

Poems from SAVED FROM DROWNING

The Day I Learned the F Word

It was just a single syllable, a word formed
as a whisper in my ear on the walk home
from school, word that sizzled from the neighbor kid's
mouth. Having heard it slurred with bourbon
from his father, he relayed it to me
with the definition he'd read in Webster's New Collegiate
during study period. The word rankled my brain
all the way home, its four letters glistening
guarded rubies, and when I stepped in the door
I yelled it at my mother. Her mouth widened
to a capital O, her cheeks flushed as if slapped.
Incredible crackle as it left my mouth--
the labiodental of the F, front teeth
biting my bottom lip like taffy, then the unrounded
lax vowel held slowly in the dull air,
ending the word with the clicking velar
of the K, tongue touching the turbulent
roof of my mouth. And when I saw
my mother moving toward me, white fingers
poised parallel for a slap,
I began to shout it at the walls, the word
kept coming and coming, nothing
could stop it. I had discovered
the true fascination of the forbidden,
the utter power of a single word,
and I stumbled through the house drunk
on a knowledge so deeply rooted, not even the blue curds
from my mother's bar of pumice soap
could wash the thrill from my mouth.

Susan Moreno

That fall Friday, she walked from school,
skidding her feet through the patchpebble driveway,
and unlocked the front door, stepping
into the hall as she slipped the keystring back
over her neck. The gold patches on her father's shirts
speckled the pile of laundry, shining like doubloons
from her father's Spanish books she could not read,

almost moving in the house's heat.
The leather holster still arched its lasso at the door,
chrome badges still lined the glass wallshelf,
each gun still glistened parallel in the oak racks.
But Susan cocked her head, she
tiptoed across the room, knowing something
wasn't right. The elements
dulled full and heavy, and she moved muzzy
toward the southwing, the shadows, her parents' room,
to twist the knob. The vinegary waves
lifted. She saw her father naked
on the bed, his body stopped from a fall,
the blue police patch pillow bracing his head
toward her. Deep nutmeg skin of his chest
now at peace: a peace she remembered
in his big hands clasped praying, peace
in the water from ruthless windworn July
as her canoe slid gentle as a silver eel
and her father paddled forward.

The day following the funeral
she arrived at school late, ran to recess
humming hymns. She hung limp from monkeybars,
face reddening the red of her skinned knees.
In the classroom, we watched her circle verbs
in her phonics book, watched her read,
stared as she skipped to the sharpener
with the pencil in her mouth, as if nothing
had happened. *When cops die, their families
turn millionaires*, someone said, and that September
we gave her chocolate pudding at lunch,
sat close as we could on bus trips,
let her kick the soccer ball past our legs.
Later, Susan smiled, stared at her desk
as we voted her fifth grade president, our hands
raised like bugels in the air,
fanfares for her life.

Brad, Bottom Drawer

In small-town high schools, you learn the basics
about everyone. Brad Stern,
for example--we all knew he kept his hair level
with his eyes, walked with thumbs in both pockets,
scarred the hall floors with his bootsoles.
But I wanted more, obsessed
with the details you had to scrape for, the shiny

gems under the chalked surface of rock
that no one knew. I did anything
to spy on him, leaving biology early to squint
through dark doorslats. I discovered
the cinnamon disks he hid in corners of his locker,
the Cars cassettes he stacked in chronological order
in his Chevy's glove box, the thumbed neck-dabs
from his green bottle of Polo between classes.
I wanted secrets even his football teammates
had missed. I cast away the uncomfortable skin
of my sophomore year, that straight-A prep
with the conservative girlfriend, to center each sense

on Brad. I found clues, jigsaw pieces
scattered through school, and I almost wanted him
to corner me. I would have confessed
to the stolen charcoaled portraits he posed for
in Advanced Art, the name tag I nabbed from its hook
on the gymnasium tennis board, even the check-out cards
I slid from his favorite library books,
his signatures repeated in different inks. I'd hidden
all at home, the bottom drawer of the dresser
I'd reserved for him. Nights, I'd lift
the velvet veil to what I'd stolen, my bedroom door
eclipsing the world. I touched those pieces
of Brad, ran them over my mouth,
my stomach, my ass, my fingers becoming
his fingers, Brad's, this sudden god
hovering over my life, this limit I wanted to break.

Donna Summer

Late nights, my mother pulled eight-track tapes
from a battered cabinet, injecting one
after the other into the stereo slot.
I watched her mouth each word.
I bent over math assignments or letters
to my father, pencil scribbling through rhythms
of Barry White, Marvin Gaye, the Stylistics.
On the nights she played Donna Summer, I lost
all concentration. Slow throb of bass guitar,
muffled snare snapping like sweaty hands
against stretched skin, and, above
everything else, Donna moaning
"Love to Love You, Baby" through rushes
of synthetic strings. On the tape cover,
she reached toward an out-of-frame crotch,

silky negligee swaying in an obvious bump
and grind, her skin russet and smooth
as a Hershey bar's underside. My mother
leaned back in the antique rocker, pinky
an elegant angle from her snifter of brandy,
her eyes closed. I imagined Donna's words
flickering with purpose, her notes
like arrows from the speakers, splicing
each frayed silence, curlicues of clefs and staves
bridging the darkness between us.

When a friend and I found my mother sleeping
that Friday afternoon, we snuck "Love
to Love You" to my room. We cranked
the volume to 7, sprawled on the rug,
then sang and groaned in synch. Her groove
bubbled higher, almost boiling over, warming
fathoms of muscle and bone
with its drug, and in my trance I couldn't know
how long Mom stood there, watching
from the hallway. She slammed the door
and coughed. We tucked our erections
into our pants. My mother
yelled, slurring words against crescendos of *Aaah*,
aaah, Donna's voice casting its spell of ecstasy:
a spell without relief, without cure.

The Collector

Tonight, I feel life's downward spiral
reversing. I've waited years
for something like this. No doubt they were smiling
when they died, returning from another win,
the ice cream truck barreling from bridge's curve
to smash the side of their bus. Three
stars of the football team, gone.
Monday will fill the halls with pool-eyed girls,
teachers thumbing yearbooks, dumbfounded throngs
sniffing beside lockers bedecked
with Polaroids and jersey numbers.
But all that's hours away.
Tonight is mine.

After three, I leave my room.
I abandon these comic books and stamps;
these butterflies and beetles soaked with alcohol.
I walk the darkest avenues of this worthless town.

Hymns from crickets: they know what's happened.
Night noise, nothing else, as I head for the funeral home,
gripping the brick wrapped in the towel
I wiped across my stomach after I worked off
my dreams of them. When I'm there
I throw it through the window; crawl inside.
Slowly, my eyes adjust
and their beautiful shapes solidify.
They're spread on tables lined with velvet
so smooth, to touch it would be touching
a beating heart. Wounds close-stitched
like the opponent's bullpup mascot, that dummy
they clobbered and burned at yesterday's pep rally.
The streetlight draws haloes
against faces that would have graduated this May.
Now, they're precise and still
as monarchs I pin behind glass in my room.
They're only a little dead.

I ask who's first, remembering strides
between yesterday's classes, jeans tight
on their asses like rinds on globes of fruit.
Their skins still smell like the field's chalked grass;
like soap flakes from the after-game shower.
One at a time, I slide against them.
Rick's shoulders swell beneath his thin
cotton shirt, muscles firm as unripe apples.
Last week, I spied through binoculars,
his head tilting toward the car window as a girl
mouthed marks on his neck. Even tonight's dark
reveals the violet hints. I move my lips
from bruise to bruise, whispering
love, love on the skin. When finished
I switch tables. This linebacker's body
that whirled Dave to fame: here,
in the palms of my hands. His cock's cold,
soft, like the finger he jammed
in the hollow of my throat to station my yell
when his fist hammered my stomach last March.
I push myself into him,
easy as the pin into insect, holding him close
until through. Only the quarterback
remains. I delicately trace the arch of Kevin's cheek,
mouth hovering on his like a moth against light.
My tongue catches on the blue stitches
that join his lips. I let this moment
linger, the room falling away around us,
then step back. This is the final memory
I will collect, the final kisses
uniting us forever, their bodies filled
with the knowledge of my love.