Leopold's Maneuvers

CORTNEY DAVIS



Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry EDITOR: Hilda Raz

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For Jon, with love

And your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

Walt Whitman

—in other words, every woman is a nurse. *Florence Nightingale*

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Leopold's Maneuvers

the four maneuvers used by an examiner to determine the lie of an unborn child

The belly an albino bowl suddenly come to life, my hands ready in the four positions like the four witches in Oz or the four winds that breathe, all of us diviners. First I cup the belly's pregnant curve high under blue-veined breasts, brim the slope and wiggle where an unborn human head is round and hard, the breech irregular. Second maneuver and my palms embrace her sides, swelling woman and curled child, where is your back? Where are your small parts? Third maneuver, my right hand grasps the pubic hollow, fingers open and close around the round ball of a head, head ball, chin down, breech balled at the fundus under blue breasts, oblivious. And last, great mother, as if compelled toward the face of miracles. my hands plunge the gutters of a pelvic inlet I can only imagine, feeling for the brow, the flexed

crown, the direction this child will take emerging into light, our world, this earth from its watery heaven into its own brief span and back again, my hands waving hello, good-bye, hello, good-bye.

I.

Treatment

The doctor drops his black bag on the bedroom rug and shakes his arm. The thin, single bed I lie in is pulled tight under the eaves the summer of my seventh, unlucky year. *Turn over dear*, my mother says.

The man knuckles open his bag, a noise like a boat knocking a pier. His medicine is purple as the robe Moses wore in the stained glass window, sun casting blood's image on my face, on the stone tablets with their prohibition: *Thou shalt not touch*.

He tips the Gentian Violet onto white gauze (like petals of my mother's violets dipped in sugar). Then Mother opens my legs as if I'm swimming underwater, ready to kick and streak away while the doctor paints *down there*, what we call the place I have rubbed raw.

I hear the bottle empty, the bag lift again into the doctor's hand, the sound of their four individual feet walking out the door. The door hugged its scrim of light, the ceiling lowered over me. All night the purple shield between my legs pulsed, a beacon from a lost ship for everyone to see and be drawn to.

Partial Detachment

I come to him the Sunday morning after, fog outside in the tree limbs like a premonition of snow.

He lies back, just awakened, elbows bent under his head not drawing away, but not yielding either. When I sit, the mattress

tilts slightly and his neck tenses. *How is it today,* I ask, and he shrugs, blinks a few times, looks out at the deck

blurry with leaves. Still a lot of floaters. He raises his hand to cover one eye,

then the bad eye. Moves his finger tracking the amorphous blobs. Yesterday, when the retina

tore, he saw dark spiders he tried to smash on the wall. *Lucky*, the doctor said. *Only a partial detachment*.

A few hours more and the vitreous might burrow under, dissolve the retina's glue. Then he aimed the laser gun, bam bam

bam bam it fired green, noisy. That night, his eye squinched like a boy who survives his first fist fight,

my husband couldn't get warm. When he realized he could go blind, he made love to me, his face in my collarbone. This morning, drizzled tree trunks and bright leaves look

like they do reflected in water. His eyes are so brown I have to imagine the pupil,

and beyond the surface find the gelatinous chamber where vision occurs and the soul looks out.

He explains it to me: Invisible nerves carry images to our brains, but our brains fool us. How do we really know what's out there?

You mean like Plato, I say, the thing and the idea of the thing? His hands rest at his sides. No, he says, that's not it.

Lot's Wife

Once she turned into salt, good things happened. First she was licked by doves, their little tongues streaking her thighs.

Then, rain drizzled down. She forgot the old story and peaked like a breast, crystallized like stars on the sand.

The wind blew in from Zoar. Salt, she was happily invisible and so scattered like dust. She flew to her husband's iris,

gouging the cornea, blinding the brown rind of his eye.

Shipwreck

The first few days we worked a lean-to, perpetual fire, a makeshift tub. At night,

we told stories, and daytime we'd explore the small island: mostly forest with a beach

we walked daily, picking shells. Monkeys stared, and fish tempted us. We ate like cannibals,

discussed *fidelity, truth*. I let him wash my back and braid my hair; we became more lost.

We'd sleep until the sun went down, then do *Romeo and Juliet,* inventing swords, elaborate balconies.

I recited the nurse's speech; fiddler crabs rushed beneath the moon. A month went by.

You say you'd have good intentions? At first we exercised, dried sponges for our bath, tried to name stars. But we had no books, our memories were weak. I invented *watch*. He liked to watch me walk naked in the sea

and toss my hair. I watched him pluck his beard. When smoke marked a ship miles away,

he yanked me by the arm. We pulled down our shack, then he lay on top of me. We stayed like that

for hours. After dark, I watched him fish, casting on his belly in case the ship could see.

That night we ate in silence, then played *fight*, his game, in which we'd scream into each other's faces,

then make love, sobbing, on the beach. The next morning I began to keep a diary.

The Brightest Star Is Home

Driving home tonight after a good dinner, you call that bright star to the right of the moon

Venus, but I say it's so far away it might as well be *home*—that place where I was a child

and Father and I walked in the yard like you and I did this afternoon before the bookstore,

where we spent too much, and the restaurant. He would part the spiny ferns, move aside the violet mushrooms

to show me where elves slept in the cupped hands of hollyhock. That place

where Mother ironed in a mist of steam or gardened in a green straw hat, the summer night

falling over me like one of her fragrant scarves, stars punched out of the dark like the bright holes

we poked in jelly jar lids so fireflies could breathe. That place where Disney beckoned

from the small screen TV, the castle exploded in black and white

and Mother and Dad laughed with Ed Sullivan and Milton Berle

as if they were uncles from out of town. And bedtime (like now, when you and I move

in our silent rituals) was God's time, when He might take me or leave me, and my last words

were offered to the night light and the universe, my parents' footfall carrying them away

as if anywhere they were without me was another galaxy—like that bright star you named *Venus,*

but, driving through the dark tonight, I pretend might be that lost place I once called home.

Prognosis

In the deep of night, I turn my mistakes over like Tarot cards, one by one.

First, a mother's face holds the memory of a close call; next, her child pleads for help:

All I do is pray. Everywhere I go, I talk to God. The third card is the father. He comes by commuter train

from New York City. One night he brings a surprise a leather saddle with fringe, oiled

and wrapped in newspaper. Finally, Mother replies: *Just stop praying and everything will be okay*.

Every Friday, the child cleans her saddle. It's so slippery, she falls off her horse

and spends a week in the hospital. The nurses' hands are fragile as oxygen. They hide silver scissors in their aprons.

In the next card, the girl herself is a nurse, washing a comatose boy.

She gives the boy his medicine. Right then, his heart stops. I turn over the hangman—

it's the nurse in her white stockings and petticoat, stiff as an upside-down clothespin.

In the last card, a couple dances, then they grow silent and cold.

She sits in bed watching *ER*. He manipulates landscapes over the Internet.

There is so much to do: balance the checkbook, rescue the children,

buy more insurance, pay the debts. Reshuffle the deck.

Masturbation

February, 1993

The desire begins as you're folding sheets or making hors d'oeuvres for relatives who are on their way. Or maybe you're home watching TV, the bomb in New York City, the Trade Center's black pit, everyone trapped. These things can stir dark feelings, like loneliness or anger: dinner guests who'll have nothing to say. That image of the garage, the shock of how little you feel. It doesn't matter.

But where you do it is important your body topping the bedspread in daylight or the bathroom's non-judgmental privacy as you work hard at your own body. You may conjure a helpful image: the friend you don't really like, her breasts immature and pink—take them into your mouth. Sometimes it's better if you need to rush. You may see your father's face, or your husband ravished by another woman.

Or else, nothing works, like today, when you could be somebody lost. Now it's so close to dinner that you're crying, the forks and steak knives weightless and bright on the plastic mats. *Hurry*.

The Jar beside the Bed

My partner, a man I didn't know before, has dark hair and rarely speaks. Now and then—and this was difficult at first we have sex, like animals, without love, although we've become adept. A woman watches us, as if we were her pets. She keeps us here.

It's like a dollhouse, but we're not dolls. We have a bed, a spare table and two chairs, a table lamp. No books, nothing to entertain except each other, which is, apparently, how she thinks it ought to be.

She turns over in her bed to watch, tings her nail against the glass as if we could be fish, or monkeys in some Lilliputian zoo. I have no memory of being captured, or how I grew so small.

For fun, we mock her make up her name, or where she works, or who she loves. She never says a word, just stares, somehow happier. It's an odd situation all around.

We have no calendar, no idea of time. My hair's uncombed, grown long, and in the heat sticks to skin, mine and his. Even our features, I've noticed, have grown alike. We've become confused.

Here's the funny thing we don't look for weak spots in the jar. We never think *escape*. We never say *next week* or *yesterday*, or try to shout for help when she's not home.

Instead, we pace the circle of our room like hands around a clock. We pick our skin. Occasionally, we kiss or snarl like dogs. It's my job to clean the inside of the jar.

Observed, observing, we stay exactly as we are.

Then It Was Simple

You walked up Sylvandell Drive on the coldest night. Soon, Father would be home,

easing the gray Plymouth into the one-car garage, and Mother, who was always home,

would be cooking meatloaf with its two sizzling strips of bacon. Snow stung your face,

snow crunched beneath your boots and the glow from Pittsburgh's steel mills hung in the sky.

In such a place, in 1955, Mary could appear to you casually, leaning out the neighbor's window,

a blue domestic angel with a movie star face, round arms crossed on the sill, her brown hair

in a friendly page boy. She smiled, you smiled back, your sled tugging behind you,

grounding you, and the frozen snow and the whirl of gravity holding you, and Mary,

as if she were not from another world, so happy to see you.

Rented Rooms, Martha's Vineyard

Upstairs, my husband's daughter and her best friend shower and dress. I remember that stripping off of bathing suits, red elastic marks on skin.

Barbara and I were no older when we ran from bathroom to bedroom like these girls wrapped in towels, long hair turbaned. They disappear and lock their door,

like Barbara and me, hiding. I imagine them shedding towels, young skin smelling of sand, quick to goosebump as they bend, fanning their hair.

Do their hearts rise in gratitude as mine did when Barbara stretched on her bed, her breasts like small, anxious animals, their pink noses, their faces

I wanted in my hands? I stared at her black lashes, skin transparent as Neutrogena soap, a few blackheads near the beautiful curve of her nostril.

Upstairs, it is our door, mine and Barbara's, that is closed for hours while Barbara guides my hand to the tight bead of her nipple,

makes my lips match hers, exactly, until we are sweating and laughing and the button of her jeans leaves a mark on me. When she unbuttons and humps them down

my skin plumps to bursting, like a sun-beat melon or an egg boiled with no pinprick. Barbara moved away in December. We said good-bye in the street,

the air so cold breath cracked. Outside, ice snaps in my husband's glass.

Let me smile as he walks in. Let me turn as I mark my page.

Keep my eyes from their door. Keep me in my place.

Reading Sharon Olds

I haven't touched myself in months, maybe years, discouraged by marriage or age,

the inevitable lessening of the flesh hunger—my youth when I would bestride a man like a solitary rider,

loving only the effect of my body on his. But reading these poems tonight has me so lonely,

so tense, words like *jelly* and *foetus* and the clear gaze of this poet's self-examination. Outside, the air

green, snow on the trees like a second skin. Maybe it was my near-death fright

in the ER on Tuesday—the belly pain, the perfumed taste of the medicine, an element so heavy

it flickered its way through me like a miner's light, my body half in, half out of the CAT scan,

stuck like a baby in some arrested labor while the laser cloned me to saggital planes

of vein, muscle, the body's secret nerves. I lie in bed at dusk with the window slats turned away, blue shadows that sway while I read words like *please-touch* and *without* and *I wanted to feel*

that make me weep. To keep me *here* I try what sometimes fails and sometimes saves:

the hard working of the hand against the individual sex,

punishing it for shame, tethering it to joy.

One Night in Burlington

"The horses screamed as they turned into flame," my mother tells me. She was twelve, in Burlington, awakened by stars flickering on her window frame.

The barn went up in no time, like a paper house. Fire trucks clanged, cedar shakes crackled on the roof. The horses screamed and then burst into flame.

Otherwise the street was quiet. A red glow danced across her ceiling.White ash fell like snow and froze on mother's window frame.

She watched for hours. Young men fought the hose, "A snake," she said, "circling, arching in the street." Twenty horses shrieked. They rose and fell in flame.

Bays, piebalds—all reared up like torches in the dark, pulling from their grooms, then rushing back. Their shadows pranced on mother's window frame.

"They died. It took a long, long time." She straightens. Fifty years, and still my mother hears horses scream at night. The sun sinks into flame. I watch my mother watching from her window frame.

Parturition

Coyotes quarrel with the Long Night Moon. I'm young. My first child is due.

I can't sleep. Scorpions hurry to hide in every crack. I worry—

will I be wiser than my parents? Back home, my mother wakes—

her daughter's face among dogs and rattlesnakes.

She writes me: Scorpions invade my dreams. Are you in danger?

But I love the coyotes' dirge, their hollow outline on the ridge,

and how the wild boar stink, wet with rain. At 3 a.m., my labor pains begin.

March 28, 2001 / March 28, 1945

I'm in my basement exercising when the radio announcer says that on this day in 1945, it was an unprecedented eighty degrees. It takes me a moment to realize that, fifty-five years ago, my mother was twelve weeks pregnant with me. Maybe she didn't know or maybe she blamed the heat, oppressive at the Maryland shore where she walked with friends along the water's edge trying to forget the war; my motherthin legs, flat breasts, brown hair, blue eyes. Pausing now in my basement, I feel her slight nausea, how sweat trickles between her breasts and dampens the underside of her hair. My father's in Italy, every day he writes her love letters from the Po Valley, unaware that I have stolen part of them both and come to life, a gelatinous fishlike curl in her uterus, a foreign body that primes her ovaries, her estrogen, progesterone, prolactin, the hormones that make her, this very day, feel slightly faint. She wades into the still-cold waves and sits down there, splashing herself with one hand, acclimating her skin

to the sudden chill. In Italy, my sunburned father sweeps land mines from green depressions between the Apennines. At night, he drinks wine and writes letters before his turn at watch. This is the day after his battalion entered Tezze, triumphant, months before he'll win the bronze star and come home half crazy. Mother can't know that soon my body will tear itself from hers and she'll birth me at midnight, lightning stuttering the labor room windows, an odd beginning to the odd ending neither of us expects when, at last no longer knowing who I am, she will refuse my hand. When she leaves the shore, suit damp to her belly, when she hurries home to write my father about how it was eighty degrees so she went to the beach, is she already unhappy or have I been, all this time, mistaken? If only I could ask what she hopes for, what she will expect of me, and if she thinks, in any way or at any time, I might ever please her.

Mother's Gloves

I wear latex gloves to keep patients' germs away staph, herpes, HIV—every viral song, each bacterial worry.

Accustomed to such risky love, I rummage drawers at home to unearth warmer gloves: blue calfskin, the silky buttoned bone

or ivory elbow length I found in Mother's coat, now my own. Are we bound to work, age, sicken, die

alone—not skin to skin? How can it be? I, who can't remember Mother's hugs, find my fingers inside Mother's gloves.

Shoplifters

As we left Gimbel's Department Store, three men nabbed us outside the glass revolving door.

They gripped Mother's elbow and hissed *Come with us.* She raised white-gloved fists and argued, but

they took us up several floors by elevator, sat me down outside an office in a leather chair.

I don't recall the taxi home—only that I wore a new wool coat, black patent leather shoes.

When my own daughter was ten, her face blotchy as my mother's was, she woke me. That day, in Macy's,

she'd convinced my son that they should pocket all the glittering beads, green plastic bracelets,

iridescent pins. Unable to sleep, she confessed and led me to the pillaged goods hidden in her dresser.

Does stealing run in families? I searched my life for impulse, stealth, desire.

Then, when I was forty-six, my mother died. Father called me to collect what he named *Mother's excess:* rhinestone bows clipped on satin shoes, a hollow copper rose, silver earrings sold in velvet pouches, looping heaps of pearls, gold

and opal bumblebees, spiders set with cabochon. Guilty, greedy, I hurried Mother's bounty home.

Anorexia

Still, I'm the only one who might tell her—

Look at your thighs! Skinny as toothpicks!

She laughs me off, her thick-soled combat boots too big for her legs.

The whole of her maybe, what, a size two?

And the hair, long ringlets she dyed the color of eggplant.

Hungry? I ask, clattering dinner dishes, fanning the smells her way.

I'm offering dark bean soup, nachos with yellow cheese melting over the plate.

She stands like a sliver festering in an open wound.

When she turns to lift the kettle, to pour tea, add Nutrasweet, she almost disappears.

Where did you go? I shout.

The hot liquid gives her cramps.

She runs to the bathroom, comes back chewing Tums, Maalox, complaining.

It's hunger, I tell her, not disease, but she knows as well as I do.

I sit down, mouth watering, take large spoonfuls of soup, dip my bread.

She reads a magazine: mannequins thin as endive, their skin the color of cream.

When she turns to look at me again, I see scooped out gourds where her eyes should be.

A smooth, domed skull like the fragile skin of an egg.

She yawns, and I invent exotic desserts hidden inside her mouth.

One has thin pastry in layers, honey flowing.

The other is aflame—vanilla ice cream, cherries, chocolate sauce, a rich biscotti.

When she swallows, she makes glugging noises in her throat. Dinner's almost over.

She goes to the refrigerator, opens the door.

Just looking?

- She decides to brew more tea, turns the burner up until the kettle screams.
- Frugal, she takes the used tea bag, dips it over and over into the new, boiling water.

In a Deep Pool Bound by Cement

In a deep pool bound by cement, in water black as the Exxon oil slick, my daughter and I swim. Thick scum trails our arms like moss, and fish bump and touch our legs like caresses from childhood. We'd better get out, I say, and she nods, her arms strong, her stroke sure. We are both calm in spite of chill currents and the inky meniscus. More afraid than she is (I think now on looking back), I break the surface first and pull myself onto the wall. Hurry, I suggest, my tone light, my hand reaching for hers over water so dense there's no reflection. She swims slowly, blonde hair wet only at the tips, a dark fringe dipping and rising. Her body is incandescent as a nocturnal beetle, and yet utterly human. Then she too pulls herself up, towels off, and joins me on the rim.

Ear Examined

The doctor tugs the fleshy lobe, pulls up and back, the canal thereby made straight. Enter his probing speculum, its light a triangle on the drum. Pearly, uninformed, it waits for the otoscope's puff of air. Like a sheet

snapped by tiny chambermaids, it flaps, teased by air to test its worth for sound: those words we long for—a whispered oath, a lie. A trickster, the ear. Making us believe what eyes deny or hearts might doubt,

the narrow bones inside like a sparrow's in flight, willing to trust the slightest breeze, the one that sings *Yes! I love you!* as if words might mean exactly what was heard. Oh, the risk, the fragile wing.

Teasing Was Only the Beginning

In this picture my son's face is young, dark circles I never saw before now under his eyes, his face turned a bit, his mouth open as if he's inhaling or saying ahhh, but overall his expression is happy.

His expression at the dinner table was happy, his hair yellow as the hay he'd helped my husband mow. Dishes and silverware clattered. In those days I cooked meat and corn, gravy and bread food for growing children and a hard working man.

My husband was a hard working man, his face washed just before he sat down, his hair wet and combed straight back, the illusion of order, a clean smell. His cheeks shone and he tapped the table with his fork, threw a comment to my son, just a small crack, what my mother called teasing.

Teasing was only the beginning. My son's face crumpled—that's the only word for it and began to split and split again as if he were something divided by a knife, barn dust streaking his face. The barn dust on his face ran in rivers into his mouth, and, I think, his world must have dissolved, compressed into a small, hard welt in his lungs, the labor of breathing, trying to mingle corn and saliva, trying to hold back.

I held back, believing a second marriage might only be saved if parents stood together in matters of the children, since the children were another man's—really only mine. I took a deep breath and concentrated on a blue spot or a gold kernel of corn, anywhere but on the contorted face of this boy who sat, head up, eyes on the man, fork poised over the meat.

The Ruined Boy

Already it has been slapped out of himall he has left is his long eyelashes. Doesn't anyone else in the airport notice? He glances down at his sneakers and genuflects when his mama pokes him. On the tarmac, men with shaved heads zoom about with our luggage. Their boots are thick-soled; do they love their mothers? How about my son? He doesn't wear glasses, like this boy, and he's blonder than anyone waiting here. When I'm home, we'll meet for dinner. The kid with spectacles, I think, will grow up to study finance in Cleveland. How's work? I'll ask my son, trying to catch up. He'll concentrate on his plate. I'll pick up the bill.

Nights after Mother Died

I slept in the guest room, the high bed. My father snored from their room, her side empty. I was terrified of him seeing me naked, the bathroom door swollen so it wouldn't close. Of her finding me those three days after death when the soul wanders. In an old dream, I bent to kiss my mother. She rose up from her coffin, flurry of white hair, mouth a dry, silent hole. Yet for those three nights I felt only the softest touch on my cheek, something I brushed away. A cobweb. A thirsty gnat. Or what I wanted to believe: a young mother soothed her restless child, one finger stroking my cheek lightly in the rhythm of sleep.

When My Father's Breathing Changed

When my father's breathing changed from the harsh, regular rhythms I was used to to the deep chuffing of an engine struggling uphill in the Pennsylvania mountains there was no turning back. His body had already narrowed into a flute of wood, the sheets damp with three day's death watch, his heart hammering under thin ribs like hard steel rams earth in the dry lands. When pain struck, as if the hands of the bedside clock were fists beating each slow second into him, I stroked his forehead, thought if he didn't die I'd go mad, if he did, I'd stop breathing too. Then my father's heart slammed into silence like a child playing statue. His skin shrank, the hands turned stone, only the eyelids were still supple and they flew open. The hazel orbs of my father's eyes locked onto mine and all his history transported itself into me like cargo slid down into a ship's empty hold. One breath, two, the lungs drained themselves, the eyes let go their visions. The spirit rose, invisible but palpable, and I called his wife into the nursery of my orphanage.

II.

It Is August 24th

and at last I'm leaving the clinic with its faded paint, its finally empty waiting room. Good-bye to the women and their screaming children, good-bye to the pregnant blonde whose water broke early at twenty-five weeks after a coke binge she finally confessed to. I'm leaving that tone in my voice as I probed her vagina and quoted statistics of loss, her uterus foul with bacteria. *From what*? I wanted to ask. *From an all night party, his oily fingers*?

Walking into the sun past "Women's Health," past the dried scum on the pavement where they scuff out their smokes, tear gum wrappers into a hundred paper swans on my tax money, I say later to friends, on my tax money my skin lets go of that blonde, the bloody water that blasted apart her thighs and filled my shoes as I opened, carefully, with one hand's fingers the bluish lips. I think about her as I pass a man dressed in a no-color sweatshirt, his eyes twin blue stones. He says *Hi*, so low I almost turn.

I'm used to being polite to every patient who looks into my eyes as if they were my friend, so I answer Hi, and walk on. There is the soft suck of gum soles as he falls in behind me, the sound like sticky amniotic fluid drying on the floor. After her exam, the woman lay back and drew up her knees. I'm better than her, I thought, as I dropped the speculum into the bucket, peeled off my latex gloves, hands pale, knuckles without her jail-blue tattoos. I know this is hard, I said, in that way one woman has when she turns away from another woman.

Suck, suck, our shadows walk, light wavering around us like the fringe of flesh that rings the vagina. What should I do? Walk faster? Turn to stare? Run to the alarm box, the security man, wondering how *he* feels today, how much better than me as I punch the buzzer once, twice, over and over? I see the woman in the clinic turn toward me, eyeliner like thumbprints under her eyes. I say The baby will probably not survive. This is some fucking mess, she says, my car on the far side of the ramp, the man right behind me, both of us knowing that I am a woman like any woman just skin and hair and that sharp primal cry.

Examining the Abused Woman

Her face, when she turns, is like a peach left in the refrigerator drawer too long,

nose and cheek caved in, as if underneath the fleshy matrix has been chewed away.

When I ask past medical history, she lists the broken bones:

Humerus, ulna, sternum, nose. Jaw, twice, eye socket, she points, here.

I palpate her face, dip my fingers in the little valley of the clavicle, scared

to press too hard. I see her bare. She breathes, I listen with a stethoscope,

her breath like wind drawn down a New York alleyway. All the time we talk.

I memorize her puffy feet, her pubic hair, the scars that rise like topographic maps

across her abdomen. Hand slicked with lubricant, I probe to touch her ovaries, hold her uterus between my open palms. She says she lives in Westchester, *a home of sorts*.

I finish the exam. She dresses and, not looking up, thanks me for being kind. How could I say

It's no use to hate or I bless you with my fingertips? It's me who is afraid.

Nunca Tu Alma

I turn my eyes from the girls' thin bodies in Sarajevo and from corpses that float down river like matchsticks, but here in the clinic I sit with Maya—a twelve-year-old, raped by her sister's friend—who asks me Am I still a virgin? I examine her crimson vagina. Three delicate tears lace her perineum, as if Maya has had a rough delivery. I culture for GC, chlamydia, draw blood for pregnancy, HIV. Am I still a virgin? she asks, her voice disembodied above her knees, bent and open, her hips narrow as a boy's beneath the sheet. I struggle with mechanical vs. emotional, consider the penis as metaphor. When we're finished, Maya and I lean close, face to face. Virginity is a matter of love, I say, when you give yourself out of joy. Rape takes only your body, never your soul. Maya nods, repeats this in Spanish to her mother and sister, three dark women singing like birds. Maya imitates me, her fist strikes her palm: Nunca, nunca tu alma. Her tests are negative. Maya's more like thirty than twelve, the nurse whispers, and I agree. I crumple the sheet and dump the bloody swabs. Shove the metal stirrups into the table, out of sight.

Every Day, the Pregnant Teenagers

assemble at my desk, backpacks jingling, beepers on their belts like hand grenades, and inside, their babies swirl like multicolored pinwheels in a hurricane.

The girls raise too-big smocks, show me the stretched-tight skin from under which a foot or hand thumps, knocks, makes the belly wobble.

A girl strokes her invisible child, recites all possible names, as if a name might carry laundry down the street or fix a Chevrolet. I measure months

with a paper tape, maneuver the cold stethoscope that lifts a fetal heart-*swoosh* into air. Then, shirts billowing like parachutes, the girls fly to Filene's where infant shoes,

on sale, have neon strobes and satin bows—oh, Renee, Shalika, Blanca, Marie, the places you'll go, the places you'll go!

Phallus Examined

It seems a relic of time quietly lax, soft pulsed, as if asleep

or waiting for others of its kind to stir and slither from the deep.

Dark, shadowy-skinned and cobbled like an ancient beast

but also pale, smooth rimmed and beautiful, it must be blessed

to resurrect itself repeatedly, burdened as it is to comprehend

this tender hand that probes to see if any tumors rend

its complex viaduct of twisting wile and changing whim.

Hurricane Floyd

Already we have a gray drizzle, birds blown sideways by the windstill, I can't get used to the weather woman calling it *he*, so accustomed am I to women being named the wild ones, the ones naturally out of control, although I see violence every day in the clinic: the shrewd faces of men as they watch their women, as they keep their hands hidden, suggesting a power so fierce it could sweep a tide through the hallways that would drown us all. What kind of world do we live in, I ask you, when a woman like me sees a man by the elevator—Wow, pretty big storm, he says—and I, trained in the illusion of keeping safe, can turn my back, board up my smile, move all my gentle possessions inside, as if any one of us could be both alive and out of harm's way.

The Condition of the World, August 1997

Channel 4 says latex kills slowly cameras zoom close to the doctor whose gloves

snap white powder into the air. *First red blotches, then asthma, then, in the middle of the night, you're choking.*

Next day, my favorite patient delivers by C-section. Hours later, her belly hard, fever 104,

she's opened again it seems one artery kept bleeding, *sullied her gut*.

Her uterus fell apart and her bladder crumbled under the knife. Now she's *beautiful on the outside*,

ugly as sin inside. Black tubes drain her body fluids into glass jars; everything

reminds me of tragedy. In Texas, coyotes howl at the Green Corn Moon and yesterday on the news,

a Korean boy stepped on a land mine the explosion dissected him like flying scissors. In Kansas,

a farmer's wife shakes dimes from a coffee can and down the road, college girls working part time at US *Healthcare* make life and death decisions. Sometimes I beg them all day to allow one damn visit to the old woman left

balanced on a bedpan. Tonight, TV commercials resemble acid dreams: starved models walk

into black & white surf, blonde kids yearn for their fathers. Outside, it starts to rain,

a plashing against glass like blood drops or the thin fluid wrung from crushed cells.

Once, a surgeon let me place my two gloved hands against a dying man's heart. The heart, slightly tipped,

lub dubbed like a fetal kitten in a red silk sack. How clean the body was, split open.

Charity

A woman lies on the floor and a man extracts a clot from her brain. Her hair fans out around her head and the red clot looks like flame. Around us, homeless people file in, shivering. They take clothing from a box—one man takes a hat, another takes a sweater. I offer them tea. What a great poem this would make the woman with her hair fanned and the clot coming out like flame, the homeless shivering around us! So I take a pen and begin to write:

Her hair fanned out like flames as the man drew out the clot like a flame, while around us the homeless shivered.

Water Story

I love the living sound of my plant when I water it, the hiss and suck of agua pulled through the soil by gravity, the sweat that appears on the clay pot, the unwrinkling of the leaves. I had a patient once, pregnant mother morning sick and evening sick, who arrived hauling her children, carrying her bucket. We slipped a needle in her vein, dripped saline into her body's dry core and, right before me, the woman plumped up. My ivy overflowsa thread of water and fertilizer returns to earth through the sink mouth. I am happy that all life is circular. Seven months later, the woman's chubby boy popped out, head first. Blood and water flooded the catch basin, spilled over. I carry this story on my white shoes.

Confessions

That time Father spanked me (the *only* time, he said), I wanted him to.

I put my hands on my hips and sassed until I saw his face turn red,

the veins in his neck stand out.

When the neighbor boy came to visit, I let him kiss me.

You were in the kitchen drinking highballs. Pearl onions sank like eyes

to the bottom of your glass.

I knew my horse was imaginary. I painted a bucket with his name

and every night I brought him hay, oats, clear water.

While you were in the kitchen ironing, I rode fast, gripping Shadow's wet belly

with my wet thighs.

Once, when you called us for dinner, I left my underwear upstairs.

Later, Dad bent over and said You can tell me anything.

A man took me into the woods. I knelt down and unzipped his pants.

His penis and forest of hair smelled like the slag heaps in Pennsylvania,

and the wild violets felt like skin.

I never wanted to be a nurse. I liked animals who didn't talk, insects whose homes were boxes or jars.

We bathed the man on the respirator, his front and his swampy back,

rolling him from side to side. Then the head nurse saw the breathing tube

lying on the sheet, disconnected from his throat.

Who turned off the alarm, she cried. Who turned off the alarm?

Story Teller

There's a story teller in every hospital the nurse who leans her white shoe on its toe,

puts one hand on her hip, and talks about the doctor who opened a man's infected belly *right in the room*

and with scissors and blade *cut the dead flesh away.* All day a river of blood, scrap piles of skin—

but when she goes home, she's clean as a bone. Her spaghetti spins in its starchy broth;

roast beef is only a meal. How I envy her, brushing off horror like salt

while I hold back secrets: the boy's amputated leg a surgeon handed me on Christmas Eve,

or the unwanted fetus that cried from its stainless steel bowl—

I swallowed that sound until I was stuffed. In my kitchen, boiling sauce is a scared patient's hemorrhage,

clotted and thick, and rare lamb a terrible sacrifice. Only poems prove

how I've stood by. How I've thrived, mute and disingenuous at the story teller's side.

To Make Nothing out of Something

Driving to work, I listen to a CD, poets reading poems about the dailiness of life:

one walks her dog in falling leaves; another washes plates after a family reunion.

Something in their voices suggests that poems are music, all in a minor key, chords of grief

or the sudden crescendo of memory that makes the poets sound oddly short of breath.

I wonder if they've attended a workshop called *How to make something out of nothing,*

because when I park my car, the words evaporate, little smoke wisps trailing after me into the hospital

where doctors and nurses chant their own rhymes, stanzas without metaphor, their subjects ponderous

but their voices so incredibly light it seems their desires are only mortal: to make nothing out of something—

as if the spread of cancer was a mid-morning stroll and the rebellious breast a marriage easily severed. Then, down the hall, I walk unannounced into the room where a man cries because his wife's nodes are positive,

and she, delirious, tries to pluck her body clean while the intern, not yet expert,

explaining everything, rocks on his heels, and rocks and rocks and rocks.

The Swan by the Mall

The swan's white bulk—crumbled like a corrugated box, one white wing angled up like a broken fanrolls from side to side with the rush of passing cars. I drive by, and as I do I see an angel rise from the swan's body, hover briefly, then turn to look at me as it opens its wings and circles like a helicopter. When an angel rose from Joe Costanzo the same joy came over me. Joe had just exhaled that long whoosh, the breath that emptied the lungs even before the heart's last thump. As Joe's pulse leapt into the room, I saw his pupils dim, like candles damped with two moist fingers. It was a busy Wednesday, nurses rushing about. Then the angel, unfolding itself and blinking. The rest of the shift, white gauze was tender under my fingertips, and blood had the fragrance of peonies. Other nurses nodded, each recalling her stories: One angel spoke. Another stole a ring and hid it in her pocket.

The swan disappears, and I pull into the parking lot. Who wouldn't hurry to the bedside of the dying, just to see the angel again as it goes, drawing itself from death's shrunken belly into the room?

Like Mother, Thirty Years before Her Death

I'm grateful when the young man arrives in his green fleece jacket, stamping and saying, "It's cold," carrying his metal bucket and glue boards, not because of the scratchings I've heard in the ceiling, the real ones, but because of the scratchings I don't describe: the long stretch of time without company; the night that begins at 5 p.m., TV flickering gray and boring; at my side, the shut book. When I open the door to greet him, I realize why my mother, in 1962—the summer my father traveled with his secretary, the one who would later become his second wife-brewed coffee for the workmen who dug up our streets for sewers, making us modern, suburban, and why she carried the cups out to them, sugar in a silver bowl, cream in a pitcher, cookies or finger sandwiches and napkins. The men would stop work and smile, wiping their foreheads, buttoning their shirts. I'd watch my mother in her thin body, housedress, apron, straw sandals offering her gifts to them-men who didn't refuse but drank her strong coffee in the noon heat. I wondered if she was flirting, but warning the young man to be careful, to watch himself in the junk-filled crawl space, then waving good-bye to him from the doorway as he drives away with his poisons and traps, I know she was simply doing what I am-being careful

and friendly with the time I have left, more anxious now to fill the space with something human, some small connection, a kindness, a shared platitude that nevertheless, in retrospect, might count for something.

Everything in Life Is Divided

Everything in life is divided: twenty-four hours that fade from day to night,

the sand at Martha's Vineyard, where we vacationed last year, separating us from the ocean

where we swam, then returned to our blanket, the two of us making one marriage,

sharing the apple sliced to reveal the identical black seeds of its surprised face.

Even our bodies can be halved, although less evenly: lungs partitioned into lobes, the heart's blood

pumped from right to left, the brain's two hemispheres directing our arms, our legs,

our lives into the two possibilities of the Greek mask. My life's work, too, is divided—

on one side of my desk, unfinished poems; on the other, nursing books with dog-eared pages.

Aren't we all somehow divided? Like when my daughter was in labor, my first grandchild emerging into the room's blue air, suddenly entering new territory,

and how, when after the delivery my daughter kept bleeding, I couldn't look at the newborn in the incubator

but stood fast beside my child, the woman who once slipped from my life into her own and now had divided herself again

while I balanced in my hands *Joy* and *Fear*, cradling them both until the bleeding stopped.

God and the Blueberries

September, 2001

I selected the blueberries from the blue bowl left uncovered overnight in the refrigerator.

I felt the blueberries in the palm of my hand. They were small, like tiny eggs, but not like eggs. Some were soft and caved in, not quite rotten—like old men and women.

For a moment before releasing them, I wondered if blueberries knew about transformation. In the refrigerator, they had been safe.

I scattered the blueberries over my cereal. They fell into the milk, turning it blue like breast milk, and the blueberries became small blue breasts.

Outside, the sky was blue, and sugar turned red in maple leaves that soon would be brown as the stem hole of a blueberry.

I rolled the sweet blueberries from palm to fingertips and, one at a time, one at a time, they disappeared.

How I'm Able to Love

I'm stunned by death's absence, by the flesh that remains, changed and yet hardly so. I try to pretend the body's a pod or insect shell, but attending the body after death

I see the body with all its attributions for the first time, totally honest a time to satisfy that final curiosity, the long gaze that reveals a life compressed, unalterable.

Beyond the window, rain falls. Streets below shine like an untied black ribbon. When my mother died, I was the one part nurse, part daughter. I caught her last heartbeat

with my fingertips, knowing that the lungs fail a few beats after, then breath empties them. From long experience, I stood at the moment just before and stroked her hair

as life moved through her as it always does pulling itself up through the ankles through the bruised aorta taking the heartbeat along, gathering the last

lungful of air and leaving nothing, all this up through the jaw and, at the moment life breaks free, out the open eyes. The hands respond, as if the body wasn't robbed, but had been clinging and let go.

I don't believe in death. Even when the body mottles, even in its closed casket, I see the body I have touched, staring at it as I work. Only my fingers

retain the memory of my memory. This compression is good: it makes room for all the dead I know and don't know the familiar dead and the dead yet to be born. Also by Cortney Davis The Body Flute Between the Heartbeats: Poetry and Prose by Nurses (coeditor) Details of Flesh I Knew a Woman: The Experience of the Female Body (nonfiction) Intensive Care: More Poetry and Prose by Nurses (co-editor) In the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry series

Cortney Davis, Leopold's Maneuvers