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## Poems

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## *House Dreams: For a Friend Who Is Inconsolable*

My home keeps coming undone.  
The door frames are crumbling,  
large chips fall away in my hand.  
In the kitchen, the original green  
is reestablishing itself. Maybe  
it's not so bad, I think, the green  
is tart and shiny like an apple.  
My ex-husband, an earnest man,  
is busy making repairs. Still,  
it won't be safe to sleep tonight  
unless we can replace the locks, and  
first we've got to install new doors.  
"Too good is no good," my father  
used to say. The thought is comforting.

I have a friend who dreams of running  
from his life, who says, "If it weren't  
for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all."  
When his father was alive, they would spend  
several weekends every spring planting rows  
of flowers in front of the shrubs,  
pulling crab grass, pruning the hedge.  
In the fall they moved inside where,  
room by room, they went through the house,  
sanding, papering, restoring the original  
color to the moldings. When the old man died,  
he sat in the living room, his  
strange blue eyes scanning the walls  
remembering every hole he drilled

for insulation, every bruise he plastered  
and repainted, every raised mark that  
still remained.

He keeps to himself.

At night he plays the banjo and the mandolin,  
old timey music, he calls it, melodies  
that weave like ribbons on a May pole  
for ladies in white dresses who danced  
at Whitsun, his hands are relaxed,  
graceful and easy on the strings,  
this one's Soldier's Joy, though  
don't ask him about Vietnam, because  
he won't tell you.

Today he's just finished laying wood tile  
in a water-damaged square of kitchen floor.  
It's beautiful, I say, it looks  
like a giant cheeseboard. He smiles  
a wan smile, his head curled into his chest,  
his chin about level with his beer can.

I take a drag on his cigarette, a brief,  
intimate taste of death, and notice  
that he's just had a haircut, his hair  
is bone straight and beautiful and  
streaked with gray. How odd that he looks  
as neat as a roundhead or a monk  
in this his hour of anguish. Hey, I want to say,  
getting down to it, listen to your music.  
Someone blessed your hands when you were born

as if that ever helped or I could understand  
what he felt, could tell him to give up the  
dream of sealing every drafty seam  
in every leaded window. That's no way to heal,  
I'd like to say, but he is too cold to hear me.

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## ***Where We Have Arrived: For Roni***

We are taking the shuttle back from Boston to New York. The airport is quiet, as if we are the only ones there. You sit in the window seat in the twilight, the horizon below you, the sun setting against the dark length of your hair. We have traveled so many times together, have been each other's witnesses, like the twins in that children's book you loved, *Lisa and Lottie*, co-conspirators, arranging our own happy endings, leaving the formal dinners and the speeches to go to the movies, we were *The Lion and the Unicorn*,\* Michael Hearn called us those two bitches from Brooklyn, and we loved that he said that, we took it as a compliment. And now, in some small way, we're even famous. Graduate students interview us on the origins of the journal—which means we're getting old. Historical. And soon to be revised. But deeper friends, beyond our young imagining. And still inside me there has always been this fear, you are talking about it now, what happens when I pull away. You put your hand over your heart, "You're in here," you say, "inside yourself," and I am relieved. I feel myself there. I felt it today when you and Ellie diverged

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\**The Lion and the Unicorn* is a journal about children's books that Roni Natov and I founded and co-edited for 15 years. It is now published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

from me in the bookstore, and I moaned  
about buying more books by men. Finally  
I am becoming weary of their authority,  
the very sound of their voices makes me angry.  
Forget them, you tell me, read whatever you want.  
I hear you laughing with Ellie and I am lonely  
even though I choose to set myself apart.  
I find Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*,  
the title is unavoidable, you were the one  
who recommended it, I read the first line:  
"His two girls are curled together like animals  
whose habit is to sleep underground,  
in the smallest space possible."  
And the father who watches thinks about  
how close they are and how much they will lose.  
It reminds me of you and Ellen Forman in the country,  
how entwined you always seemed to be  
in each other's arms and legs, how you danced  
in the dark house in Chichester as I watched  
and played chords on Jonathan's guitar.  
And that winter Ellen was killed by a car  
as she stepped off a curb, and you called me  
in the middle of the night and said,  
"Geri, it's the worst," and we stayed  
on the line together for a long time  
although there was nothing to say.  
And years before that, there was Laura's death.  
And of course, you always said,  
I didn't have to try to take their place.

The plane circles over Manhattan.  
I can see the lights, the Empire State Building,  
"Look," I almost say, but catch myself.  
I am a sightseer, looking out the window,  
my eyes are jumping around, focus, I think,  
notice how people look at each other  
when they talk, remember to notice that  
the next time you have a conversation.  
The dark cabin protects me. "Sometimes,"  
I say, "you sit down next to me  
and I am overshadowed. I am lonely  
without you and then when you are there,



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my heart is filled with something—  
fear, a loss of self. What fragile self  
is it that is so easily lost?”

I'm working on this, believe me.

The plane is landing as we talk, and  
part of me concentrates on its descent,  
the wheels hit the ground, and I breathe again,  
and we walk through the airport, arm and arm,  
and stop to call our separate homes,  
preparing to say goodbye. We will say  
at some point in the future, “Remember  
that day when we went to Ellie's meeting  
in Boston? How many years ago was that?  
And didn't we have a great time?”

## *Alas, Glass Slipper*

I wrote a haiku once in  
high school, tiny poem  
about turned heads

that saw the spring  
where the window was  
once closed on winter

not knowing then the  
dark ground in which  
I seemed to be a geneless seed

in a cold field. Sadness  
grew endlessly in me. It took  
such space. Someone else

could have a life in which  
the snow's dark days bore  
fruit while I lived

as if there were some  
elaborate flowered tree  
remembered in the mind

of God that I could never be  
and all else was just  
a paltry scratching at a shell

that would not crack.

II

If a tree falls in a forest  
and there is no man to hear it,  
will it make a sound?

I know this thought. It has  
a heritage, like bound feet,  
says who told you

you could grow into anything,  
make any noise, leave footsteps?  
Tread softly. Make dull marks

indistinguishable from  
a dead branch that  
hits the ground and lies still.

Lately, every time I buy  
a pair of shoes  
I need a bigger size.