

## Jacaranda on Mt. Archer

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle. – Plato

Leaning up against this gnarled tree,  
bark shredded  
and dangling like loose skin,

my gaze is held by pale feathery leaves.  
Wind-snapped twigs and wilted purple blossoms  
lie strewn across the lawn.

Three-pronged, jagged  
with amputated limbs,  
this trunk twists heavenward.

Beneath my feet, brittle roots  
with unseen tendrils prick and sift  
hard mountain soil.

My spine meets solid wood,  
brushed in radiance even as it dulls  
under the grey lichen.

Silent witness to the play  
of butterflies, the few remaining blooms  
yield nectar to the honeyeaters,

unabashed at spring's exuberance,  
mirroring the long, slow crumbling,  
the inevitable tumble back to earth.

# Yellow

Like Howdy Doody and the Musketeers,  
her childhood is in black and white.  
Chicago coal dust sprinkled like pepper  
across snowy lawns, grey slush  
and the school, five story brick in a sea of blacktop.  
Up the steps through the tall door,  
she cringes at the first bell,  
has to pee, but the tardy bell is next.

Squeal of her rubber boots  
down cavernous halls,  
scent of ammonia, chalk dust, and glue.  
Seated at a desk bolted to the floor,  
she's five, a big girl now, trained  
to hold back, to hold in.  
Her palm lifts, circles and then wilts.  
She's scared of Miss Kofall's face,  
caked with powder  
black eyebrows pencilled high above the frown.

On the radiator sits the metal crate  
with 30 miniature milk bottles.  
She must drink it warm  
through a paper straw that softens,  
pulpy under reluctant lips.

Hands folded, body wound tight  
holding, holding,  
counting  
loud ticks of the regulator clock.

Lined up near the front doors,  
she bends her knees ready to sprint  
as the clang sets off an explosion  
of feet and elbows.  
Teachers shout, but the stampede  
doesn't slow until they reach  
the first crossing guard at Eighty-fifth Street.

The endless trudge  
as one by one, the cluster of kids  
peel off into their own front yards.  
In her mind, she sees their toilets and is asking, *please*,  
but she's holding so tight, no words can pass.

She pulls off her mitten and chews  
the fat of her fist, praying to the liquid God,  
with her mother's kitchen lit up in the distance.

Too late.  
All down the block, imagined eyes roll behind dark panes.  
A little cloud escapes her chilled lips.  
She stands absolutely still  
as the hot sting seeps down one leg into her sock.  
*Hold it. Hold it.*  
Her legs refuse to obey. They spring apart  
with a gush. And a brittle laugh,  
her own voice, the only sound in the empty street.

She is wet and shivering, but stares,  
transfixed by the arc of colour,  
the unexpected loveliness,  
like a giant lemon lollipop  
etched into black and white snow.

# Ungloved

Scooping through butter-soft skins,  
some hand-tooled in Italy, I lift the leather  
to my nose and sniff.

Slip my fingers  
into the tight cocoons you never flew from.

Already wearing them at five,  
grim-faced for the photograph,  
swathed in crinolines and lace, crochet-covered  
fists like netted wings pinned to your lap.

Bone stays, feathered hats and fur collars beckoned.  
Your mother's disapproval clung  
with the choker around your neck.  
(An Irish parlour maid who'd married up.  
But shush, don't breathe a word.)

Groomed for cotillions and garden parties,  
you wore brushed cottons on summer afternoons,  
a row of pearls at the wrist. For evening,  
ivory kid fluted above your elbows.  
In winter, fawn, fur-lined for motoring.

Two World Wars, four children and the Colonel,  
your husband, demanded dinner, nightly at six.  
You instructed the Cook, menus you'd never attempt.  
Your embroidery adorned the throw pillows,  
but mending was for the seamstress  
who worked in the little sewing room on the third floor.

When you took my small palm into your leathered one  
and led me to the Zoo, you grasped it gingerly  
as if our bones could crush on contact.

Outings were to teach me manners.

*A lady's hands must be discreet.*

*Never point or wave about.*

At dinner, yours had a secret duty,  
to press the buzzer hidden under damask,  
commanding the maid to serve the next course.

Gaping at ghosts we couldn't see, you sat mute  
in the nursing home, hands gripping each other raw  
until someone slipped you a plush stuffed dog to pat,  
which you did ceaselessly after that.  
The half smile on your lips suggested—(dare I say this?) Bliss.

The same smile when you dismissed  
the gardener for the afternoon.  
I was nine, spying through the hedge,  
as you squatted in your nylons and tweed wool skirt.  
How you paused and peeled off  
the second skin of your gardening gloves,  
wind fingering your silver hair.

Spellbound, you surveyed  
the bald pink hills and valleys of your palm,  
then plunged it  
into the damp, black soil.

## Dotsie, 1937

A spy. From behind the privet, you watch  
your older sister entertain her beau.  
She holds up plum jam she bottled herself  
scoops a spoonful into his waiting mouth.  
His dark eyes bulge.  
He gags and spurts and you are rolling,  
clutching your skirts, sniggering at the prank,  
the cod-liver-oiled spoon.

You sprint from her screams, scramble high  
into the arms of the Weeping Beech  
and loll, deaf to the call of your mother,  
lost in the empty sky, searching  
for a glimpse of Amelia and her Lockheed Electra.

Knees clutch the bough. Outstretched arms  
tilt left, then right in imaginary glide.  
One day, you'll get a pilot's licence,  
poke through clouds like your father did in the Great War.  
You love to rest your cheek against the polished wood  
of his propeller, each half, as tall as you, shipped back  
from France and placed in the front hall next to the hat rack.

When Nanny hollers (Mother's given up),  
you shinny down *quick smart* for the excursion to town.  
A maiden voyage to the beauty parlour, your amber plaits  
lopped off below your ears – now that you are twelve.  
You bring them home in a box, two fat snakes of hair.  
Proud of your aviatrix bob, only Nanny sheds a tear  
for the locks she'd brushed each evening,  
counting one hundred strokes.

This summer, you alone will accompany your father  
with his quicksilver eyes and handlebar moustache,  
south on the train to Texas where he's promised  
to teach you to drive. Pop's special pet.

But you didn't expect Pop's business partners  
to cram into the roadster, fish-eyed Pete and Russ,  
all wrinkles and white beard fringed in nicotine yellow.  
On the horizon, heat rises in wavy lines. Gigantic metal birds  
dip and lift, pulling up oil. These are the wells  
the men have come to inspect.

Pop plumps a pillow so you can peer over the dash.  
From the back, the men advise how to pull out the choke  
and the shift's so stiff, Pop has to do that part.  
On the flat dirt road, each lurch brings snorts of laughter.

*A joke, teaching a girl to drive.*

Pop slides a butterscotch onto your tongue  
as you grasp the wheel and stretch  
to press the pedal with the toe of your Mary Janes.  
Clattering over ruts, kicking up dust,  
the wind dances with your cropped hair.  
Pop hands around his silver flask  
and the men grow more boisterous.

You picture Amelia, ten feet tall  
on the Movietone screen, climbing into the cockpit.  
These endless flats would make a perfect runway.  
You hear the thrust of the engine, feel it lift off.

But Pop is waving his hands, shouting, *pull over*,  
and you pump the clutch and brake, spinning out.

As the dust settles, Russ thumps your shoulder,  
blows whiskey breath. *Crazy girl, could'a rolled us.*  
But Pop beams, *A born racecar driver.*

The men are about to set off on foot when you spot  
a rattlesnake coiled on a rock. *Watch out!*

*Show 'em how to shoot.* Pop hands over his pistol.  
But you've only ever shot clay pigeons.

Sepia and black scales glisten in the sun.  
The men glare at your trembling grip on the gun.

Squinting, you cock it, aim for the head and squeeze.  
Eyelids tremble, eardrums quake.  
His muscled form rears up, then shrinks.

Something shifts in your skull like sand  
sinking to your toes and spilling out.

Russ dangles the snake, tries to drape it  
– a trophy around your neck – but you push him away.  
Wincing, you crawl into the back seat.  
The men complete their business. Pop takes the wheel.  
Pete has snapped the rattle off the tail  
and slips it into your palm. Firm as a fingernail  
woven like a chain, you shake this brittle beautiful thing  
and, if there is a tear, you never let them see it.

Back at the lodge, the guests are hunched around the wireless:  
*Amelia Earhart has disappeared somewhere near New Guinea.*

## Make Belief

To attract godmother's blessing,  
she sneaks toast for the mice and birds,  
tries to be good. Avoids the wolf.

In the garden after dark, she squats  
among the cabbage leaves,  
waits for a changeling  
to raise as her very own child.  
Shines the torch into columbine blooms  
until they are tall pink hats  
bobbing on thumb-sized heads.

When the hemlock bough taps  
her shoulder for a dance,  
she whirls and lifts the needles  
to her lips.  
Her curtsy is deep.  
Soft winds invoke her majesty.

Panning for leprechaun gold,  
she digs up white, curled nematodes,  
then buries the green-haired troll doll  
for the dragon  
with matchstick breath.

A poison berry tumbles to her lap  
dropped from a scolding raven's beak,  
so crimson, her tongue  
cannot resist a lick.

And she will sleep one hundred years,  
but dream –  
dream herself awake.