WE DO NOT SLEEP UNDER A FULL MOON

By

AMY SCANLAN O’HEARN

Graduate School-Camden
Rutgers, the State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
Graduate Program in
Creative Writing
written under the direction of
Lauren Grodstein
and approved by

___________________________
Lauren Grodstein

Camden, New Jersey October 2013
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

WE DO NOT SLEEP UNDER A FULL MOON

By AMY SCANLAN O’HEARN

Thesis Director: Lauren Grodstein

Comprising four sections to mark distinct phases, from childhood and early adulthood, through the course of a thirty year marriage, to the loss of both parents and the ordinariness of middle-age, *We Do Not Sleep Under a Full Moon* is a collection of free verse poems the scope of which may be more ambitious than seems possible. But each poem’s spare and fine detail attempts to communicate the ineffably fleeting yet somehow permanent moments of understanding and observation that, amidst all that is ephemeral, may serve as witness to the writer’s very real and concrete business of living as time, people and events pass her by.
DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad
EPIGRAPH

The instinct to discard is ultimately an act of faith.

- Don DeLillo
The Same View

The pokeweed, the white flowered vine
that bends the pine.

Arching forsythia gone green,
fledgling tulip tree I cut
at the base to stop its growth.

The spider webs, the dew, brick wall
backdrop, against which
it all plays out.

The mass of undergrowth,
perch of the hawk that tears
the flesh of a dove
outside my window.

Dusk. Pokeweed droops,
berries gone, clusters now
barren.

House of brick recedes
behind brambles and weed.
Pine droops too, its reaching
tips
fade from view.

Dark now. Hurricane winds sweep
between the houses.

The neighbors’ bricks wet,
patterns seep their walls.

Pokeweed sways in the humid air.
The Tulip Tree still clings,
its withered leaves, like hands, they wave to me.

In the undergrowth darker now the wet ground
sends up heat, the pine
heavier with the storm
reaches over.

Morning. A cat bird
eats a last berry.
We Were Reckless Then

We stripped trees bare
and left holes dug untended

From the cool acre behind Digney’s barn
from the glass-black pond
in which we would not swim

we scooped small orbs too numerous
to count carried them home
to steel buckets
lined up in our garage

Even there they grew round
bellies sprouted tails
and frantic legs

On hot days the air hung
bodies fuzzed with rot and stink

It was back to Cooley’s Pond
where frogs leapt
at the sound of our feet
The Agoraphobic

She doesn’t know what day or week or month she knew. Her mother was. A kind of unwieldy mass of something deep and unspoken, with just the right amounts of denial and knowing. Now she was the one to fabricate the why for avoiding anything outside the house. Appointments vaporized, dates disappeared from conversations, very little was ever really obligatory. And she was not accountable for not acknowledging it all. A grey mass hung there between the thing, the invitation, the event, the gathering, a time period so well worked, it floated someplace and was gone. She avoided speaking to anyone, made dismissive comments, complained of memory loss, a misplaced calendar or a minor illness, and voila, she was free. Until the next lunch date, shopping trip, baby shower or funeral she could not attend. Staying put brought comfort even as she feared the unraveling. Morning coffee, the newspaper, sorting mail, doing the laundry, the dishes, shining her granite counter top. There were bills to pay, forms to complete, the fixing of a faucet, patching a plaster wall, relaying the patio stones gone askew after a spring downpour. Always something to begin even while something else remained slightly undone, just a few days more and she’d be through. Knocking out the wall in the upstairs bathroom, caulking a crack in the mantle, she had so much to do.
This Time the Bowl is Pink

Hair line cracks
run through painted thistle
a chip grays
with age

A bowl that no one wants
but that no one throws away

The bowl into which
melon balls
and tears
were dropped

the color of my mother’s skin

A bowl that holds a past
empty as it is
Why Blue Smells Like Gin

The juniper berry’s pungent and bitter sting on my tongue as I crouched behind the bush hunkered beneath its scratchy arms makes me feel alive. For how long did I hide? I would like for it to be hours. In the impossibly silent and eternally framed memory my father is inside of the house on the other side of the brick wall and I am willing him to come find me. It is the first stand off between me and my father, who until then had never hurt me. The scent that rises from my father’s cocktail is the smell of the berry, and when I learn that Benedictine Monks distill gin from juniper I cannot be surprised at the connectivity of all things. I don’t see my siblings in this or other memories. Photographs show us huddled in front of the TV or for an impromptu portrait on the front steps. In one my mother leans on the porch rail, unaware that she is in the frame. A dishtowel hangs limp from the fingers of one hand, her other at her forehead shades her eyes. I think this photograph reveals more of my mother than any I have seen. My brothers and sister are frozen inside the silent frame and they move like invisible ghosts outside of it. Balls pop from the end of bat, a screen door slams, voices rise in the summer heat. I remember the first time my husband hurt me. I left the bedroom and sulked alone, wanting him to come find me. Hours pass, even days before we speak again. In my childhood memory it is my father who never arrives. I am crouched and branches scratch, and I reach to a cluster of blue, to a bitter smell and taste. I am both comfortable to remain there nestled in the cold, powdered earth leaning against the familiar brick and I am conflicted. I am learning that love hurts. The buzz of the mower from a neighbor’s lawn lifts through the open window in the room where I sit at my desk and will my husband to stand in the doorway and tell me that he is sorry, and it is twenty-seven years and I know he will not come.
Fences

were meant to climb over and woods dense with underbrush and muck our domain. We hacked through prickly bushes, trampled long grass, collected burrs on our clothes and in our hair, clear cut canopies to lay bare the soft earth, and sat for hours stripping bark to carve the skin that lay beneath. When that grew tiresome, we traipsed to the lowlands to construct a catwalk of doors over swamp and shape an inner sanctum within its towering reeds, until the day my father forced me to lead him to my brother’s towering collection of pornographic magazines. A tower quite impressive in the way it leaned so markedly to the right yet remained standing, almost as tall as I was at 8 or 9. I try to envision my father’s reaction, but all I can see is the tower of glossy magazines, his own stash transferred by my brother from his (my father’s) secret place under the bed to the end of a path of doors that lead to a circle of trampled weeds encircled by eight or nine foot reeds in the recesses of a swamp. I leave my father by the pile and follow the path back out to the road.
**New Wood**

Smelling sawdust like smelling love
not love, lust, not even lust
not what you know it is at thirteen.

Smelling new wood as new floors are set,
watching mercury bounce in balls across the floor.

*I'll drop mine if you drop yours* and I laugh,
my profile framed against a second story window
someone below might make out as mine

know I was giving it up
that like the mercury it would bounce
separate itself from itself nothing left
except the shame

I carried from that unfinished house
into every other I'd occupy.

He wouldn't have to ask twice.

What he had to show wasn't what I wanted
but I'd still comply.
The Path of Least Resistance

An object remains motionless, enacting its own force in a state of seeming restfulness, unless acted upon by another. This I learned in 8th grade Physical Science from Mr. McGoughney, with whom I fell in love, to be replaced by Miss Holden in ninth grade English for whom I read the entire lyrics of John Lennon’s Imagine, turning the paper and my head as I followed the words round and round the center of the album’s sleeve. By Mr. McGoughney the secrets of motion I suspected already to be relative were revealed to jive with things at home. Things at rest best left at rest. In the doorway in a hall shrouded in darkness on the morning my sister decides it is time for her to leave in Monte Carlo car driven by her boyfriend I crouch. I won’t come down the stairs to say goodbye. I am too afraid to get close to a voice so loud and unlike anything I have ever heard. In my memory, her mouth is open yet no sound comes out as she is backing out the door slightly hunched under her duffel. We won’t talk for a long time for no other reason than she has left and I am still there. Along Route 70 are many bus stops, some sheltered, most simply marked by a pole. I look for my brother. It was February when we hid his shoes, had each prepared something to read while he sat fidgeting on the edge of a chair. While we talked he devised a plan for getting the hell out of there, and when the counselor finally approached with his shoes, he tied the laces very slowly, then he got up and ran. The path of least resistance still leads out of doors.
Evenings

We spit seeds to the side of our brick house.
They bounced and fell instantly
fertile in the shadows,

forgotten
to come back again -
bursting giant leaves and wayward vines
that flowed out into the yard
and sun.

And finally came flowers and small fruits
we never knew would get big
so cracked open
and examined and threw back into the dirt

where with more seeds we spat and spat
they sank
to do it all again.
A Childhood Kingdom

subjects
of a whimsical king

whirligigs
in a vicious storm

we scaled castle walls
and tore each other’s motley

ate cake maraschino cherries
   and jujubees

labyrinthine hedges secluded us

a moat divided the world beyond

we feared to swim would subvert the king

so we bowed to his queen
and cooed like doves to the crown
Come Home

I have the bell my mother rang
for us to come
Between its clangs we measured time -
one last walk atop a split rail fence
one more you're it

Beneath the waters of the tub
our scratches bloomed
or poison ivy or tar or taunts

Our victories were few
but by degrees
we grew
The Final Sacrament

My father highly recommended
Reconciliation, if you could get it
in the privacy of your own home
and on your death bed

When the hand holding
and tears were too much,
he let go with three Hail Marys
an Act of Contrition, one
Our Father and the Glory Be.

After he’d spent his last breath
(he wouldn’t need it in the body bag)
he went limp, all the faith
drawn out of him and
floated weightless out the door.
II
Love Thy Neighbor

I love my neighbor
the mechanic
who fires it up at 7 am.

The couple next door
and their power tools.

Nadia’s weeds
she lets droop
between the yards.

I want to stay here
and never leave.

I could die here
Mornings

I see fox
pheasant
and bob-white

A piper whose
ochre-speckled
eggs

sit in a fine rut

The fox
turns in his track
to study me

the intruder here

I am not the
authenticator
of morning

and in most cases
hesitate to begin
the day
Black Dog

I love that black dog
I pass every morning
on my way to work,
at attention ears cocked.

My day depends on him,
his head as it moves side to side
with the cars that pass him by.

He understands it’s not easy
to wake up to an alarm,
though he never will.

It's a dog's life after all.

His coat shines,
his black fur glistens
in the morning sun.
Someone is brushing him
or he has licked himself clean.

I wish someone
would lick my fur clean,
fill my bowl each day
let me out in the morning air
to watch passersby.

I’d be a good dog.
Afternoons

A gray sky weighs heavy
it’s not our kind of day -
the promise of sun’s rays
an ice cream cone.

You sit on your couch.
I wander room to room.

Used to be a big hello
now I resist the phone.

Our exchanges pass slow,
our words ring hollow

So I don’t call
I’m on my own.
That’s It You Can Say When You’re Dead I’m Done

Even if I wanted
to call you now

it’s too late
If I said yes

you’d not die
from pleasure

You said I’d miss you

April Fool’s day
Eggs in a bowl
Daylight Savings

Thought you’d sent
them from the grave

If someone is watching
I’d like to think it’s you
February

You should have spelled it in the snow
not made me eat candy hearts

Dig me doesn’t cut it anymore
like you thinking somehow
I’d always be hungry

I’ve given up food
only spiritual nourishment
for me

like Ghandi
I’d as soon evaporate

Take a slice of me
for each year
you’ve left behind

like time zones and geometry
just give me the facts

I’m afraid I don’t know
what I’m made of

and rely on you to say
Ode

You’re darker than the rest
and reek of cherry

smoke has settled
into the creases of your skin

an acrid smell rises from your
oiled clothing

and always that heaviness of soot

still I’m turned on
to the sexy pull and drag

to the sweet reek of the tug
to the possibility
of something
Alone

When I lie down
and you are gone

that empty space
where you belong
is enormous

to fill it I expand myself
I stretch my leg
knowing you’re not there

and fall to sleep
aware I am alone.
I Lie

Sometimes
I go to bed
at night
just to wake
up in
the morning
and have
a cup
of coffee

Sometimes
I call you
at the office
just
to listen
to your voice

You'll say
what are
you doing

Sometimes I lie

I'm working
I say
If I Twinge at One Word

- eucalyptus

it’s involuntary
or for that ridge we sped along in Marin County
you and the car having taken cruise control

I can still smell it
the pod you picked for me
I carried it home in my breast pocket

guarded
like some contraband
I am

my scent gives me away
Roadtrip

Icicles cling to steep rock face
of blasted mountainsides
to allow for passage
gray sky leaves us feeling
hollow inside

we are traveling
back in time

picking raspberries and tasting jam
sniffing melon the raw hide of a saddle
under us the bounce the tack of the ride

over the dash windmills tower
slowly slowly spinning some rest
some paddles spread more widely
than seem possible to us
below here
on the ground
Telling Our Dreams
at Breakfast

We sat together and one rose
to go through an open door.

It was snowing and
there was a turnstile.

I’m sure it was you
who stayed, I pushing
the turnstile into a field
of snow and crowds.

*Let me guess, you didn’t
have the ticket.*

I didn’t have the ticket and
the turnstile would not turn.

Was it you went through
an open door?

How is it we sit together now,
telling our dreams
at breakfast?
What I Left Burning on the Stove

Leaving you in the park was more metaphorical than I could stand thinking I'll burn it down yet as I turned and sped back to the house

yellow corn and bright spring peas  
fused to the pan insides stuck together  
stacked against their will

(competence overcoming my own ineptitude)

if I untied a knot  
(I almost slipped on the stairs getting here)  
I will have accomplished a lot

a string a lace  
a chain of gold

when it seemed impossible  
I kept at it

you'll know when we have survived  
triumphant at least in breathing
The End of The World

If you tell me it’s the last day
I’ll still make the coffee

at least that’s the way
it’s gone before

salt, more salt
that’s the way it’s gone before
III
When Desperate for Relief

I pray then suck the words back in
aware that though half spoken
I have betrayed my doubting self

then wonder if half spoken
they will work in the end
The Ordeal of the Morsel

To prove my devotion
I must swallow not chew

this wafer paper thin
yet it will not disintegrate
so easily

and you want to add a morsel.

I’m gagging
and you haven’t even
placed it on my tongue.
Mothers and Daughters

women come and go

mother and daughter
   you can tell

   the same nose
   slope of the shoulders
   haircut   eyes
         lips and hips

   pants from the same tailor
         shoes cobbled too

   around their necks the same charms

   their toes curl the same arcs
   their breasts hang the same

   their souls
   meet again in heaven
On Days My Mother Smelled Like Fish

On days my mother smelled like fish I curled against her on the couch while the other six kids went about the day and into early dusk without her at the stove or bent before the drier, or standing at the line her arms raised to place the clothes one pin holding two shirts or pants or diaper in perfect unison for us all. Someone else swept a broom across the kitchen floor someone carried plates and silver to the table; yet another folded napkins or poured milk in mismatched jelly jars and stacked white bread. Someone boiled water emptied boxes of noodles coordinated the race to our bowls rang the bell that announced Ready! for father and the boys who came from behind the paper or in from out of doors to sit without her at the table though she rarely sat at all. On days my mother smelled of fish she lay in blue velour her eyes shaded by an arm, her lips closed her mouth drawn taut. She let me lie down beside her my body pressed against her womb.
Daughter

It’s like sitting in a chair at the bottom of the pool and your mother’s arms an octopus, blue ink seeping from her heart, and you want to say people die everyday. Her suckers cling and make sucking sounds and the water is buoying you up while her arms are pulling you down, and inside her mouth is something that looks like a claw. Still you hold onto the chair at the bottom of the pool.

It’s like sitting in a chair at the bottom of the pool
my mother’s arms an octopus

suckers cling make sucking sounds
a broken heart seeps black ink

you want to say people die everyday

her face is too large her lovely
skin purple and blotched

and somewhere in there is a mouth
open and lined with something
that looks like a claw

she glides swimming off
but I know she will return

and still I hold onto the chair

because I can’t let go
because the water
in her wake

keeps me there


**An Early Spring**

1

In the infusion suite  
women come and go  
amidst the lounge seating

a woman screams  
and everyone listens  
little else is being said

women knit scarves  
or afghans or shawls  
and watch the televisions  
hanging above their heads

a few children quietly play  
on a bookshelf a sign  
take a book or leave one

mothers and daughters  
with the same bodies  
go arm in arm except  
one is sick and the other is well enough to accompany her

2

An old man is out in front  
my mother whispers to me  
in the middle of the night

*Is he good looking* I ask  
what I am really thinking is that it is my father  
he beckons her across

I was dreaming of babies  
and my grandmother  
of my grandmother  
holding a baby
we speak
of what we’re feeling
tangled and restless
thirsty and tired

I have had enough
of the days and the nights
and my mother has had enough

3

4:00 a.m. awake again
at the week’s end her eyes
will go shaded and grey

our conversation volleys slow
she strains to hear laughs
faintly at the funny things I say

I fill in the blanks where her
funny things used to be

4

The forsythia is ready
and my mother asks for
a cutting

when we were kids
she snapped its branches
from a bush outside our door

forced their bloom in vases
throughout the rooms its shocking
yellow petals fell on surfaces and floors

I have forgotten and so
she missed her early spring.
At the Cemetery

Visited Longwood today
a crisp winter one
no wind

I pushed myself
along its course

Edith Gustav
Oleg Elaine
Geoffrey
Staffos Tom

a pinwheel stirred
poinsettias lay sideways
blue bows red
an angel prayed

on one a shroud pulled taut
and knotted behind

left the path to read the name
forget it now

at the exit
a white pine drooped boughs
of hair-like needles I swept aside
to go through gates
always open
What I am Without

It’s good I don’t have a disposal

how else am I to remember my mother scraping the day’s detritus

unidentifiable mess of stuff

From a wicker basket I lift clothes to white rope pins like little women if you paint faces on their round heads

Across the carpet I drag the big guns suck up what is dropped throughout our day

and ice trays

*please God*

don’t take away my chafed hands cracked nails or lower back they are all I have left of her

that and the spritely clink of ice against the glass
IV
Who Are We To Say

Today two birds flew into a whirlwind
outside my classroom window

one landed on its back

its blue black wings
beating the ground by starts

or by gusts that continued
despite the destruction already done

The other sitting stunned had us
tapping on the glass wishing

with each small lift of its wing
it would set off again

even as in our guts
we doubted
that wing’s volition.
What My Baby Said

You ask if
there such a thing
as a free lunch

I can’t
say no

High in your car seat
little king or prince

asking all
the right questions

We pass The Women’s
Center, the signs.

I say they don’t want to give up
their babies

because they don’t want
to give up their
babies

You say,
Would you?
Between Friends

My friend said there are degrees
to what
everything
everything
yeah
like
like hatred
love
insanity
give me an example
take death for instance there are degrees
when you’re dead you’re dead
yeah but
what
if you’re killed or you die of a heart attack
can’t get too upset about a heart attack
OK
and murder is worse than if you’re killed in a car accident
right
and suicide
where does that rank
don’t know
is it worse or better
depends
on what
on if you were an asshole
right there are degrees
Neruda in the Woods

I spent tax day with my students in the woods building shelters for fun not because we were too hot or frozen or lacking food

Catherine found a possum’s skull teeth intact
be may have met death with an electrical wire
maybe with a larger animal
that’s often the way it goes

the kids wanted to keep it in the classroom but decided to leave it to the morass of the pines

things do recycle we agreed

at the end of the day we boarded the bus for home staring out windows at housing developments mansions why so big

on the radio they argued over Neruda’s bones to exhume to not exhume in their search for truth

who is Neruda my students wanted to know
why do they want to dig up his bones

we pulled into school reflected on what we learned

vultures puke to protect their food
the swan is the gangster of the animal kingdom
a crow can say I love you
the female eagle is the bigger of the two

my students laughed and bounced their way off the bus always ready for what is to come

they didn’t know anything had changed while we were gone
Election Day

I like the privacy
of the election booth.
Parting the curtain
makes my heart flutter,
always like the first time

I breath a minute
before I begin. I eye
the panel, like the cockpit
of a jet plane, it glows.

I am seasoned and so
breath again. I already know
what direction to go,

satisfied that what I think
inside the curtain remain inside.
The Mixologist

Concocts beverages
to make the day go
not to run from war

but a past that may
leave PTSD
just the same

after an armistice or
at least what someone
said was the end

to arrive somewhere
you discover you are
awake in

as on a riverboat
ports and points of
interest along the way

save there is no
guide or no one has
alerted you to her name
Brothers and Sisters

one remembers
not another

a thing said to be denied

what hides from one
the other can see

last finishes first
the first denied

one is bespoken
another silenced

what after

ey all
die
Saturdays with the Family

when someone dies
in the country
you’re comforted by neighbors
bearing casseroles

you kneel for the rosary
and a brother rises through the air
where father says he’s gone

He’s with the angels now

On saturday mornings
white snow falls outside

so as not to lose another
you gather
in front of the tv

new rules are recited
new leaders deposed
between cartoons

when The Three Stooges is over
you get up and leave the room
Buck Up

Such a sour face
has someone left you

unaware you were
such misery could be

Courage! Be a cowboy!
Fit pipe! Unclog the drain!
Put your hands into it

nothing is out of reach
from so much pain
My Sister Does Not Write Poems

My sister places fruit in an oversized bowl – guavas avocados, mangos oranges and limes. Under her table a sleeping sheepdog lies who she calls Patch, for the perfect circle surrounding his right eye.

I call in the morning when she is in her leather chair, a café au lait balanced on its arm. She is reading The Wall Street Journal, watching her morning shows. She’ll say, You should be taking probiotics. Are you watching Dr. Oz?

On walls painted celery or pistachio she arranges photos of her children, some of me and mine. You can buy frames at Tuesday Morning, she suggests for pictures I have hanging on my refrigerator door.

Every day at twelve thirty she watches her favorite soap. I won’t call her, she wouldn’t answer the phone. When we were kids every night she watched Johnny to fall asleep, and every night I reached across her sleeping form to turn him off.
We Do Not Sleep Under a Full Moon

I stand at my window she at hers
one hundred miles away

fat moon shines his fake light

I will not know until tomorrow
when she calls to tell me
we are restless