

August 10, 1995

No one kept me from picking blackberries
that clear, sunlit August morning.
No one stopped me or called my name
when I stepped from the small cement porch,
ringed with morning glories and portulaca,
the small white dog running ahead of me
toward old man Guyowski's field.

Guyowski was dead now, but I knew him long ago,
when he was the janitor at the Polish Club
and his daughter Stella married my uncle Paul.
Every Friday night he stood at the entry
to the club, drunk and singing—
sometimes in broken English, sometimes in Polish.
I can see his small, crooked body still.
But that was in 1959, when I was someone else,
with no thought that I would ever leave
this small town with its muddy brown river,
oil-slicked, flowing through its center.

I followed the dog up the sloping hill,
past old Guyowski's pigsty,
a pile of odorless rocks and bricks
and ancient straw moldering in the cool air,
past his faded red barn, its double doors
crossed with gray splintered wood,
past the old fallow apple trees,
bent and heavy, the small windfall apples
with soft brown rotten spots dotting
their green translucent skin.
Was my skin green too that morning,
green with the sickly pallor
of days spent in the hospital, green
from the nights without sleep?
But I was alive, and I reached the field
below the barn, the dog still ahead of me.
Two rabbits, small and brown,
sprang from the bushes fringing the field,
and the dog started after them.

This was the place I'd longed all my life
to reach, the time and the place
where everything coalesced, as if I'd
been destined from birth to come here,
picking blackberries in the warm sun,
while my father breathed slow
and shallow breaths into a respirator,
making the float inside a plastic jar
rise a few scant inches at a time.

Yellow jackets swarmed in and out
of the shade, while I wandered along the field's
periphery, snatching the ripe blackberries
and piling them in my open palm,
sometimes mistaking the yet-unripened
red berries for raspberries,
until I tasted one and found it bitter.
All that I'd lost there—there in that town,
in that other life—all that I'd lost
suddenly rushed back, and I knew
that even those losses hadn't erased this place,
hadn't erased me from the place.
I was there in that field picking blackberries,
I was there in that cemetery,
some of my names engraved
on barely legible white stones,
and I was there in that hospital,
breathing up and down with my father.

At a time in my life when I feared
everyone I loved would leave me,
I came back to myself. I carried
my handful of berries back to the house
before the mother bear and her two cubs
caught me pilfering, or before
old man Guyowski's ghost floated
from the pigsty to tell me it was time,
while the sun still shone, to forgive my father.

—Susan E. Gunter, Park City

This poem was winner of the College of Humanities 1998 Eisteddfod
Poetry Chair Competition for the "Losing One's Way" theme.