

## **Everything Before I Became Myself (2023)**

Once, I opened a cocoon in winter-  
melted caterpillar in streaks of gold and green and black -  
like colors that edge my life, hinting at another form.

Do butterflies remember eating heartily in life?  
The pain in melting and reforming?  
Do their wings ever ache to return Earthbound, a respite from the wind?

I remember.

I remember wandering woods like a wild child – moccasined feet, shotgun in hand.  
Hundreds of acres      all mine.

I remember windows open, peeper choruses serenading the night.  
Reading Grimm’s Fairy Tales by kerosene lamp.

I remember braided pigtails, where hairs with night-time freedom were again bound.  
Picking spearmint by the creek and buttercups in fields where cows chewed cuds.

I remember morning air electrified by night storms.  
Harmonizing my child's soprano with Mother’s alto while singing *I’ll Be A Sunbeam for Jesus*.

I remember jumping into my father’s arms, never doubting I could fly.  
Handmade quilts      a way of life.

I remember.

## Quiet Strength (2023)

As an Amish teen, my mother wore  
the covering of submission,  
and her cape dress hung mid-calf against  
legs hidden in black stockings.  
Yet, the tilling needed done, cows milked,  
and hay hefted in scorching sun.  
Undergarments of flour sack material  
chafed in heated rebellion.

My mother planted garden rows using stakes  
and twine for guides. Hand-rototilled and weeded daily.  
Cucumber tendrils wandered in a black plastic desert,  
and marigolds protected tomatoes.  
In the row nearest the house,  
gladiolas raised flowered arms in praise.  
Or was it supplication?

Oranges bought by crate  
from the bed of a multi-colored truck,  
were peeled, quartered, and deseeded  
by my mother's skilled knife.  
While juices gushed sweet,  
it burned the small cuts  
endured from hard work.

Sometimes when land and tempers broiled,  
my mother washed dishes alone.  
Tears splashed in dirty dishwater  
as she hummed hymns of comfort-  
created a space of holy noise  
and drowned out the cacophony of anger  
in which she had no voice.

In peaceful times, she embroidered  
pillowcases, tablecloths, and quilts.  
Though her hands twisted in pain  
and her vision dulled,  
she tirelessly wielded needle  
until blood blended among  
the threads of her last cardinal.

## Hide And Never Seek (2023)

Bare feet swing  
over wagon's edge  
as dust trails in their wake.  
The air burns to breathe,  
but at seven years of age,  
Summer's heat is bearable.

The tractor jostles,  
followed by the sickening sound  
I've heard too often -  
a last piercing cry.

Among blood, splattered like drops of rain,  
lies my white kitten.  
Her tail thumps slowly

and then stops.

I jump from the rough-hewn boards and run,

but it's too late.

Turning into my father's arms,  
he tells me to go home.  
Forget what I've seen.

All traces of death are removed,  
Smoothed over,  
never to be spoken of again.

## **Five-Gallon Bucket Lament (2023)**

### *I. Corn Freezing*

We walked amongst cornstalks as morning fog cleared,  
yet dew and sharp leaves cut and irritated bare arms.  
Husks shrieked when ripped to reveal their ripeness.  
I left five-gallon bucket tracks in dirt  
because ripe ears of sweet corn became too heavy.  
We shucked, cleaned, boiled, and bathed in cold water.  
Kernels were cut off into cake pans,  
then sticky spoonfuls filled empty freezer pints.  
Corn silk clung to sweaty bodies & cotton clothes.  
Cold water from hoses unable to remove all residue.

### *II. Applesauce Canning*

Crates full of apples – quartered and boiled,  
were dumped with unladylike plopping  
into the Johnny Apple Sauce maker.  
My glasses fogged from heat.  
Sweat soaked through clothes.  
For hours, my young arm cranked,  
scraped off peelings and  
worked  
the wooden pestle up and  
down –  
its rhythmic sucking as if gasping for breath.  
I forced mushy apples into a sauce  
that flowed into five-gallon buckets.  
Bags of sugar added and stirred,  
then by dipper-full, the sweetness  
funneled into canning jars.

### *III. Chicken Butchering*

Though the axe changed,  
the stone for chicken beheadings  
remained the same for generations.  
Mingled blood and dust,  
dead bodies strewn about  
where nervous systems ceased functioning.  
I held knobby feet and dunked corpses,  
one by one,  
into a five-gallon bucket of boiled water.  
The stench of fresh chicken death  
captured in blood, Scheiße, and the hot wet feathers  
I plucked from warm, supple skin-

trying my best not to gag.  
Clots and feathers clung to my arms until water grew cold.  
Like invisible fireworks on a sunny day,  
bones cracked and snapped.  
Meat was canned and frozen-  
one for quick eating, the other to cook.

#### IV. *Soul Sealing*

After a full day's work,  
our families gathered for a meal.  
We cooked, baked, made desserts,  
and cranked homemade ice cream by the gallon.  
Not deemed as special, I ate  
with those relegated to the children's table.  
Conversations of hunting, relatives,  
and church filled the air.  
The secrets that broke and bled life from us-  
already frozen, canned, and stored away.