

Betty Greene Jenkins
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Crumbs of Light

Selected Poems

Betty Greene Jenkins

PRESENCE

Children did not trespass in great grandmother's room
built off the parlor chapel-like.

We loitered and peeked at its speckless order
before she clapped the door shut,
carrying her mending to sit straight-backed
in the cane-bottomed chair,
threading her needle without glasses
while her grown-up grandson sneaked behind her
and tied her apron strings to the chair rungs,
then slapped his thighs when she stood and the chair clung.

She rapped his head with her thimble finger,
muttered: "Idle mind, devil's workshop!"
and flounced off to her room.

That same grandson held open the front door Sunday
mornings for her to step past
in her black bonnet and long black dress,
skinfolds sagging from cheek bones
like apple slices drying from the clothesline in the back yard.

She took his arm and strode him regally down the mountain
path to church.

At ninety-nine she took to her bed.
Only grandmother went in to her call.
We children tiptoed and listened to the grownups
in hushed vigil before the parlor fire.

After the funeral, I stole in trembling and dared not touch
the high-topped shoes under her bed—the black bonnet
she had strung on a nail, her thimble where she had placed it.

In 1986, Betty married Brad Jenkins, head of the History and Political Science department at Guilford Technical and Community College. Betty and Brad lived in Greensboro but spent most weekends hiking in the mountains Betty had loved since childhood. In 1994, they built a home on a small farm between Sparta and Jefferson. The new home included a pottery studio where Betty began another career making cups, bowls, pots, and pitchers by the hundreds. Betty's pottery, like her poetry, reflected her sturdy grace, honesty and love.

Brad had one child, Michele, who had married James Michael Loar. Betty became a grandmother to Mike and Michele's children, Ian and Annie. The Loar's enjoyment of Brad and Betty's mountain place was shared by Betty's son, Mark Flinchum and his wife Gwen, who added two more grandchildren, Dane and Conor, to Betty's flock. The flock grew larger when Betty's daughter, Jan, married Mark Dukes. The Dukes eventually brought grandson Max and two granddaughters, Eden and Millie, to join in hiking, horseback riding, fishing and swimming in the trout pond, hunting crawdads and mudpuppies in the brook, and sledding down the mountainside in the winter.

As the years passed, the mountain winters seemed to grow longer so Brad and Betty bought an RV and began traveling to warmer climates. Eventually, they bought a home in Venice, Florida, where Jan and her family were living.

After five years as snowbirds, in 2013, they moved to Venice year-round. They joined the Unitarian church there becoming very active and making many new friends. In 2018, as Betty's health began to decline, they returned to Greensboro to live in Friends Homes and be near their many kinfolks and friends.

In addition to her husband, Brad Jenkins, four children, seven grandchildren, and at last count, seven great-grandchildren, Betty has two brothers, Raymond and Roger Greene, their wives, children, grandchildren and a sister, Judy Greene and her daughter, Ellen Bailey. She has at least twenty nieces, nephews, and their children.

Betty Greene Jenkins Bio

Betty was born in Boone, N.C., October 8, 1939. Her parents were Floyd Everett Greene and Almeta Norris Greene. Both the Greene and the Norris families had lived in Watauga County for about 150 years.

Betty attended first grade at Cove Creek Elementary before her family moved to Emporia, VA then to Halifax, NC where her father raised food during WWII. When she was seven, the family moved to Guilford County where Betty attended Guilford Public School, near Guilford College, from second grade until she graduated as Chief Marshall of her class in 1957. She began writing poetry while she was in high school.

Betty attended Wake Forest University for two years, after which she transferred to the Women's College of UNC, where she earned a B.A. in Biology. After college, she trained at Moses Cone hospital to become a cytotechnologist where in just a few years, she became chief cytotech at Moses Cone.

Along the way, Betty married Eddie Flinchum, who had also grown up in the Jessup Grove Baptist Church. They lived first in Falmouth, MA while Eddie was in the Air Force. They returned to Guilford College for Eddie's education with the GI Bill and started their family. They had three children: Mark, Scott, and Jan. Then they moved to Gibsonville, where Eddie taught and coached basketball, and Betty continued to work in cytology. They moved to Greensboro when Eddie transferred to the new Western Guilford High School. Mark, Scott and Jan all graduated from Western Guilford. After their children were grown, Eddie and Betty divorced.

In 1981 Betty joined the faculty of Elon College to create and teach in a program training cytotechs. Betty returned to UNCG to write and study poetry, earned a masters degree in creative writing and published several poems in literary journals. She moved from teaching in the medical field to teaching composition and literature, first at Alamance Community College and then at UNCG and Greensboro College.

SUNDAY DRESS

Saturday night Mama said nothing,
Curled my hair on old socks,
made me wash behind my knees
and pressed my frilly frock.

On Sunday the boy and I
touched tingling fingers,
hurled hungry-eyed messages
over the hymnbook.

Until Papa jerked me down
with his stern "Young lady,
you are too young for boys."
I cried. Mama said nothing.

Come Monday, she pedaled away
at her old machine
sewing me up a new dress
just for Sunday.

STORIES

When the lights go out
we are reading fiction at Jane's house.
She rummages for candles,
calls, "There's a storm somewhere."

Brad begins. "Nine months after the New York blackout,
there was a jump in the birthrate."
Bob takes it up. "It's because of the satellite,
the moon flights - - man interfering with space."
Martha tells of the woman
who travels outside her body.
Betty recalls her grandmother's empty skirts
rustling in a dark closet.

Somebody wonders
what black holes in space really are.
Somebody tells of the ghost in a party dress
begging drivers to take her home

Jane calls from dark rooms.
She knows she has candles. Not to worry.
We laugh.

We tell about the crazy cousin. The baby-faced man who
works in the asylum. The schizophrenic who turns from nice
to murderer in a wink.
About our children grown hostile.
Aging mothers. How shrinks let people happen to themselves.
And having a shoulder to cry on, a good friend is just as good.

Jane lights the candles. They flicker
like moths around a globe.
We cheer. No one tells
that we are Hansels and Gretels
blessing our crumbs of light.

CHARLESTON

St. Michael's carillon peels back the air
from a high white tower. Domes of the round church
cup sounds of Sunday bells
and the squabbles of grackles and jays.

Wisteria blossoms petal the sidewalk slippery
and azaleas bloom unconcerned in graveyards.
Aging horses toss their manes
and pull stately carriages.

Off the Battery, maverick winds
toss New Jersey skirts and tour boats
steering toward the fort.
Old fish odors waft toward the ice cream truck.

Chatting couples admire street paintings
of black character and white magnolias.
An old woman weaving baskets in the ancient
slave market shields her face from a camera,
waves it off with a flick of her hand.

PARADISE TREE

In April on George's Gap, our Mother
spooned us molasses and sulfur tonic,
bathed us in foul brew to ward off itch.
Later, rock-muscled, she dug potatoes,
carried granite down, underpinned our jerry-built
house.

Even in hip-high snow, sweat pearled between her
breasts.

When Dad found work and we moved to flatter
ground,
she planted a paradise tree,
hoed her garden, cooked and canned,
sewed denim in the factory, sang in the Sunday
choir.

We grew up and left, mailed her Hallmark cards,
sent birthday colognes.

Now, under shelter of pendant blooms, she rocks
and reads of mansions with many rooms.
Pink petals drop quickly to satin mounds.
Presses beneath her feet, their delicate flesh
perfumes the air for days
with fragrance kin to the Windsong
she learned to dot into her cleavage.

TIME TRAVEL

Walking into the museum in Santa Fe,
I was drawn to a large earthenware bowl.
The hair on my arms stood up.
The piece was labeled "Anasazi Olla."

I knew the feel of opening a ball of clay on a wheel,
The way the clay could be molded into a vessel.
The fingers of the ancient one grooved the clay,
pressing and turning it in a circle.

Ignoring the "Do Not Touch" sign, I lifted my fingers
to the potter's grooves.

I had reached back in time and was holding the hand
of a kindred spirit—a Pueblo dweller living two
thousand years ago.

I wish I knew her name.

AFTERNOON BREAK IN THE LAB

We blink at our microscopes all morning
as the orderly shades our doorway,
pushing his cart by
like a gardener his wheelbarrow

We maneuver around a stretcher
on our way to lunch.
Without staring, we compute
the configuration of bulges.

Forehead, breasts, toes support the sheet,
thrown like a dust cover over chair posts
while the owner holidays in Miami.
(Too long. Too short. Not him. Not her.).

We bend again in our work, forget;
until a nurse in novice uniform passes
with a blanket, tagged
and doll cradled in the crook of her arm.

Then we take a breather.
Plan our vacations over coffee
and Hershey Bars.

CONFINEMENT

(A Chippewa man-child far from tribe waits in the lone wilderness for the otter to call the name he will live by. Chippewa legend from The Wayfield Deer by Mark van Doren. Also legend from Mountain Wolf Woman: Sister of Crashing Thunder, The autobiography of a Winnebago Indian, edited by Nancy Lurie.)

Child-woman of the Winnebago
flees tribe at first show.
Nameless shamed to winter forest.
Her unclean glance must defile no man.
She squats covers eyes and ears
with her blanket. Blood of her fear
glazes snow.

Her sisters steal to her hiding
to trace her night with branches.
No owl drums periods
to the forest's unspoken sentence.
The otter sleeps. Five days and nights
her senses visited by no wildness,
except mute blackness circling in
like wolves, except bone hunger, devouring marrow.

Unannounced her vision leaps
out of void—a mare bolts
across the steepes of her dreaming.
When her sisters return she skitters
to a corner of her shelter.

She belongs to more than her tribe now
rides off to signals from the far woods,
her ears first to hear owlets
breaking their shells, first to gather
the wolf's lone question.
From distant mountain
she hears the name they call her.
She returns with gifts.
She calls herself,

MY MATADOR

You gesture No, No, No's at me
for choosing sangria over tequila.

Your temperature spikes
at the performer's banal jokes.

You crush another cigarette with your heel.

Your shrill Aye, Aye, Ayes
join the guitarist. You lead me in flamenco
with your eyes.

I am danced toward shadow.

In night glare you own no cape
to cover the fleshy stitches where you claim
the bull gored,
but I know the carcinoma was removed
or still grows.

SACRED GROUND

Opaque as a monastery wall—hushed, dim inside—
a forest adjoins our acres. Trails and scat
mark the ridges. On waking, we lift our eyes, scan
for deer.

From the pine steeples at sunup, crows rise and
glide, one after another over the ridge,
then circle, dive intentionally, call into the valley.

Evenings, as pilgrims we climb to the top
to catch the day's nuance at sunset,
the drift of sunlight arcing over the crest.

We study Mount Rodger's rugged profile—
giant boulders whether clear or cloud obscured—
our distant markers.

Descending, we wade knee-deep sedge,
note fresh tracks, peer under a thicket
where the doe sculpted a bed to hide her fawn.

At dusk, we signal each other
to watch the crows retrace the ridge line,
following their homing leader to sanctuary.

Wary as novices, we sit side by side on a rock ledge,
muffle our voices,
watching the tree line until dark.

Though I sleep so lightly moonlight wakes me,
I never hear the doe cross the meadow.
How soft as prayers her hooves must fall.

CHOREOGRAPHY

Under a well of darkness,
her body is stone molded upon itself,
face to knees.
Wrists press the earth before her.

A pinprick of light strains for her phototropic cells,
drawn by eyes rising,
neck and back unroll her to tiptoe.
She approaches a point of light.

Arms rising,
her body weaves through mazes of dark and light.
She is sucked into ice floes of white,
bends back upon herself, is caught
between waterfalls of light. Climbs stair steps out of night.

She walks high corridors lined with doorways
that open into doorways
that open.
She graces into panorama.
Light is a sphere.
She toes peripheries, revolves
with the long axis of the earth.

Her gypsy skirt is winged.
She touches space
like one who has known the center of the earth.

LEDA WAS IT LIKE THIS

Did you lie on that felicitous leaf bed, willing?
Eyes wide to green-fingered light
Sieved through the high-leaved dome.
His spent head resting on your dampened breast.

Did you lose track of where you ended, he began,
inside cacooning nets of lights?
In the aftermath of white-centered fusion,
did light metronome between your common veins?

When the empowered air lifted his feathers,
brushed your nakedness, did you embrace
that untamed surety in you
beating its rhythmmed wing?

How could he have known
your warm fingers tried
to christen his feathered breast?

When his cold-veined eye
has powered all temples down,
will he understand his latent hunger, for the sentient
touch always pulsing in you its quiescent genesis?

DAWN

Outside, hidden birds cavort
Under the magnolia's summer cover—
baptize our cottage with the contrapuntal trills.
Cardinal, robin, a subtle thrush
reveal themselves and bathe
like libertines in a rain gutter.

I'm awake before you as usual,
rummaging my morning limbos.
Already I've forgotten something.

Beneath the window dawn whispered in
not long ago. You sleep
curled innocent against the space I left.
The curtain breezing in and out above your head
already reveals a shriller light.

A mocking bird (his borrowed song too beautiful)
claims the fence. On another world's highway,
a siren mimics in perverse octaves
the harbinger bird's pluperfect telling.

HARVEST

Grandfather set his angled jaw,
determined to grow strawberries
in the stony field fallow for years.
Set the mule to the iron plow
exposing rock after rock. Lifted, loaded
the big wagon, helped me to
fill my child-sized wagon, straining
at boulders too heavy for me-
showing only jagged tips above the ground

Stones multiplied. I longed for play.
He showed me how to stamp bruised heels
through hot crust to cool soil below.
He described how patient earth
spent millions of years cracking that giant slab.
We hauled away the pieces.

Resting in the shade, I asked if we might find
a jewel. He judged that gems seldom surprise,
then pulled a striped agate from his pocket
explaining how time and a warm hand
can burnish, disclose color.

Our solid relatives snickered
behind their hands at young fool and old.
A year later they dropped their eyes,
relished ripened berries. Another spring,
ramrod on the funeral bench,
I focused on his jawbone-
believing that marbled mouth
would in time blood tinge.

ONE DAY

It is early morning
and again I stand at the wide window
watching for sunrise.

Thinking about today.
Wondering about tomorrow.
Startled by the glow of orange and gold
stretching across a blue sky
that changes daily.

Soon it will be evening
and again here I will stand
awaiting the sunset
Its wider display of color
against a grayer sky.

If I should lose vision,
the day's beginnings and endings,
these precious moments, will remain
in the chambers of my memory forever.

THE FENCE

Through narrow slits
in a mile-high wall
I watched the antler-proud buck
falter and fall.

Heard his breath come sharp—
taut-muscled body thud the ground.
Saw quivering tan-gold skin
turning blood-brown.

Saw mute pain in asking eyes
but could not reach
to touch to comfort
or even speak.

WIDOWER

Their long ago beach fire
had lapped the sand warm.

The log they'd found
glowed deep into night.

Many mornings after,
he searched the beach
where he thought the fire had been.

Touched the shuffled face of sand,
the way his fingers memorize now
the breakfast table's wooden grain
feeling for the circular impression
left by her cup.

BURIAL

Bustling between stove and woodbox,
to the cellar for potatoes,
the springhouse for milk.

At night she stopped.
relaxed her face to the play of firelight.
Released the long white hair from her nape.

We stand like the sewing forms
she left in the corner of her bedroom,
while black coats
lower into the mountain side.
There are no houses in sight.
We see, but do not hear
cars passing on the distant road.

Blinding sun intrudes,
the only sound, spring lambs
taut-curved in their new wool,
bleating on the nearby slope.

VIRGINS

I began to call him lover
years after he died
when I could look at his photo.
Dark-sheened eyes, spray of boy hair
against the stark pillow.

How could I have pushed his hand from
my young nipple
as if touch were finite.
How could I have feared the wet kiss—
the poison cell research has conquered now.

Remembering his covered face,
I have unmasked all lovers
and yielded to the only palliative I know for death.
Now I would hold him.

FOUND LIGHT

Beaded skims of heat have peeled away.
In purged air, my skin draws;
my jawbone hones angular.

Bronzed leaves.
Bleached stalks. Burst okra pods.
I stand at center of things fallen.

Emerging sunset charges space with
late angled rays.
Deflects from metallic limbs.

In the just-before-dark rarified air,
nothing moves
between my eyes and anything.

WINDSTORM ON THE BLUE RIDGE

The woman lives alone atop the mountain.
Husband dead long ago, able to rest.
Knows her home is where wind
will blow cloud to shade and shadows,
miming blaze along her ceiling.

She listens to the winds
oboeing through the bones of hollows.
Beside her window, spruce tendrils
pliant as children, flex wild to wind.

Transparent flames tease and dance
on innocent logs.
Nurses her fire that simpers for a draw,
then wrestles a smothering gust.

Over her roof tall pines writhe
at the crest like savage dancers.
In her fireplace chameleon flames
violate knitted skins of bark.

At this height, birds must glide
their slopes on sinews of wind. Her fire
keeps its heartbeat timed
to a barbarous breath.

SNOWSTORM

Whiteness dazzles,
drapes barn and field,
subdues all shapes
except the Arabian stallion,
standing high headed,
rippling his snake skin.

His steam melts webs of flakes,
outlines his form
in black relief against froth.

He is master of a passive white space,
oil that will not, for beauty's sake
mix with a fickle medium.

CAMPING OUT

She spends her first nights alone in a no-
man's land
expecting fear and bear.
But sleep nuzzles her down like a lover.
Morning slips in easy.

Rising, her breath a stream of warmth,
she rolls her sleeping bag down,
unwrinkles her jeans,
unzips the tent,
mountain mist cracks cold into her nostrils.

Crunching out a path to the river,
she thinks first of Jarius' daughter.
She hears the girl's restored breathing,
her first reclaimed words
unheard by the Jesus-awed crowd.

"I want these ice needles
clawing the cage of my lungs."

THE STREET

We form a tourist cluster,
leave our convention hotel
to walk the alley
where shops and bars spill onto pavement.

Neon blares. From doorways, dim music
and mellow voiced hucksters procure.
Walls poster future attractions.
We twist heads
past the muscular torsos
lining the mirrored bar,
to the other side,
where the girl on the bar top
swirls her hips
and her tassels that sparkle in the semi-dark.

We idle at the leather shop's window
avoiding each other's reflected eyes.

Moving as one we glance
past the slender skirted boy,
lashes long above his frosted lips.
Past the candy store
where the clerk handing change
wears a man's voice, a woman's breasts.

Still grouped, we return by the side street,
Enter the revolving doors of our hotel.
Disperse to elevators. Relax our thighs.
You and others speak the polite goodnight at my floor.

After midnight, in a deserted elevator,
you push the down button.
I've already brushed out my curls.
Removed the day's makeup. I welcome
your low-keyed tap at my door.

NIGHT STREET

Under a stoplight
pavement glazes red with sleet
turning to rain.

White lines waver under floods
reappearing like boundaries of my fears
reflecting wrinkles
from my father's forehead, smooth now.
Did he brake off that mountain path
reeling in from the gorge
or did he just let go of the wheel
and slip out off the pale painted lines?

If only he had known
what nighthawks know. He could have
taloned the ledge until evening, caught
an updraft
and learned to live somewhere
out of bounds.

RIVER: BEGINNING

We slip between trees to the river bank,
climb the table rock
where water unslackened concedes to stone.
Here the feast is saffron light streams,
shadows of leaf-play,
sibilant water.

You crouch, smokescreen your eyes.
I relax; fit my thighs to the stone seat.
Water surface reflects our limbs,
lengthens them to roots growing
downstream.

We stare at subsurface boulders,
shapes immutable, hues chameleon.

Just above waterline a snail clings
to the rock.
Beetles clamor in a mass of tiny hearts.
Water collides in fleet communion,
pulls away,
leaves the stone dark-grained and wet.

SEINING

Two silent uncles wearing hip boots
wade the river—divide the weighted net—
walk and pull again and again.
Underwater, their boots squeak and sigh.

One croaks low: “Lift up. You’re hanging bottom.”
We kids whisper, follow along the bank—
barefoot and curious.

They bend like reapers culling moon slivered water.
Their crotches lapped cold, they rise and high pace
like dancing shadows.

By flashlight, they draw in and sort.
Keep a gulping catfish, a rare trout, the shy turtle.
Throw back a mud-oozing shoe, grinning
slack-jawed from its sole.

We remember our grandfather’s corpse feet,
crinkled and sour.
Our grandmother—laughing, crying—throwing out
his hoard of moldy shoes.

Water, unscathed as air swept through a butterfly net,
ignores thighs, never slackens, will reveal no
muddy boot prints to the morning.

SLUG

White belly rolls
to amber back. Plump undulation
drags slime across my palm.
I cannot find eyes.

Moist pores plead for dark safety.
Shallow secretions flake.
Will centuries adapt
skin for midday tasks, evolve for progeny
an appendage of vision?

Foraging behind a flat rock
calls for timid antennae.
Free-loading a worm’s burrow
demands no eyes.