

*Five*



## *Gutshot*

Captain Karen Walden is a character in  
*Courage Under Fire*, a 1996 film.

Those early years I dreamed of this girl's fist scoring  
a clean right to a jaw, of vaulting a horse from a dead run,  
of shooting it out with the black hats. But even then I knew  
nothing could make a hero like staying behind  
with a belly full of lead, holding off the redskins  
to save the women and children. Karen Walden knows.  
When she drops, her stomach strafed, she orders her men  
to retreat, fires her M16 at attacking Iraqis. She dies  
saying her little girl's name and becomes the first  
woman ever nominated for the Medal of Honor.

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In a cowboy dream, the hand clutching my side holds in  
guts peppered by buckshot. Blood, thick and warm,  
pumps over my fingers. Now it's my chance  
to hold off the Indians, to hunker down behind  
my old buddy Paint while my partner heads for the hills.  
As I reach for my toy six-shooter, glory fades.  
I'm a woman sick with Crohn's, no hero, my family  
won't cut and run, and the bullet holes in my bowel  
are here to stay. I learn what Walden knew.  
Dying is easy. Living hurts, and it takes a long time.

*1932: Dr. Crohn Identifies Ileitis*

Dr. Crohn, how nice of you to lend  
your name. It sounds so much better  
than "Inflamed Intestinal Disease."  
In your day I could have stood among  
satin-skinned women and tuxedoed men,  
allowing your rounded vowel to slip  
like a smoke ring from my lips.  
Of course, back then, cameras didn't  
spy into one's most secret realms,  
snap photos of colon ulcers like  
postcards of shorelines for relatives.  
Friends didn't ask the gritty details,  
but came for short visits bearing  
bouquets and chocolates. Now I gulp  
slick red pills in secret and pretend  
I have a malady that requires me  
to wear lace and perfume,  
to take long naps on chaise lounges.

## *Birthright*

I inherited the McDonald constitution—  
straight bones, endurance of a marathoner,  
physical arrogance of a mountain lion—  
from a drunk father who took falls that  
would maim another man, got up and shrugged;  
from a great grandmother who climbed  
sixteen steps from the outhouse till she was ninety-five;  
from a great-great grandfather who arrived in a Conestoga  
with nine sons to carve out a new Atlanta after Sherman.

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Like my wedding gift, the bracelet with an 1890 gold coin,  
I lost my claim to wake up child-happy and fit,  
ready to take on whatever my nurse job could demand—  
hemorrhage, cardiac arrest—when a doctor delivered  
the diagnosis, eclipsing the clan's protection.  
My denim-blue fingers, sloshing waves of gut,  
pills bitter as green persimmons, humble me  
like a guilty supplicant, and I study  
the family tree to wonder which of  
these dead has committed this treason.

## *Trophy Hunters*

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Last week a doctor told me I'm special.  
My colon, as pockmarked as a teen  
with acne, is twice the normal length.  
I dream of artfully draping it around  
my neck like a feather boa, posing for  
publicity shots, lovely in tones of rose  
and lilac. But no. It lies coiled under  
my belt like a snake on a cold winter day,  
seen only by hunters who forage  
in my dark places with flourosopes.

Odd innards run in the family. My mother  
sporting one huge kidney. A horseshoe,  
curled under her ribs, brought her  
no protection against the depression  
she deadened with drugs. I see Mother  
in the mirror each morning when I gulp  
my ration of reds and whites:  
steroids and immune suppressors,  
to calm a slack gut eating at itself.

I would gladly trade my trick intestine  
for her bad luck horseshoe when  
at a medical lecture I see slides:  
excised colons of patients with my disease—  
brittle red question marks on green towels,  
piano keys of fat marching up the sides.  
So I take my pills to keep the surgeon,  
like some south Georgia good old boy  
at a rattle snake roundup, from snatching out  
my gut to show it off like a prize specimen.

## *Arthritis, A Lesson*

I can no longer hide this secret shame.  
My hands bloom into angry gloves.  
Ten knuckles, one wrist sprout  
bony lumps. Long nights  
read like pornography:  
hot swollen parts  
throb, ache, tingle.  
Ask me to make a fist  
with these rebel fingers,  
you will see how far gone I am.  
I've learned to grovel at God's feet  
for every small gift. At least,  
the rusty nails I feel piercing  
my palms don't draw blood.  
He gives me that.

## *Moisture Seekers*

An ode to Sjögren's Syndrome

78 "Can you swallow a Saltine dry? Are your eyes  
sandstorm red?" *Don't listen to him, Anne.*  
*He's a doctor, not a man.* He digs up  
my secrets like desert fossils: crystal sharp tears,  
hands curled into claws. Pulling me close,  
he inspects my smooth, knobby knuckles  
and hums over blue nail beds. The sound  
of his gurgling belly tells me I'm already  
dried up, like the four-hundred-year-old Pope  
with brown parchment skin I saw in Rome.  
The doctor drives nails into my coffin with a book—  
it shows a man with his eyes sewn shut  
to conserve tears, kidneys like petrified wood,  
a list of bleak outcomes—blindness, lymphoma.  
This healer offers me yellow fever pills  
as if they would juice up my rasping cunt  
or stop my teeth from rattling like castanets.



## *“Somebody’s Knocking”*

A Prednisone song

I’m alone when the bell chimes late at night.  
I should know better, but I open the door.  
He slouches in the porch light, wearing  
tight jeans slung over hard hips, a grin  
that lights a fire where I sit.  
“Candy, little girl?” He winks, opens  
a meaty fist. Tiny pills the color  
of robins’ eggs shine against  
his callused palm, just the right  
size to go down easy. I want  
to shake my head and close the door  
but fever burns under my lids, joints  
throb and my gut begs for relief.  
“We can fly,” he says, running  
a fingertip up my arm. I lean into him,  
remember how the engine-revving rush  
whisks away bellyaches, bone pain,  
blood from all the wrong places  
and lick my dry lips. “You can only  
stay a little while,” I finally say.

## *The Truth about Travel*

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Skipping time zones leaves me with gritty eyes  
and a headache. I know too much about lumpy  
hotel beds, foreigners who refuse to speak English,  
long hours in a car or bus, picture-book scenery  
whizzing by while I wish for a bathroom, a chance  
to stretch, somebody new to talk to over dinner.  
Then there's the food—greasy pub fare, bloodwurst  
or fried meat of unknown origin. Only the memories  
make it worthwhile. Standing at the kitchen sink,  
for a moment I hear again jazz in a Prague square,  
stroll down a certain waterfront alley in Cannes,  
or dance the polka on a snowy night near Salzburg.

Now I'm dizzy and weak, like the time that my head  
swam in a Devon farmhouse after pub hopping,  
when I mistook a cow for a woman moaning in sex.  
Rising from the commode where I've knelt all night,  
I recall a week of cramps in a Rhine village and a doctor  
only too glad to take my American cash. In the mirror  
my skin gleams with a damp sheen, like the moss  
on ancient stone walls between Yorkshire fields,  
the mortar of my health as crumbling as those walls.  
In the bathroom mirror my face wears the waxy  
translucence of a cryptal effigy in Westminster Abbey  
and I wonder why I ever wanted to leave home.

## *The Rehearsal*

I hate to cook, yet I make a feast of fresh vegetables—  
creamed corn, fried okra, green beans, ripe tomatoes—  
to eat with buttery corn sticks. “It’s ready,” I say,  
and the world goes blank. My husband calls the doctor,  
tells him I’m acting like a drunk trying to pass for sober.  
On the way to the hospital where I work, twin cars  
whiz in double lanes. My vision clears, but some  
silly woman’s jabber falls out of my mouth. “A clot  
on the brain stem,” the doctor says. Knowing I can  
become a vegetable like those on my table, I giggle  
while the internist grills me about secret drinking.

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My good sense has gone on vacation. It’s as if  
I’ve forgotten my grandmother Annie, her dread  
of stroke, I fold my arms, let them slide me,  
who can hardly breathe in subways, into a tube  
for an MRI. I lie still for a doctor to shove a hose  
down my throat to look for clots lurking in my heart.  
The lab reports bleeding time in the danger zone,  
yet I, the nurse, only ask if I got to eat any  
of the corn, the beans. The next day the doctor yanks  
the IV, declares me out of danger. On the ride home  
I fear a wreck, the street awash with my blood.

The next two weeks, I struggle with simple words,  
run red lights, cut up credit cards for no reason  
until the mist clears, and, like Annie, I know terror.

## *Going Steady*

Diseases are often named for the doctors  
who first catalogue their symptoms.

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What woman hasn't imagined being  
in bed with more than one man?  
But a good girl, long married, I was never  
into the kinky stuff. Suddenly my fantasy  
comes true: three new guys share me.  
If it were high school, I would wear  
a senior ring caked with wax,  
a letterman's jacket, sleeves rolled up,  
a fraternity pin over my left tit.  
My new lovers, doctors all—  
Wouldn't my mother be proud?  
—hardly let me get out of bed.  
These sexy seducers leave brands  
like whisker burns and sucking kisses.

Dr. Sjögren, that charming Swede,  
likes to talk nasty, "Head case, long  
in the tooth, dry as a bone."  
Dr. Reynaud, French to the core,  
kisses my lilac fingertips, navy nail beds,  
murmuring, "*Froid hands, chaud heart.*"  
Dr. Crohn, that plain-speaking American,  
thinks foreplay is whispers of stomach  
in knots, gut feeling, pain in the ass.  
These men don't have a jealous bone.  
I can still flirt with guys in hard hats  
sporting tattoos on rocky biceps.  
Lefty Lupus says my skin rash turns him on.  
His pal, Slammo Sclera D., would like  
to lick my smooth knuckles, but for once  
I'm too exhausted to think about sex.

## *Big Sky Country*

In Atlanta on Ozone Alert Days, when heat  
shimmers on asphalt and buildings wear  
a skim-milk haze, I conjure the Montana  
of summer vacations, warm days,  
fireside nights. Outside of Red Lodge,  
I know how prairie grass waves,  
a woman's hair in water, the silver-tipped  
Beartooth Range rises, offering valley vistas.  
In Luther, a dozen mailboxes cluster,  
not a house in sight, and in Bear Creek  
a bar draws pickups like birds to a feeder.  
I watched Friday-night drinkers bet  
paychecks on piglets scampering out back  
around a dirt oval while the barkeep tells us  
how in winter, iguanas race between tables.

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I'm ready to turn my car northwest.  
But then I think winter, arctic cold,  
snowy quiet, scuttling lizards underfoot.  
It's too much like life since I gave up  
my nursing job and became a patient,  
since my strength dribbled down to  
afternoon naps. Friends say I have it made.  
They don't know hours unreel, endless prairie.  
Instead of lacing on boots to tackle  
a rocky path, I face worse dangers than rattlers,  
a stray grizzly—poison pills, drifting clots,  
sluggard kidneys, a gut at war with itself.  
I can't tell them this trek I didn't choose  
looms steeper than any wilderness trail.

## *Body Shop*

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I clock in at dawn to enter rooms  
stinking of old blood, much-breathed air.  
Patients sprawl on beds like stalled cars,  
their bodies revealing secrets no one  
wants to know: tired cupid bows of urethra,  
dimpled epidermal moonscapes, leering  
new mouths carved by surgeons.  
Safe in my scrubs, I catalog symptoms,  
tell smiling lies, stroke patients' arms  
to rub them in. My hands move with  
precision, bandaging proud flesh,  
programming pumps, mainlining drugs.  
Talking to heads, working on bodies.

Patients' stories flatten into blips  
on a screen, ink smears in a chart,  
puzzle pieces to fit into a pattern.  
Until now I could hang up my scrubs  
and clock out, but I've become  
one of them—symptoms, syndromes,  
a prognosis. My charges complain  
of chilled fingers, the breaks I take  
to swallow pills. Medical Records keeps  
a growing folder under my name,  
a rap sheet of my body's convictions,  
I plead my case to the bored nurse  
I am, but she shrugs. She's seen it all.

## *The Greedy Dead*

I buried Mother twenty-five years ago,  
but she still whispers: *"Stand up straight,  
smile, don't let men know you're smart."*  
My sister escaped, but I stayed—a confessor  
for Mother's sins, a record keeper of small  
slights, a protester to suicide schemes.  
But I couldn't save her. On her sixtieth  
birthday she wore lace to a solo party.  
Instead of cake, she ate red jelly sleepers.

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After so many years I think myself safe  
from those heirloom pearls of gloom.  
Yet, three months before I would turn  
sixty, I lie in the hospital, my bone  
marrow on strike, lungs swampy, my heart  
chugging like a Model T. My sister  
calls me: *"Today is Mother's birthday.  
Do you think she is reaching for you?"*

I think how Mother would sit beside me,  
my hand curled in hers, as she dumped  
her problems, smothering me under the weight,  
then grin. *"Don't worry about me."*  
Outside my window a magnolia blooms.  
I stare at petals as white as her Ipana smile.  
Mother's hand beckons among glossy leaves,  
but I won't be the good daughter again.

## *Saying Thank You*

86

A Southerner, I thought I knew  
good manners—you first, please this,  
thank you that. So over tea at an inn,  
I ask a woman about herself.

“New York is home, but I came back  
for my sick mother.” Cancer, it always  
comes down to that, or so I had thought.  
Now I knew worse terrors—bad doctors,  
bungling nurses, nearly dying for no reason.

From porch rockers we look out at  
mountains gaudy with fall leaves.  
“I climbed Mount LeConte last year.  
Now I’m barely walking.” I describe  
transfusions by the quart, boggy lungs,  
marrow gone on strike, a daughter who  
stood guard like a pit bull, checking on  
nurses, tracking monitors, grilling doctors.

“My mother died six months ago.  
What hurt was how she thanked me—  
for every little act.” Remembering how  
I, too, had thanked my daughter when  
she mothered me, I say, “She knew.”  
Thank you was all I had left to give.  
The words slipped out with every breath,  
no longer manners, but an act like prayer.



## *The Safe Zone*

It's like when you were ten, and your mother calls  
and calls for you to come in from a game of tag just  
as the lightening bugs begin to flash, and her voice  
gets that sawtooth edge you know means trouble.  
It's when you run inside and flop down on the couch.  
After she's done fussing and the crease between  
her brows erases, she undoes your stubby braids,  
pulling her fingers through your hair, a tingle  
like dancing fairies that makes your eyes fall shut.

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Or it's like that trip to Prague, all night knotted  
in a plane seat, an hour of riding over bumpy roads  
with a driver who doesn't know a word of English  
as you hug your bag with money and passport,  
knowing that if you disappeared now, no one  
could find you. It's after you pay the driver the sum  
he writes on a slip of paper, even if it's too much,  
so he will hand you the key. When you lock the door  
and your head hits the pillow, the dreams start  
while your eyes are still open, and you can let go  
of the thick meringue pressing on your brain.

Except this time you're curled in a hospital bed,  
the air conditioning on your backside, the only air  
moving, certainly not in your lungs, that festering  
mucous swamp, and you pant like a hound in July.  
You don't dare sleep: sloppy nurses could bring  
germs to finish you off or flood your heart with  
the IV's two-step drip, the blood's thick crawl.  
It's this new nurse, just when you've given up.  
It's her stare over a stethoscope as she nods in time  
to your stuttering pulse, reads the news in your  
lungs' wet-paper wheeze. At last you can rest,  
your lids drooping like sheets hung out in the rain.

## *Doppelgänger*

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I'm here to tell you it's not that easy being  
two people at once. The nurse that I am nods,  
noting symptoms. Yes, bone marrow suppression,  
pneumonia, left ventricular hypertrophy  
indicate a poor prognosis. As the patient,  
short of breath, head split by bolts of pain,  
I push the call button, count minutes until  
a frazzled woman with a clipboard rushes in,  
only to wait again for the pill, the relief.  
The other nurses, the doctors, know I'm  
a member of the club. We talk critical  
platelet counts, rocketing hypertension.  
Alone, I dial the automated report number.  
"Webster, Anne: today's chest film shows  
increased infiltrates of pneumonia."  
Pus boils in needle sticks; my fever spikes.  
Is this the fatal infection? I've seen it all  
too many times to think I should be spared.  
Yet the woman that is me weeps for the man  
she would leave, the shining years left, for  
grandchildren who will grow up without her,  
even as the nurse in me notes vital signs, tallies  
figures in the chart, numbers in the red zone.