

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

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Lauren Grodstein

Camden, New Jersey October 2013

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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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  
*he 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

they 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