals they love to suffering merely to prove that they themselves can no longer be hurt, but they are also given to testing the boundaries of their own desensitization through various acts of self-mutilation. In short, such children can only achieve a sense of safety and empowerment by inflicting pain and suffering on themselves and others."

"The Animal-Cruelty Syndrome,"

The New York Times Magazine, June 13, 2010

I am trying to get as close as possible to the place in me where the change occurred: I had to take that voice in, become my father, eternally vigilant, the judge referred to before any dangerous self-assertion, any thought or feeling I happened in reverse: My body took in the pummeling actions, which went down into my core. The voice is no longer his. It is my voice asking, before any love or joy or passion, anything that might grow from me: "Who do you think you are?" I suppress the possibilities.

IX.

My mother used the small inheritance she received from her mother to put my father through embalming school. She hoped to raise us up—her mother had been a cook—and to become an undertaker's wife, one of the highest positions of black society. But when he came back from the school, my father wouldn't take the meager \$5 a week his stepfather offered him to apprentice. He wouldn't swallow his pride. He also wouldn't take jobs offered by his stepfather's competitors. That, too, was a matter of pride, not to sell out the family name.

My father knew the works of the heart. That's why so many people—my grandmother; his stepfather; and even his best friend Rad, whose heart he had crushed—loved him even after he let them down completely and many times, even after he abandoned them or did the meanest things. My father was with each of them, holding their hands, when they died. My handsome, charming father, the ultimate lover, the ultimate knower of the heart.

I didn't know how my parents slept in the same bed because they never touched. Once, I saw them kiss. Maybe it was her birthday or Mother's Day. They blushed when they saw I saw them.

My father wanted me to appreciate the quality of his work. Like any good teacher, he wanted to pass it down.

X.

My father knew all about the body, too. He had learned in embalming school. For a while after his mother died, he stopped smoking and drinking, and came home at night. He'd get out the huge leather-bound dictionary (Webster's—the same as our last name!) that my grandmother had given him when he graduated. He would open to the middle of the book, where the pictures of bones faced each other, front and back, one on each side: on the first plastic overlay, the blue muscles; on the second, the red blood vessels; and, finally, on the third, the white nerves.

He loved the body, loved knowing how things worked. He taught me the longest name of a muscle, the sternocleidomastoid, a cradle or hammock that was strung between the sternum and mastoid. He taught me you could figure things out if you knew how to make connections. He'd amaze me with long, multisyllabic words; then he'd test me on the spelling.

My father always explained. He always showed me the little smear on the plate that I had set to drain before he'd make me do all the dishes over again. He'd explain how he had studied hard so he knew where to hit me and not leave a single mark. He'd brag about it. He wanted me to appreciate the quality of his work. Like any good teacher, he wanted to pass it down.

XI.

During the summer when my mother and aunt were cleaning and wanted me out of the house, I would go out to the side of the house

with a fly swatter and command the flies not to land on my wall. There were hundreds of flies, and though I told them not to, they continued to land. I don't think I said it out loud. I think I said it—screamed it, really—in my mind, as if I expected to communicate like that. Sometimes, I believed that the things in the world heard your thoughts, the way God heard prayers. When I was very young, not even out of my crib, I'd ask the shades to blow a certain way to prove they heard me.

The flies were disobeying me. Whenever one landed, I would go after it with the flyswatter. I was furious that they would do what I had commanded them not to. I knew they understood, or would understand finally. I killed tens, hundreds—didn't they see?—but they wouldn't stop.

I knew I was murderous, and yet, was it murder to kill flies? My aunt and mother never stopped me.

XII.

My grandmother had three dogs before she died when I was 10. Each had a short life. Patsy was the "good" dog, who died of a chicken bone in her stomach, and Smokey was the "bad" dog, my grandmother said, who growled at people and would jump over the second-story banister on the porch and walk around on the outside of the rail. When my grandmother and grandfather were downstairs in the undertaking parlor, they would leave me alone with Smokey. I was about 7, and I had learned the voice the nuns used to say cruel things to the children who were slow. Sometimes, the nuns hit them over the knuckles with a ruler, but mostly they just humiliated them, made them sit in the back and never called on them to do errands. I played school with my stuffed animals and dolls

at home, and when they'd slide out of their chairs, I beat them mercilessly. I tried to teach Smokey to stay behind the gate to the pantry. I would open the gate and tell him to stay, and when he went out in the kitchen, I'd hit him with his leash, over and over. I believe I hit him hard, maybe as hard as my father hit me. I wanted to feel that power.

I believe I did this several times, and though it seems impossible that my grandparents didn't know, no one ever stopped me. One time I came over, and my grandmother said Smokey had escaped, jumped over the second-story banister to the street and didn't die, but ran away. He was never seen again. Was he that desperate to get away? I felt sad and responsible. I felt glad.

XIII.

I was 9 when we moved to a bigger apartment on the first floor. Now, my father had only one flight to carry me up by my hair. He didn't mind going public—the stairs were right in the lobby—but he refused to allow me to scream in terror when he grabbed me. Not because he was afraid people would see.

My screaming made him furious because I knew he was only going to carry me up the stairs and scream at me, only beat me on the thighs and calves (where it wouldn't show), and only until I made every look of pain, confusion and fury disappear from my face. He knew I knew that. So what was up with all that broadcasting, as if something really bad was going to happen, as if he was going to kill me?

I knew I was murderous, and yet,
was it murder to kill flies? My aunt
and mother never stopped me.

XIV.

Life is something you have to get used to: what is normal in a house, the bottom line, what is taken for granted. I always had good food. Our house was clean. My mother was tired and sad most of the time. My mother spent most of her day cleaning.

We had a kitchen with a little dining space, a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom and two halls, one that led to the bathroom and the bedroom, and one that led to the front door. There was a linen closet in the hall between the bedroom and the bathroom. I had a drawer in it for all my books and toys, which I had to straighten out every Saturday. There was a closet in the bedroom for my mother's clothes, a closet in the front hall for my father's and a closet off the living room that held my mother's bed.

It was a huge metal apparatus that somehow swept out on a hinge. I can't imagine how my mother and I, as small as we were, brought it out and put it back every night and every morning, for my father was never there. We just grabbed on, exerted a little force and pulled it straight toward us. It seemed to glide by itself, swinging outward around the corner; then it would stand up, rocking, balancing, until we pulled it down.

XV.

My father and I shared the new bedroom, and my mother slept on the pullout in the living room so that she wouldn't wake us when she got dressed in the morning for work. We slept in twin beds, pushed up close together, as if we were a couple.

I could have slept with my mother in the bedroom, and my father could have slept in the living room on the pullout. I could have slept on the pullout, and my mother and

father in the twin beds in the bedroom. It was a matter of what worked best. My mother knew what worked best. She would have liked to sleep in the bedroom, but she always put her comfort last.

I had special things given to me, special things she paid for: the expensive toys I got for Christmas that took a whole year to pay for and the clothes I wore from Himmelhoch's while my mother wore an old plaid coat for 11 years. Now I was a big girl moving from a little cot in the kitchen to my own bed in a bedroom. My father and I always got the best.

XVI.

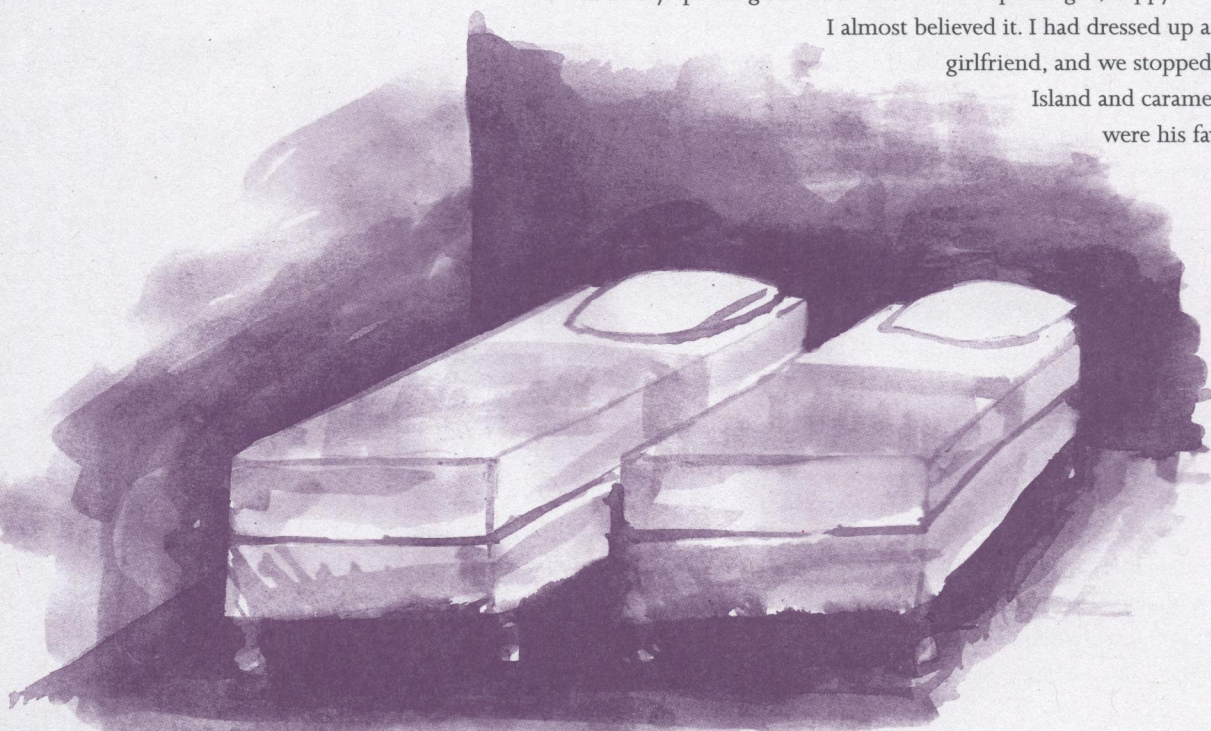
My mother shopped after work every Thursday, so my father would come home and fix dinner for me. He'd stop at Fadell's Market and get a big steak with a bone in it. He'd bring it home and unwrap the brown paper, slowly, savoring one corner at a time, like someone doing a striptease or opening a trove of stolen diamonds. He'd brag about how much money he had spent. He'd broil it right up next to the flame, spattering grease, fire and smoke, only a couple of minutes on each side, cooked still bloody, nearly raw, the way we liked it, he said—different from my mother. He'd say he liked it just knocked over the head with a hammer and dragged over a hot skillet. His eyebrows would go wild, and he'd rub his hands together like a fly.

XVII.

Once, my father took me to the movies. We walked to the Fox Theater on one unusually warm Thursday evening during my Christmas vacation to see Bing Crosby in "The Bells of St. Mary." My father frequently promised things he didn't deliver, like the time he promised to come home and pray the family rosary every night for a week when I carried the huge statue of The Virgin home in a box something like a violin case. He never came home once. When I turned The Virgin back in at school, I had to lie to the nun. After that, I rarely asked for anything. But going to the movie was his idea.

I was never happier than when I was with my father and he was in a good mood. He liked to tease me and make me laugh. He was so handsome that I felt proud when people noticed us. I thought they were thinking that my father really enjoyed me, that

I was a very special girl. I acted as if I was a special girl, happy and pretty, until I almost believed it. I had dressed up as if I were his girlfriend, and we stopped for a Coney Island and caramel corn, which were his favorites.



XVIII.

By this time, my father didn't come home most nights. Sometimes, he and my mother wouldn't speak to each other for months. Sometimes, they wouldn't speak even to me when we were in the house together, as if we had to be quiet, like in church, and respect their hatred for each other.

My father thought I hated him like my mother did or else he didn't think I was worth talking to, for he'd often go months without speaking even when we were in the house alone.

I guess he was showing how long he could hold out, like a soldier who won't break. He was strong. I always needed him first. Finally, I'd break down. I'd have to ask for money for the bus or for lunch; I'd have to ask who was going to pick me up after school. He'd make me pay by not answering or make me stand at his closet door and wait or throw his answer as if it were a barb to catch my feet.

I tried to make him change. I'd make up special names like "D-dats." Hi D-dats, I'd meet him at the door when he came home at night. I knew he liked to feel young and hip. I'd make my voice happy, as if I weren't afraid he'd find a shoe or book out of place and beat me. I actually was happy when I was with him—I had to be! He could see inside me better than I could see inside myself; he could tell my moods. If I wasn't smiling, maybe I thought it was because of him.

I had to be happy; my unhappiness blamed him.

Maybe all that silence and beating was because he thought nobody loved him, not my mother and not his mother. He told me how his mother had knocked him down when he was a grown man. He told me how my mother always picked up his ashtrays to wash them as soon as he put his cigarette out. I tried to make him feel loved. Sometimes, we played "Step on a crack you break your mother's back" when we were coming home from his mother's house, as if the two of us were in cahoots.

XIX.

Once, when I was 10 or 11, he came home for lunch, and I asked him if I could dance for him. I had seen Rita Hayworth dance the Dance of the Seven Veils. I had stayed home sick and practiced. I liked to dance on the bed so I could see myself in my mother's dressing table mirror.

I wore old see-through curtains and my mother's jewelry on my head like a crown. I must have had something underneath for I knew some things mustn't show. I thought, maybe, if he saw I was almost a woman and could do what beautiful women do, he might find a reason to love me.

At the end, I spun around and around until most of the drapes, towels and my mother's nightgown fell to the floor. I don't remember what remained to cover me.

XX.

Sometimes, on the nights he came home, I'd sneak up on him while he was reading the newspaper and pull off his slipper.

He'd put the paper down very deliberately, put on his "mean" play-face and say, "Oh, you want to play, huh?" And he'd grab me up like an ogre. He'd hold me down and jab his fingers into my ribs.

"No," I'd scream, "I'm sorry," and I'd plead that I would pee if he didn't let me up.

Finally, he'd relent. "You're not going to do it again?" And he'd tickle me more.

"Never, never," I'd scream.

"Are you sure?"

My father could make me laugh. He knew just where to hit the funny bone.

As soon as he picked up the paper again and seemed to turn his attention away, I'd go back. It hurt so badly, but it was worth it. I was in charge this time.

My father could make me laugh. He knew just where to hit the funny bone. Always, my father was the only one who could make me swallow pills or sit still while he administered burning iodine. When I fell or took the wrong step over a picket fence, I'd come to him, crying. "I'm going to have a big scar and nobody will love me." And he'd tease, "Oh, my poor little baby, all the boys are going to call her 'old scar leg,' and she's going to be alone for the rest of her life"; but he'd do what had to be done, hold the leg in place, put the iodine on the raw spot, right where it was needed, direct and quick, without flinching, never afraid to cause the necessary pain.

XXI.

On Saturday mornings, my mother and I would have toast and coffee in her bed. She let me lie there while she planned our day. She'd get up barefoot and put the coffee on and make me sugar toast. I loved those Saturday mornings near her: her big bed, her cold cream smell.

I had always thought my mother was frightened of my father. She never seemed to fight straight. She got him by going the back

route, like the look on her face when she got in the orange and yellow truck that he bought when he started the egg business. She sat on the orange crate—he called it the passenger seat—and never laughed, never joined in on the fun as he took us around Belle Isle. He had been so happy when he jingled the keys, but you could tell she thought that old truck was nothing to be proud of, as if even a joke about such a poor thing was in bad taste.

Then one Saturday morning, I spotted a big roach, a water-bug, on the living room floor. I jumped up on the bed and started screaming; she came from the kitchen, grabbed her house shoe and got down on all fours. The thing charged her under the chair like a warrior. I was screaming like crazy. I realized she was my last protection. And she started punching at the thing, punching the floor, anywhere she could punch, as if killing it was going to be an accident. She didn't stop until it was flattened.

I had never seen my mother brave. It was a part of her she never showed—that she would fight to the death. I had thought she didn't stop my father from beating me because she was afraid. I was confused by her braveness.

XXII.

Life is something you have to get used to. My father and mother were in a war, and whoever loved the other first would lose. My mother was sad. She didn't feel appreciated. I didn't do enough to take care. She hurt inside. Her body suffered. Her feet swelled black with poison. She had a dead baby. She had womb problems. They had to take the knotted thing out. The doctor rubbed her stomach for hours until she went to the bathroom. She got TB. She got a goiter. She shouldn't clean so hard; she should rest, at least late in the afternoon. My father knocked her upside her hard head and smashed her through the kitchen table.

XXIII.

Nobody thought the little marks were worth looking at. I cried and showed how they went up my arm all the way to my elbow, ran all over my ankles and the tops of my feet, even up my thighs. It was as if I could see them, but when anyone else looked, the marks disappeared.

Maybe they didn't itch. Maybe they weren't serious. Maybe I was causing trouble. (I had an active imagination, my mother and father said.) I couldn't sleep because something was happening in my bed—a misery—and everybody acted as if it wasn't.

It didn't hurt after a while. I could take my mind off it and put it somewhere else.

What was it that made me suffer? What made me see things they didn't, or see them in another way? I kept waiting for proof to pop up. I was invisible or invincible.

I think the only reason my mother finally believed me was because I kept showing her that Monday mornings, after I had spent the weekend with my aunt, I didn't have the marks, but Tuesdays, after I had slept in my own bed, I had the marks again.

In an instant of recognition, she raced into the bedroom, flipped my covers off the bed and saw the little bits of blood. She turned over the mattress, and there, in the corners, were the nests of a thousand bedbugs, lethargic or crawling. She looked close. They had gotten so far inside that the room had to be sealed with tape, a bomb put in.

He had been sleeping with another woman. He had brought her dirt into his own home (though he said the bugs came in egg crates).

Bedbugs were what poor women had, women who couldn't do better, women who didn't matter. Some other woman's bedbugs were making my mother the same as that woman.

He had brought in everything we hated, everything we couldn't control: the helplessness of slavery, bad births, poverty, bargains with killers. How could he be that low! Everything she had risked her life to clean out of our apartment!

My mother had reason for outrage.

I only had reason to itch.

XXIV.

The living room was off limits. There was too much that might get messed up or broken. I guess he chose rooms in honor of the sacrifices my mother had made to make our home beautiful.

In the bedroom, where could I go when I fell? I wouldn't fall on the wooden footboards. There was an aisle between my mother's closet and my father's bed. That was too narrow. On the left side of the doorway was my mother's dressing table, where I'd sit and put on necklaces, earrings and nail polish and look in the mirror. There wasn't room for me to flail around, so my father had to be very specific about the direction in which his blows would aim me.

If my cousin was visiting, he would inform her, his voice sincere but matter-of-fact—as if he owed her an explanation—"I'm going to have to take Toi to the bathroom." He preferred the bathroom when she was visiting, except when my mother was in on it, and then we needed a bigger space. If, for example, my mother had told him I talked back, he'd say, "We're going to have to speak to Toi in the kitchen." He'd pull me by my arm and close the kitchen door, which had glass panes so that my cousin could see.

But she said she averted her eyes, knowing it would humiliate me. She remembers him sliding off his belt; she remembers me pleading each time the belt hit; she remembers him telling me, as he was beating me, in rhythm, why he was doing it and what I shouldn't do the next time. Then, I would come out of the bathroom, trying not to show how I had been afraid for my life, how I had pleaded without pride, as if these things would have made her hate me.

I remember the hitting, but not the feeling of the hits; I remember falling and trying to cover my legs with my hands.

I remember the time I came home with a migraine and begged him not to beat me.

"Please, please, daddy, it hurts so bad." I could hardly speak. I had to walk level, as if my head was a huge cup of water that might spill on the floor.

Why couldn't he see my pain? My head seemed to be splitting open, my eyes bleeding. I didn't know what might happen if I tipped my head even slightly. He saw me walking like that, as if someone had placed delicate glass statues on my arms and shoulders. I begged him, not now, as if it would be better later. I knew I had it coming. I had gone out with the Childs, and he had left a note telling me not to go out.

The Childs lived on the fourth floor. Sometimes, they brought down the best rice with butter and just the right amount of salt and pepper. They had no children. They had a little bubble-shaped car. We all seemed glad to roll the windows down and go out to a place without many cars. Their niece turned her bike over to me. It was so much fun pumping it up and down the hill, letting my hair fly. I forgot my father, as I had forgotten the bug bites, as I forgot what it felt like to be beaten. I just thought, "I'm pumping harder so I will go faster and let the air hit my face and arms, and then I'll stop pumping at the top and fall down and down, my feet up off the pedals." And I didn't feel fat: My body lost weight—it just went with everything going in that direction, and the wind flew against me in the other direction. Though it blew in my face and began to sting, I couldn't stop pumping, couldn't stop trying, one more time, to bring myself to that moment of pleasure and accomplishment right before I'd let go.

I had never felt such power, earning it by my own work and skill. I could ride it. I was the girl in charge; I had the power to bring myself there.

XXV.

Shortly after I was married, we had a dog that kept shitting on the floor. Once, I took a coat hanger and was going to hit her with it, but she drew back her lips and snarled at me in self-defense and fury. I had no idea that she would defend herself. I was shocked. I thought she was going to attack me, and I put the hanger down. I respected her in a different way after that.

She lived for 16 years and was a great mothering presence in our household. It seemed every dog and cat that came in the house had to lie beside her, with some part of its body—a paw, the hind—touching hers. Once, I heard a strange noise during the night and went to investigate. A kitten we had found on the railroad tracks was nursing from her, and she was sleeping, as if she just expected to be a mother. When I would come home, after I had been away for a while, she'd jump up on the bed and curl her butt into my belly, and I'd put my arms around her and hold her like a lover. When she died, I missed her so much I realized that she had been my mother, too. She taught me it was beautiful to defend yourself—and that you could be unafraid of touch.

I remember how, occasionally, my father's dogs would pull back and snarl at him when he was viciously beating them. His anger would increase immeasurably, as if they had truly given him a reason to kill them. "You think you can get away with that in my house?" he'd ask, the same as he'd ask me.

Once, to get away from him, one of his dogs leapt through the glass storm door in the kitchen and ran down 14th Street bleeding to death.

XXVI.

You would think that the one treated so cruelly would "kill" the abuser, throw him out of the brain forever. What a horrific irony that the abuser is the one most taken in, most

remembered; the imprint of those who were loving and kind is secondary, like a passing cloud. Sometimes, I thought that's why my father beat me. Because he was afraid he would be forgotten. And he achieved what he wanted.

In the deepest place of judgment, not critical thinking, not on that high plain, but first waking judgment, judgment awakened with perception, judgment of the sort that decides what inner face to turn toward the morning sun—in that first choosing moment of what to say to myself, the place from which first language blossoms—I choose, must choose, my father's words. His face has a look of pain on it, of disdain, as if I have made him shrivel up like some bug into an ashy curl, as if I myself am the words he spit out. I feel, in that look, a withdrawal of the air, and I am left in the center of an utter nakedness, left to the most punishing elements, to hail and thunder, battering rain, and to the eye of God above me, a cold look without interpretation. I am judged by something to which I can never explain myself. My jaw is locked, and I must accept that I am the worst.

The twisted snarl of my father's unbelief turned everything good into something undeserved, unreal, so that nothing convinces enough—no man or woman or child, no play or work or art. There is no inner loyalty, no way of belonging. I cannot trust what I feel and connect to; I cannot love or hold anything in my hand, any fragile thing—a living blue egg, my own baby—in the same way that I never convinced my father I was his. And I must rest on it, as on bedrock.

I do this to myself in remembrance.

XXVII.

The time I had the migraine, after my father had beaten me, he made me bathe. He drew the bath, felt the water with his fingers and made sure it wouldn't burn. He told me to go in there and take off my clothes.

The water, when I put my toe in, was like walking in fire. I stood there, holding myself.

And then—instead of letting my father kill me or bashing my own head against the tile to end all knowing—I crouched down, letting the lukewarm water touch me.

Oh, water, how can you hurt me this bad? What did I do to you? I was whimpering. I don't know if I still had hope he would hear me, or if I just couldn't stop the sound from leaking out of my body, like a dog you make be quiet after you beat him.

But my father came and lifted me out of the water in his arms, took me naked, laid me on my bed and covered me with a sheet, lightly. Then he went away and left me in the dark as if to cool down, and he brought cut lemon slices for my eyes and a cool towel or pads of alcohol to put on my forehead. He bathed me in tenderness, as if he really knew I was suffering and he wanted me to feel better.

I wondered if he finally believed. If he realized from within himself that I had been telling the truth, that I wasn't evil. Maybe he had some idea of how much he had hurt me. I knew that, sometimes, men beat their women and then make up. I didn't know what to believe.

AFTERWORD:

I hear in myself a slight opposition, a wounded presence saying, "I am me, I know who I am." But I am left with only a narrow hole, a thin tube of rubber that the words must squeak through. Where words might have gushed out as from a struck well, now, instead, I watch it—watch every thought, every word. It wasn't my father's thought that I took in; it was the language. It is the language in me that must change. ■