

A Letter to All Those in the Dining Room at 821 14th Avenue

Dear child of the Midwestern winter, just trying

To get warm in front of the kerosene heater,

You will huddle in front of other warmths, arms out to catch

Any stray heat, any air that tries to escape past you

Dear impatient older sister, dumping lemonade on her brother's head

When he demands "LEMONADE" while his friend is over for lunch

You will tell this story for many years, and at least you can laugh

At this one, not so much at the tale of washing out your brother's mouth

With pepper when he wouldn't stop swearing—and when you weren't a good substitute

For the missing mother

Dear 14-year-old daughter, home late from the dance to find a dark house

But an ambush in the doorway to the dining room

A sudden snap of lights, of dad's voice, of open hand to face

You will tell this story to your therapist, and maybe even realize that

It's not about you so much as your father, losing his grip

On your innocence, on your childhood, on your shirtfront as you slumped

Underneath the dining table, as he pulled you back up from the floor

Dear child of a future divorce, awakened to what might have been a stranger at the front door

But who found her parents having sex, completely naked and Mom on top, on that stretch

Of floor right between the dining and the living room

You will realize later that your little sister was the last, not best shot

At saving whatever had fallen apart when Dad started sleeping on the couch

And that night, probably her conception

Dear Pumpkin and Patches, and Thumper too, you were the best pets

I never really had in childhood. Cats, you climbed the lace curtains over the window seat,

And puppy, cute as your tail wagging was, you were apparently too much for Mom

And one day when I came home from school, you were just not there