

POEMS FOR THE BORDERLANDS PROJECT, March 27, 2013
The University of Notre Dame, DeBartolo 129, 7 p.m.

Part I Home

Pudding (Bajan Bread)
Ars Poetica
The Lee girls had it bad
A Simple Gesture
On the Outskirts of a Bonfire
Blessed Rancor of Music

Kimberly Renith-Joy Licorish
Orlando Ricardo Menes
Diane Seuss
Mary Sexson
Elizabeth Kerlikowske
Curtis L. Crisler

Part II Borders

Border States
Poem with a Phrase of Isherwood
Marquette, Michigan: Tuesday, September 11, 2001
Just the Facts
Pyx
The Falling

Susan Blackwell Ramsey
Francisco Aragón
Gail Griffin
Nancy Botkin
Orlando Ricardo Menes
Gail Griffin

Part III Migration

Without a Life Jacket
A Poem About Bluegills
AM Radio: North America
Don't fill the outline
Way Out
My Father's Helmet
What Brought the Helicopter Down

Elizabeth Kerlikowske
David Dodd Lee
Kirk Robinson
Diane Seuss
Elizabeth Kerlikowske
Jacqueline Dickey
Kirk Robinson

Part IV Immigration

Old Barbados Train Station
Throw down: reflections on boxing
If my grandfather had not emigrated from Silesia
My Grandparents' Land
A Pot of Couscous

Kimberly Renith-Joy Licorish
Curtis L. Crisler
Karen Kovacic
John D. Groppe
Kimberly Renith-Joy Licorish

Part I Home

Pudding (Bajan Bread)

I think of it, the bowl of pudding
mix in my grandmother's lap.
She sat on her old hammered chair,
her arms twined around the bowl,
the way she must have held her children.
My grandmother slapped, turned
thick clouds of yellow batter over
into it self, the way cornmeal is rolled
in okra to make coucou.
Her feet rocked back and forth
to the beat of her slapping spoon
as she scraped the brown sugar,
eggs, vanilla, and flour batter
from the bowl's edge.
As she whipped, the smell of batter
warmed my stomach.
I watched her pour it into dented silver pans,
as if it had a life of its own,
watched it rise
like my mother's chest
when I buried my face between her golden breasts.
They too smelled like pudding.
I thought my grandmother a god
who created food from her lap,
molded and shaped by her hands.

—Kimberly Renith-Joy Licorish **(Marion County)**

Ars Poetica

After black motor oil whet the chinked blade,
Papá planed leftover lumber, groomed the grain
With emery rags, nipped shards, buffed to suede
Every nick and scratch then smeared an oily stain;
Armoire, cupboard, credenza, or stool, each made
To outlast mold's caprice, rot's relentless reign—
A cement shed, pawnshop tools, Papá got paid
With cardboard IOU's but didn't complain,
Dallied bills, snubbed calls, worried about dirt
Spoiling beeswax, a runny varnish, the hair
That strayed into seamless shellac, while I gave
Succor to fractures, restored scraps, healed the wart
On a lacquered pine leg, vigilant in my care
Of salvaged wood as it bucked the austere lathe.

— Orlando Ricardo Menes (**St. Joseph County**)

The Lee girls had it bad

and their little brother Sonny but they were busy
for a long time on the top floor of that old barn

at the edge of their dad's property and finally
one day led me up the stairs into what had been

the hayloft and removed the bandana they'd
tied across my eyes as a blindfold and there

was the most beautiful playhouse I'd ever seen,
they'd made little curtains for the windows with

a matching tablecloth for the table and cups
and saucers and beds for us and small beds

for the dolls and a wash basin and a vase
filled with wild chives and white lilacs and empty

cans for canned goods and nails in the wall
for our coats, I used to believe all the babies

Mrs. Lee lost when they quit breathing and turned
blue were the lucky ones until I saw the rag rugs

on the floor of the playhouse and the bookshelf
and the Bible and even a newspaper for when

we could get Sonny to play father.

—Diane Seuss **(Kalamazoo, MI)**

A Simple Gesture

We sit down to Sunday dinner together for the first time in months. A simple enough gesture, but it speaks louder than anything else we have done lately.

You cut the meat on your son's plate,
we pass the salad, pour
the milk, we ask each other how the day
went, laugh at a funny thing
the young boy said.

We hold
each other's gaze without wincing,
smile and nod so easily
you would think what a nice family
we are, not witnesses to a free fall,
not a people eclipsed by tragedy, we
are just sitting down to dinner together,
tonight, at least for tonight.

—Mary Sexson (Marion County)

On the Outskirts of a Bonfire

Set up house under an apple tree
 mildewed tarp overhead kerosene lantern
 when fireflies and moon are not enough

Hack a path through weeds
 where secrets wheeze

Comfort in the ankle deep
 trillium flags elephant ears

 undertone of bees

Stand with the cattails
 to spy on pontoon worlds
 more mysterious than baby mice trapped in icicles

Understand almost anything will burn

Feed garbage rags books maps into flames
 that kiss fingers into blisters

—Elizabeth Kerlikowske (**Kalamazoo, MI**)

Blessed Rancor of Music

Inspired by Cindy Cradler's #10 painting

The strings strummed in overture of Tchaikovsky
plants dreams where the small child in me finds flight,
& fights for Decembers in a small house in Gary's

suburb. How many houses since then have I lived
in? How many tapes & CDs have I bought to
take me into a Russian man's mind of a ballerina's

perfect gift, one that protects her from danger?
How those dangers get twisted up when in real life,
where we want to protect children from them, like how

the assimilation of the dance of the sugarplums
& the Arabian soldiers will save a child. A cold
brings a chill, makes me readjust under Mama's quilt.

I have traveled to worlds, to other children's dreams,
in my drowsiness. I hear Nate King Cole singing
"tiny tots with their eyes all aglow," & hear that

connection to us all, know too how a song from
one man belongs to so many. Now the chubby jawed
jazz man, Mel Tormé, waves to me, along with

Ebenezer & Rudolph & Ralphie. There's things
to my drowsiness—the how I got here. The music
snuggles me into slumber. The tree's manipulation

with lights. A decorative soldier, positioned
around strings of rainbow bulbs & garland, winks to
me under a blurred cacophony of family voices, as

I nap on the couch in the home my mother
bought back in the 70s. How the home can save us
from what flurries life.

—Curtis L. Crisler (**Allen County**)

Part II Borders

Border States

Here we watch hawk migration from moraines
left by weary glaciers trudging north,
emigrés dropping what they thought they needed.
We pleat, corrugated by their defeat.

Here invisible lines control, both known
and groped through. Tax boundaries are clear enough,
but north of D Avenue pawpaws won't grow,
while five miles south of Sturgis basketball
ceases to be sport, becomes religion.
For decades, contrary to cosmology,
you could cross a time zone by driving south.

We lean close, step back, squint our eyes.
Rational, we grant that we don't know
what we don't know. But we feel nudged,
hustled, dumb. And in that space
at the edge of waking we feel the breath
of border collies behind us, we the sheep
racing to escape, to find an opening, to map
the boundaries, to overvault our sleep.

—Susan Blackwell Ramsey (**Kalamazoo, MI**)

Poem with a Phrase of Isherwood

to Jan Brewer

Cruelty is sensual and stirs you
Governor, your name echoing the sludge
beneath your cities' streets. It spurs

the pleasure you take
whenever your mouth nears
a mic, defending your law...your wall.

Cruelty is sensual and stirs you
Governor; we've noticed your face
its contortions and delicate sneer

times you're asked to cut
certain ribbons—visit a dusty place
you'd rather avoid, out of the heat.

Cruelty is sensual and stirs you
Governor, the vision of your state
something you treasure in secret

though we've caught a glimpse
in the jowls of your sheriff:
bulldog who doubles as your heart.

— Francisco Aragón (St. Joseph County)

Marquette, Michigan: Tuesday, September 11, 2001

While you interviewed for a job all day, I walked
the path around Presque Isle, by the mother of lakes,
dark blue, impervious to summer.

A great space had opened. I'd seen the towers
shed the tiny bodies, then collapse like Legos.
Who knew what was coming?

This might have been the start of another life.
The future already singed the edges of maple leaves
in the branches arching the path.

The bright sky was closed for business,
all America grounded, ATM's down.
I considered our ready cash, our trip home.

I tried to imagine a life here, a life with you.
Would it feel like the edge of the world?
Could I endure that kind of winter?

Tonight, a cabin on an inland lake.
Steaks on a grill, corn in a pot.
The world coming to an end elsewhere, to the east.

—Gail Griffin (**Kalamazoo, MI**)

Just the Facts

In the chain of time a woman is born in 1886
on the west coast, and her great-grandson

is shot out east in a Jersey parking lot.
And in between those two events, many people

have rocked back and forth, heel to toe, jingling
the change in their pockets, waiting for the bride

to appear at the end of the aisle. And you have been
to the fair, haven't you? Taken your turn on a big,

bright wheel that floats you to the edge of forever.
You rise up and your hometown gets smaller.

Your body throws down a shadow, but the stars
have never moved. That's the difficulty of this earth.

—Nancy Botkin **(St. Joseph County)**

Pyx

Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, Notre Dame, Indiana

Wrought cross, wounds of rust; ice-welted saints; a rosary
That thaws in a bronze bowl, pyx of pleas. Valerie,
Giggling, snags it, a new necklace. Crows caw, flap low,
Silty clouds, specks of rain. She runs into the grotto,
Afraid of loud birds, thunder too, but will do handstands,
Cartwheels in a snowstorm. Beware to forget her pill—
She'll eat pencils, cut clothes, glue lips, staple ears at school.
We feed the money box, light candles, kneel in spring air.
Mother of God, help me not break things, be good, not litter,
She prays, her crossing astray. I correct cold hands,
But she twists in my arms, darts toward the lakeside park.
Afraid she'll get hit by a car, I chase, skies now dark,
& scold. She cries, kicks, but piggyback can console.
She plucks her beads; I drop a wrung plea in the bowl.

—Orlando Ricardo Menes (St. Joseph County)

The Falling

A March snow, sudden and thick outside the library windows. Three carrels down, two students talking as if their lives depended on it. My mind does its sideways slide, like tires on new ice when a car seems suddenly weightless, and I think *Let it all go flying, why not, let this life unravel like a long scarf*. I watch myself spin away from the loves, the loyalties and meanings that have moored me, feeling that old lurch in the stomach when my gondola went over the top of the double ferris wheel at the State Fairgrounds and for an instant before the ground rushed up I could see all the way to Canada.

In those days, when the snow was new and deep we stood, buffered in snowsuits, faces turned up, open-mouthed, catching flakes, and then we'd throw our arms wide, cruciform, falling back like timber or soldiers, buttermilk sky curling over us, inky trees, and then the soft *whoof* into snow. We lay there breathing, face to face with the great blank winter sky. Then we flapped our arms and legs like stranded birds, planing arcs into the snow. But first there was the falling, the giving in to gravity, as if in that lush surrender we forsook ourselves, took wing.

—Gail Griffin **(Kalamazoo, MI)**

Part III Migration

Without a Life Jacket

At the eve of dawn
 head down hill to the old dock
 and wash up with Ivory soap

 Untie the boat and quietly push away
 from sand larded with turtles and crayfish and clams

Too early for dragonflies to perch on paper reed tips
Too early for light to lift the night mist from the water's skin

Oarlocks won't squeak if they're oiled

 Row up to ducks
 Slide through lily pads for bullfrogs
 Be comforted by rod and worms
as the boat drifts aimless as a doomed fish on its side
 past port authority

Far from familiar shores
 grab the greasy rope
 pull pull pull
 pull until the motor grabs
 blue smoke of a new pope rainbows of oil

 Aim that mellow barge between the arms of cottages
 that cradle the lake and its silence

 and without a life jacket
 gun it

—Elizabeth Kerlikowske (**Kalamazoo, MI**)

A Poem About Bluegills

There are poems about bluegills. There are poems
about trout. The bluegill will eat a bare hook
but would rather not hear about your childhood.
It's thickheaded. It hunkers down
in the weeds, thinking. The trout's like a young girl
in a wedding gown. Touch it and it dies.
You can pull a bluegill out a pike's ass, it might
still swim away. I'm not talking about pumpkinseeds,
those little flecks of tinsel. The bluegill's
the stud of all panfish. People catch pumpkinseeds
thinking they're bluegills. A pumpkinseed shivers;
it thinks it's going to convince you it's cold.
Bluegills are fatalists. A slab in your hand may jerk its head
twice. Once hooked it goes for the mud. By the time
it's resting on a flotation device it's willing to die.
It doesn't grope like a rock bass, swallowing air,
the bluegill's a realist. It knows it's just a wedge of painted flesh,
heavy enough to pull you half out of the boat.
If you've got a big white bucket of panfish
sitting on top of the ice, the bluegill's the one still living,
thinking, its head like a stapler, mulling things over.

—David Dodd Lee (St. Joseph County)

AM Radio: North America

The Midwest is lonely, said James Wright,
from as far north as Minnesota, but tonight
it's crowded.
Ninety-five degrees, still,
at midnight, on Highway 35 north from Athens.
The headlights take little
from Lancaster, Ohio, but the radio brings the crack
of a good wooden bat from Baltimore,
news of the West from Denver, and talk
out of Detroit, the mechanical heart of our world.
I've been to both coasts, seen the waves
crawling up-shore
bearing iridescent jellyfish,
but it's a field of corn that keeps a radio-wave rolling.
There's blues growling down from Toronto.
The weather up there? 26 degrees.

In America, it's July. The Indians broke a record
set when Harding was president.
At the center of the dial, *The Voice of St. Louis*
projects east and west, broadcasting
a long, low Ben Webster solo
that blows like a cloud across a continent.

—Kirk Robinson (**Lake County**)

Don't fill the outline

the hound left behind with a hound. You
know how good it can be, holding an empty
leash. When the fire station burned it was

a relief. No red truck to shine, no bell to clang,
no hose to wind up or unwind. Admit you know
how pretty it was when Ellie gave birth to a moon

out on Born Street behind the hog market, that kid
without a face, its head just a bare bulb, a circle,
silvery, like a hand mirror. You know when a tooth

falls out, the gap gives your tongue something to do,
that when the mushroom factory left town there was
no more manure in the wind all summer. Remember

when Simplicity shut its doors, how renegade
dress patterns went blowing down the alleys
and fluttered like paper birds in the limbs of trees?

—Diane Seuss **(Kalamazoo, MI)**

Way Out

Hike alone through the forest to a one lane road

Smooth baked ruts conceal stones
but your feet are hard with practice

Mossy the base of every stationary thing
Emerald woods lodged forever in the eye

Mailbox yawning with grasshoppers
having seen runaways before

Moos roll across the meadow
and if the hot wind blows just right
the world smells like a warm kitchen
full of shit made pretty

like the kitchen of the farm wife who sells eggs up the road
eggs soaking in one side of the sink
a toddler soaking in the other

and then the township hall on the corner
clapboard little picture of new England
where the pavement begins
and you stick out your thumb
or run

—Elizabeth Kerlikowske (**Kalamazoo, MI**)

My Father's Helmet

You want to empty a heart
like some men discharge a gun?
Have someone you love die—
or go off to war.
I have seen my father go to war
a hundred times a day in his head.
It is his way of dying
without really leaving.

Last night I dreamed
a sadhu took soldiers
coming home from battle
to sit in meadows.
There he instructed them
to draw pictures of deer.

I see my father, a young man
on a hill bent over a pencil.
The soft lines of prairie grass
sketch around him.
His brow is furrowed.
He is trying so hard
but only makes straight, harsh lines,
cannot find the curve
of haunches,
the flow of the deer's neck.

Flashback:
standing at attention
in his helmet,
he is making rows of marks,
counting by fives
the number of bodies taken down.

In childhood
he remembers
being tucked in.
Peering through
blanket holes,
he would trace the moon
with his finger.

*The Buddha preached
his first sermon to deer,*

turning the wheel of dharma.
Take the wound
to beauty,
the man on the hill
with the gathered robes says.

A wheel
a moon
a helmet
a deer.
My father's lines curve
and rise
like syllables
lost on a battlefield.

—Jacqueline Dickey (**St. Joseph County**)

What Brought the Helicopter Down

1.

The pilot flies low
over the field, flies
low and the burnt and bloody
elephant grass bends beneath him.
He sees, briefly, bodies,
sees death in each tree
and bit of bush, but he does his job, he rises
and moves on. Each afternoon he delivers
Lifebuoy soap, warm beer,
and last week's mail to the men of our country.
Each evening he hauls corpses, tagged and bagged.
No rotor-wind
can cleanse the air that reaches him – he breathes
the heavy air of flesh burned live.
He flies the same route every day.

2.

I should say right now
that my father was blown up
and saved. He twisted
in elephant grass and mud
for two days. There had been a jeep,
three men, then a sound, then
no jeep at all. No one else
making any sound.
From his helicopter that pilot had seen
hundreds of broken bodies, but somehow
he recognized that, overnight, one body had moved
three meters, had pulled off a bloody boot.
He flew the same route every single day
and the miracle is, he recognized. No miracle
brought that helicopter down, though,
picked up my dad, gave him his life back.
What brought the helicopter down
was a man with a heart like yours.

—Kirk Robinson **(Lake County)**

Part IV Immigration

Old Barbados Train Station

Rusty stumps poke through dirt at low tide,
coconut trees bent by the wind
form a canopy over the tracks.
Only skeletons of the railroad remains.

In 1881 the trains traveled so close
to the sea they resembled ships
humped with black seed, black gold,
brought to life on sugar shores.
Trains hustled along the coast to Bridgetown,
their cars stuffed
with sugar cane, rum, molasses.

Black children frolicked in waves
saw their dreams seep into sand,
watched white families depart trains
and pile onto donkey carts with grips
and picnic baskets.
White women and daughters,
how elegant they looked, in white lace,
standing upright under straw hats and umbrellas,
sons in cotton shorts and vests,
husbands—masters of plantations,
in white linen suits, black-rimmed hats,
rode from plantations
to holiday homes at Cattlewash's coastline.

The women and children stayed a week,
sometimes a weekend.
The men, gone a month from the sugar factories,
lived like gods.
Slammed dominoes, smoked cigars,
swilled whiskey and rum,
rained down heavy their desires between black legs,
discarded these women the way rotten sugarcane is cast off—
sometimes by fire, sometimes fed to hogs,
sometimes left in the air to blow, disintegrate in wind.

—Kimberly Renith-Joy Licorish (**Marion County**)

Throw down: reflections on boxing

for Marlen Esparza

The little girl's beast, growling behind grown woman's eyes
on laminated promos, where my scarred fists

are *boom* & *bam*—an alternative position—
taped in white, so I don't leak out.

How the fight in me is bound by
leather. Now, I control all the buttons on *this*—

relinquish all piss & pain in incremental huffs
of combinations & fast feet.

When babyish & sweet, I confused fighting with passion.
But it's the passion when fighting that's my faith, my reason

for mixing daydream-pink with pitbull-black.
In my eyes, a blood-soaked boxing ring in London Olympics.

In my eyes, an M.D. framed in cherry wood, never dusted.
In my eyes, the blue light, the feline catnip,

my want wobbling my body like a puppeteer,
the indispensable need to walk through fire and not detonate

as the blue flame wraps 'round my hard shell
because I was born with the insatiable satisfaction I am

my Papa's discontent, my Mommy's distress, my brother's
desolation, but somehow, still me. To be the brawler and

the cover girl, to own the gorgeous anger of all my faces,
and to live & love all the black-eyes of the rights I cross.

—Curtis L. Crisler (**Allen County**)

If my grandfather had not emigrated from Silesia

I would have been born between Auschwitz and Krakow
My first vowels would've been nasal
my first consonants a grafting of whisper and cherry
The nearest city would be two blue buses away
but I wouldn't think of leaving
The uncles would teach me morels and red currants
The aunts would bottle yellow plums on a wood stove
and stew hens whose necks I had snapped with practiced hands
I would dream of sliced beets in their lovely fuchsia lake
I would pack a rabbit in my mother's purse
then at a neighbor's undo the clasp and up would pop
the checkered ears, the still, pink eye
At twelve, I would visit a dentist for the first time
The loud pain would make me cry
but afterwards my smile would be pretty and gold
A bible and 1940s album of Stalin
would be my only books
I would memorize that mustachioed face, poreless
as an actor's on a movie poster, eyes glassy
as my rabbit's, and fall asleep with the strange man's arms
open on the slippery pages
The city teachers would whisper about me
Blushing, I would struggle with their questions
posed in the quick, sharp tones of the capital
The other children would call me dunce, baboon
and after school, I would walk home alone
fast on the yellow days of fall, then later
slow over frozen mud, and at my lane
I'd salute the storks atop the lamp pole in their nest
brown and deep-brimmed as a fancy lady's hat

—Karen Kovacik **(Marion County)**

My Grandparents' Land

Killaloe, County Clare, Ireland

Too little space between river and hills
to bury all born here,
too little hope here
despite tales of royal glory and the rich river,
so they left and were buried
far from the stone slab huts of hermit monks
and defiant towers of warrior architects,
far from sheepfolds and salmon runs,
and carried with them names from their past
to endow their children
and their children's children
with a kindly courage.

— John D. Groppe **(Jasper County)**

A Pot Of Couscous

As we put the last of the frozen
peas and broccoli in the freezer
you talk about your garden
of corn, cassava, and yams in Benin.
How you tended it.
You miss cupping
wet earth over tubers.
Your labor gave sustenance and renewal.

I want to remember us this way:
a late August day, golden slacks of sun
stream through the window,
Bob in the background.
I kiss your buttery lips,
you spoon hot couscous and cream
to my lips, yours,
filling us forever.

—Kimberly Renith-Joy Licorish (**Marion County**)