how much like children

poems, 2003

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Wristwatch

Hand-me-down,
the band dulled from use,
one eyelet stretched more than the rest.

The back of the face
crusted with bits of green,
sweat-stained metal,
flakes of tarnish and skin.
Residue of the dead man who once wore it.

It loses two minutes every twelve hours.

A Doctor Has Closed Shop

On more than two hundred occasions,
he plucked a child from the
warmth and safety of his nest,
shrieking, bald, crying,

“Nobody asked me if I wanted to be born!”

Tonight,
the plaques are being removed from the walls.
The instruments are silent.
Nothing chirps or beeps or clicks.
The overhead lights are off,
and might not come on again for some time.

Blues Against Tomorrow

Boom chick-a-boom.
Hear that?
Rhythm trying to say something.

Somebody at the bar,
talking just loud enough
to be overheard.
“I’m not as young as I used to be.”
“Nobody is, sweetie.”

Wet ring on a napkin. Toothpick,
bright red on one end,
dull beige the other. Sound
soaks the walls.

Clack clack clack clack drums march along the bar rail.

“Is he actually trying to go to sleep up there? With all this noise?”
Cheap apartment. Upstairs.

12:52. Band takes a break. Line ‘em up.

12:58. Complete silence. For no good reason. Falls on the room like a sheet of glass. Lady at the bar starts to cry.

Boys in the band look at each other. Raise their drinks in a toast. Pack it up early tonight.

From above, gentle, tiny sounds: a two-year-old quietly snoring.

Haiku #1

Mother and daughter
sharing valium and milk;
such a touching sight.

Knife-Dropper

From across the street,
she watches you.
There is not much in her expression,
but her eyes never stray from yours.

She sees you through two sheets of glass:
the window of the laundromat,
the window of the restaurant.

You sip your coffee,
double-check your bill,
consider which credit card to use,
never aware of her gaze.

Bill paid, you retreat to the day
and move quickly down the street
to your next stop. Her eyes
follow you.

Countdown

2 minutes:
someone starts the clock
(it isn't me).
Down the hall, right, left,
just a little way to go.

So much to do
in
so little time.

Not enough time to
read the paper
or pour the coffee.

Forever in some cases,
but 2 minutes
(now down to 1)
is nothing, really.

When the music stops,

Midnight Prayer

The buyer insisted that
before we moved,
we had to bury a statue
of a certain saint
in the back yard,
upside down. So we did.

I have visited the house
only once since then,
not entirely surprised
by the hosta, furiously
spreading from that spot.

Haiku #2

Sit back and relax.
Ignore your better judgment.
This won't hurt a bit.

A City Called Dusk

Apprehension grows like green vines
along the brick of the post office wall.
This place has stood forever.
It understands its children, but does not miss them.

Around seven,
students make their rounds:
selling tickets to a play that will begin shortly.
“Won’t you come?” “We’ve been practising all week!”

Outside, down the hall, the adults sit,
the resentments bunched and furrowed like reeds in a vase.
“This is their last chance,” one of them says,
“if this doesn’t work, they’re not going to try it again.”
Murmurs of melancholy agreement ripple across the cast iron table.

Cold food. Plastic forks. Shirts that make the neck itch. Show must go on.

Rachel is radiant, Noah never better.
Cheers echo from those who notice.
A song, a bow, one more bright moment.

Before the cars start: cologne, sweet-smelling just hours ago,
now sour and bitter from sweat.
“It’s time to go home.”
The radio is silent the whole way. And so is he.
He will not dance with you when the time comes.
His thoughts are reserved for the problems of adults,
but yours are more important, by far.

Later, in your room,
you remember what matters about tonight,
that it was you on the stage,
not him,
that you were brave,
not him.

Now sleep, sweet girl, and let dusk wash over you.
Dawn will arrive very soon to bathe you in new possibility.

Woodworking

In the interest of time,
I have made a wooden box.
Lovely maple burl,
beautiful grain, a flawless assembly,
with polished golden hardware.
It is sealed on all edges, and only
a hammer and chisel can open it.

There is something inside,
but for the life of me
I cannot remember what it is.

Haiku #3

What was the cold war?
Home in Pennsylvania,
waiting for the flood.

Exhaustion

Bent toward the ground,
a shape that not long ago
was straight, strong, firm.

Leaves withered, colors faded,
she stretches down in an
unnatural arc,
a weary concession to
time and gravity.

Branches that once held leaves,
fruit, wren's nests,
arms that once held children,
groceries, lover.
Both now stooped away from the sun,
a crescent moon of fatigue.

Remove the weight, but the
shape stays the same.

Keepsake

She has it all spread out in front of her: everything that remains from the past three years of trying. It barely fills the shiny wooden box ($149 at the faux antique store in the mall) that she keeps it in.

Now, each leaf is spread out around her on the bed.
The pillows are casually knocked to the floor.

Among the newspaper clippings, magazine articles (with key passages circled), handwritten letters, she begins to see a pattern.

Here and there, her eyes will fall out of focus. And certain letters, or bits of a drawing, will stand out.

She is reminded, briefly, of her old King James Bible, Red Letter Edition.
The important bits shining off the page so that even a fool would not miss the point.

Perhaps God is still a writer, she thinks, while fingering a yellowed missive from a Sunday paper's advice column two years ago ("father-in-law disapproves of living arrangements").

But the only things printed here in red are the bank statements,
the collection notices.

Three years, and what to show?

So much paper.

Haiku #4

This is all I have
to show for being a child.
Daddy, please don't touch.

Drugstore

Tiptoeing to see over the counter:
every color, plus one,
shapes and forms familiar,
sweets stacked in front of those
many things that make no sense yet:

Newspapers, cigarettes, paperbacks showing bare-chested men.
Cassette tapes, small square packets (which clearly contain something round).
And pills. Row after interminable row of pills.
In every color, plus one.

It’s Got a Good Beat, and You Can Dance To It

Marvelous cadence,
a click-click-click thing.

Words like shoe-taps,
syllables like a snare.
Darts on a dictionary page.

What was it the man said?
“Fas-cin-a-tin’ Rhy-thm ... ”

Haiku #5

How much like children,
with buttons, knobs and wires,
silent in our rooms.