

Words for My Daughter

About eight of us were nailing up forts
in the mulberry grove behind Reds' house when
his mother started screeching and all of us froze
except Reds--fourteen, huge
as a hippo--who sprang out of the tree so fast the
branch nearly bobbed me off. So fast,
he hit the ground running, hammer in hand, and
seconds after he got in the house
we heard thumps like someone beating a tire off a
rim his dad's howls the screen door
banging open Saw Reds barreling out
through the tall weeds towards the highway the
father stumbling after his fat son
who never looked back across the thick swale
of teasel and black-eyed Susans until it was safe to yell
fuck you at the skinny drunk
stamping around barefoot and holding his ribs.

Another time, the Connelly kid came home to find his
alcoholic mother getting raped by the milkman. Bobby
broke a milk bottle and jabbed the guy humping on his
mom. I think it really happened because none of us would
loosely mention that wraith of a woman who slipped
around her house and never talked to anyone, not even her
kids.

Once a girl ran past my porch
with a dart in her back, her open mouth
pumping like a guppy's, her eyes wild. Later
that summer, or maybe the next, the kids
hung her brother from an oak.
Before they hoisted him, yowling and heavy
on the clothesline, they made him claw the creekbank and eat
worms. I don't know why his neck didn't snap.

Reds had another nickname you couldn't say or he'd
beat you up: "Honeybun."
His dad called him that when Reds was little.

* * *

So, these were my playmates. I love them still for
their justice and valor and desperate loves twisted in
shapes of hammer and shard.
I want you to know about their pain

and about the pain they could loose on others. If
you're reading this, I hope you will think, Well, my
dad had it rough as a kid, so what?
If you're reading this, you can read the news and you
know that children suffer worse.

* * *

Worse for me is a cloud of memories still
drifting off the South China Sea,
like the 9-year-old boy, naked and lacerated, thrashing
in his pee on a steel operating table and yelling "Dau.
Dau," while I, trying to translate
in the mayhem of Tet for surgeons who didn't know who this
boy was or what happened to him, kept asking "Where?
Where's the pain?" until a surgeon
said "Forget it. His ears are blown."

I remember your first Hallowe'en
when I held you on my chest and rocked you, so
small your toes didn't touch my lap
as I smelled your fragrant peony head
and cried because I was so happy and because
I heard, in no metaphorical way, the awful chorus of
Soeur Anicet's orphans writhing in their cribs. Then the
doorbell rang and a tiny Green Beret was saying trick-or-
treat and I thought oh oh
but remembered it was Hallowe'en and where I was. I
smiled at the evil midget, his map-light and night paint, his
toy knife for slitting throats, said,
"How ya doin', soldier?" and, still holding you asleep in my
arms, gave him a Mars Bar. To his father waiting outside in
fatigues I hissed, "You, shit,"
and saw us, child, in a pose I know too well.

I want you to know the worst and be free from it. I
want you to know the worst and still find good.
Day by day, as you play nearby or laugh
with the ladies at Peoples Bank as we go around town and I find
myself beaming like a fool,
I suspect I am here less for your protection than you
are here for mine, as if you were sent to call me back
into our helpless tribe.