

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kimberly Ann Rasmussen for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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Abstract approved:

Karen Holmberg

The Spillways is a collection of poetry investigating a wide range of themes: identity, memory, loss, illness, labor, suffering, and grief. At times, the poems investigate place—in the physical and natural world—as a driving force of the speaker’s identity. Many of the poems also consider the role of work and explore the deep connection to work as a narrowing frame on life, but a frame that is also very rewarding and real. The poems that comprise The Spillways are primarily concerned with the examination of suffering and the resonance of loss—loss of innocence and childhood, of the sense of self, and of a father.

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The Spillways

by

Kimberly Ann Rasmussen

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Chair of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Kimberly Ann Rasmussen, Author

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The Spillways

FOR MY FATHER

I remember the times, after you
returned home from a day
of weighing grain and pitching seed,
when I'd accompany you
in your maroon truck
to get the needed onion or potatoes.

It was a big step
up into the cab. When we sat,
bits of dust rose and shimmered
as placeless stars in the honeyed
sunlight. The air tasted like dirt
and the husks of crops just harvested.

Only the squeak of the empty truckbed
interrupted the song of Bob Seger, as we rode
along. And there was always enough dust
collected on the dashboard that I
could trace out my name.

l.

WEST RIVER AND BACK

What was it like

returning from the prairie along Highway 18—
from spring, from summer? Sun blanketing over bellied earth

and folding in the shadows. Purple of pasques,
the coffee centers of sunflowers. Did they nod

at your passing? Did the shaking of the clouds sound
like the rapping of your footsteps—

Through the screen door
now, the crickets,
just their sound

mixes with the humid air of the room,
as you trace around the rim
of a glass,

remembering

the hook-and-spread of the sparrow
the rondure of the buffalo.

DRIVING TO WORK

The gravel cracked as I slowed
and stopped to see

its smudge of vermilion,
its scissors walk—

a ringed-neck pheasant
on the road that morning.

The field in its feather fronds—
muddy hay and snow-dotted lawns.

It's not as if I hadn't seen one
many times

perched on a fencepost,
coursing through the prairie sky,

or stripped and spread open
like a peony in July.

But I was drawn to the face
of that raw hour,

the ring of the pheasant's
emerald cleric collar.

THAT RIVER

We slammed the car doors then walked
the half-mile through waist-high weeds, smelling of beanfields
or smoky diners.

We were fourteen and free
for the late hours of the afternoon to enter our part of the river.
The turbid waters of the Missouri

called us in and we followed
like turning when you hear your name.
Descending its bluff,

twig by twig, we tested for each next
step until we were rootless in a water meadow,
floating between acceptance

and Nebraska. We never jumped in.
We couldn't afford that cast. Our mothers worked two jobs
and our fathers drank.

But that migrant water
would unage and rinse us of the scent of summer
work. Some days we swam out

far enough to begin to feel
the desire of the current. Even then
we never stopped to think

what would happen to our bodies
if we'd drown. That river would likely take us
only as far as the next town.

THE EARLY SHIFT

Looking out the café window
I watch the fresh
blueblacks and bruised-

azures that will not
remain long. The spray of feathers
in a peacock dawn.

In the pocket
of my apron, a dollar
bill ruffles like an artificial orchid.

Hunters and farmers' monarch
hues flicker above the counter's muted
complexion. Their stirring

spoons clank the sides of cups.
Talk of the storm last night,
the hiss of eggs shuffled

into the echo of another day. As
routines reassemble,
as eavespouts drain—

How much
for the coffee?
How much rain?

HANDFISHING

that photograph of us
hues of browns
yellowed by the years

we didn't know where we'd go
from there nor think
about it much

it was as much summer
as our childhood
was winter
and the frost on the leaves
melts just as soon

we knew one thing
we never talked about
and that was keeping

everything we touched
we took
and hid it in a shoebox
or stashed it in a jar

where memory collects

and now
aren't we still
down at the river

kneeling at the shallow end
of the dock
watching a school of minnows
disappear like bullets

in all directions
away from our seeking
cupping hands

THE SPILLWAYS

Gavins Point Dam, SD

We mooned about the rocks
then took our sandals off.

My sister and I were eight,
searching for sea shells

along a man-made lake,
watching for an exotic

shine to surface. She wanted
the kind of shell you press against

your ear to hear the ocean inside.
I wanted a starfish because I had felt

the ribs of one once in a neighbor's foyer.
We tip-toed around amber and green

pieces of beer bottles living
between the rocks like weeds.

She found a brown-spotted
feather and lifted it by its quill.

I picked up the turquoise shell of a bird's
egg, a lens from a pair of sunglasses.

We found our reflection on an abandoned
mirror as candid as a photograph.

(continues)

We were the same height with the same
tawny-colored ponytail, loosening some

at that hour in the day. Our father
was on the other side of the road

snapping shots of the spillways. He had driven
here to take pictures—bald eagles in the tips

of cottonwoods, clay and silver
bluffs around the lake, and the wind

brushing waves over the top of the dam
like a waterfall, feeding the river.

VANISHING POINT

But if I could have heard
them screaming
I wouldn't have done it.

Squished those pissants,
divorcing their heads
from their bodies. I watched

them march one by one
to build homes of sand
just as my mother washed

dishes and glanced
between the backyard and CNN,
her attention half-mast

and perspective
from as far a length,
as my mind to my shoe.

NOTE ON MEMORY

A sloshing clack: I can almost hear
the sound of you jostling those slippery cubes
from the last of your lemonade
on the patio that summer, your last summer,
siding with the lorn garden where the pansies
mother planted bloomed. The sunlight that
July day bridged our skin, and its warmth
was like a near fire or folding fresh laundry.
I can almost remember, but each day it wrecks
a little more and I cannot get to the sense of it.
Little difference between memory
and the imagined. Like the floors I walk on
in my dreams but never feel.

WITNESS

For the two months after you were
transferred to hospice, I watched a trinity
of maples chameleon from green
to a determined shade of crimson

that held briefly, like a memory before
dimming. Now the trees' plumes
have dwindled like the geese
in this cold, northern air—

I don't know how to begin again.
Maybe it's because I was witness
to that slow-going, that piece by piece,
or maybe it's this unreachable sky

revealing more of itself now
through those vein branches.

II.

PLACES IN TIME

I have no need for the images.
Not the items in the drugstore:
the hen clock, or Maalox
aging on the shelf,
the Congratulations bears
or The Princess Has Arrived
pink shirt. Nor the carpet stain
with chanced borders like a country.

Yet, I see them still as I see the blender
in the kitchen, the television—
those places in time and the yellowing
of your skin, the swelling
of your belly, the catheter bag
collecting a dripping bronze.

And the sunlight that last
autumn afternoon that kept filling
and unfilling your semi-private
room from behind clouds
like a deep, soundless breath.

WINDFLOWER

You struggled to steady a drift
of peas on your spoon,

loose, wrinkled pearls
tasteless as November.

I watched your tenor collapsing;
your fingers folding in

and trembling (a spider spinning
its plate) before I took the spoon

and broke the dune
of mashed potatoes; a ribbon

of gravy trimmed the plate.
The fingers of your free

hand waved like tips of wheat breathed
on by the wind; your hospital bracelet

kept time with every waft
of your wrist.

I wanted to not think
of how this was like feeding

a child but be
a child: one that waited for the airplane

of mash to arrive at my mouth;
one that saw the tremble

of the spider not as working,
but dancing.

DISAPPEARING

The last morning you were home,
you would never remember. You'd
never return to finish any of the things
you had aimed to do. After the ambulance
took you away, I stayed behind
and paced around the upturned
furniture, the disassembled, until I could begin
trying to retake order. Turning back the chairs,
screwing in the banister, and moving back
your dresser, slowly,
lifting and inching against its heft.

You had said you wanted a gun again,
that we used to own a family revolver,
and you'd keep it again
next to your bed in a dresser drawer.
You didn't know then, that you were sick
and had these spells of disappearing.
I worried what might happen,
a weapon sleeping
so close to your head like a mother
to her child.

The last night you were home
you said you weren't feeling
well, and I knew in the morning
you'd wake up confused and not recognize
my face. And you didn't. "Yes," you repeated,
"yes" to no question searching for that answer,
*what's your name, who am I, where
are you, can you stand?*

Mother lifted your arm. We watched it fall
back down to the edge of the bed
as if you didn't know it was part of you.

CALLING HOME

i.

As I learned to speak
while tripping on its carpet,
I gave it a name:

home. And ball
and sky, but I've learned
it's the meaning
of words that differents
through time.

ii.

Is the grass getting tall?

In August, you called from the VA
to request your plaid shirt, some pajamas, a razor,
certain you weren't staying long.

I went up the stairs and down
to collect these things startled by the quiet
in the familiar steps—the steps
that made your knees creak.

iii.

In September you found out you wouldn't
leave.

Throw the leaves over the fence.

(continues)

You had asked

to return home
but you couldn't.

iv.

Does the dog look for me?

To imagine home where the October
tilt lets the sun filch in
and sphere across the living
room floor.

 This structure.

Its foyer of switching
photographs, personals
tucked in drawers,
lone standing pears bruising
on the orange craqueleure counter,
and pebble-filled lamps that quiet
into the familiar. The plums
dropped on the yard.

Tips of cornstalks slant
over the fence as sheets,
blowy on the line, thwack
in abandon.

v.

Have the orioles returned?

I was looking for your flash-

(continues)

light in the garage when I lifted
a sack of birdseed
and a hole made a quick escape
for the small pellets to make their limited
sound and polarize on the floor,
just as my hands had reached for that sack,
like iron filings on a magnetic field—
ordinary, imprecise.

vi.

It's the meaning
of words that different

through time: home

again, almost harvest

father

silence.

THE MIDDLE GROUND

I brought you warm, white
blankets from the nurse's station
and wrapped you before wheeling you
out to the patio of the VA. I pushed
you past the rest of the patients
in matching white gowns
to an open sitting area, a kind
of clearing in the sun, not yet
as far as the nurses' smoking
conversations, not as far
as the lawn fixed with evergreens.
Evergreens, I thought, not the kind
you watch change through time, as I lay
on a bench shielding my eyes
from the sun when it came out
from behind the clouds.
Those palpable shapes
in the sky I used to name from the backseat,
my forehead tilted toward the window
as if to overhear, during drives we used to take
before I grew up too soon
and the foremost place
I wanted to get was a nearness
to understanding
why it was you couldn't stop
drinking and who could make death
a consequence. But I wasn't close to that
grip on the patio, I was closer
to the quiet in that narrowing moment,
to the sunlight warming your face
and mine, as if the wind and clouds
were the foremost terms
of this middle ground, as if this place were
an acceptance as easy as
when you appeared in my dream
days after, no longer alive,
and stood to tell me that you were sorry—
and the dream-me that watched you writhe
from a nonexistent bed to a nonexistent stance,
simply responded
for what.

THE MOMENT AT HAND

Surveying the front yard as if invited.
Fluttering their grey wings and darting
their smooth black necks. Their pond
was gone. Where there used to be

a dip in the land that filled with rainwater
was a rectangle of cement for another house.
No more tallgrass and cattails
beyond the street that years before
was the dirt road where I played as a child

and rain meant mud. The geese have long
since stopped elsewhere, the face of home
has changed. But I keep searching
for what once was. For what doesn't
return, what now passes overhead.

MAN MOPPING

Under a flickering glow in the empty room,
you are circling towards a memory
with your mop, your persistence.
Railed curtains tracked aside, beds undressed,
monitors erased to blank. This is the afterwards,
the stay-behind. And each squeeze
from your bucket is a brief rain. And each thrust
to the floor forages for the before.

JUST AFTER

The sea off the coast of Oregon shivers
under gray. I'm far enough away,
but afraid to go any farther,
knowing I'm to lose more of you.

One could call this the in-between,
call it the most beclouded moment
they've ever seen—the hesitance
to rush across tracks
after a train has rolled past.

Here I'm soldierly, anchored,
would rather stay and watch
as the tide takes back
the skeletons and the loosened, takes.

AFTERIMAGE

I looked at the sun,

and then away

That was all.

right and then

left, no,

I stared at the sun

and now

that cutout shape,

that spectral fire

haunts,

disrupts my sight.

Nuisance, yes,

But what a hold

it has and its persistence

could be a sign—

oncoming

blindness or maybe just the loss

of one afternoon—

cold November,

(continues)

when I took the roses out

to see
the red and peach
color
 the glowing snow,

and the wind
 moving
west

and the weight—

petal by brief
petal—

and I had looked at the sky

before walking away
before turning my back

and the reverse of this

that mad
image didn't stay,
 and the leaving didn't last

if only this was how

we'd lose
anything.

III.

RUSH HOUR

I hear it coming as I drop
down stairs, carrying
lemons and regret,

due for the gray tunnel
and train. Every day as I leave
work, a couple sells Jesus on a corner

near Times Square. Every way
I go, I arrive at the mouth
of nothing sacred, nothing unscarred—

a chorus I can't escape, but this is not
about what I have left. It's where I am
going as I lockstep and stumble

into the crowded subway car.
The doors seal at my back, chimes
chime, yet the movement

is a false start—a lesser threshold—
because the door, though closed,
still feels like an opening.

NEPHEW, YOU WON'T REMEMBER

being three and sitting at the kitchen counter.
With each mouthful, you told me how much you loved
ice cream, your eyes sailing from counter to cupboard
to sink. But then you stopped, shrieked
and your expression pinched. I gave you my hand
to hold, told you to slow down.

 Cautiously, you resumed, spoon in hand,
eyes adrift. But soon again, you stopped.
Shrieked. You couldn't leave the bowl unfinished
nor grasp the role of your own hand
in your suffering.

PLANTING

Yugoslavia, 1970

There was land and my hands.
 The wheat gold
 in the curves
 of the fields. And there was more
 land. Hills mean boundary
 for some, a divide
 between what's mine and yours, but I
 saw farther into the world
 in those paling blue
 outlines hinting
 at the distinction
 of sky. By day, those hills
 would arc and bend and hue
 depending on where I was standing—
 high on or low down
 where the river cut through
 and I had bent to rinse
 my face—and at night, while lying
 in bed, tucked in moonlight, I'd see
 hills covered by a white quilt, rising
 with each breath.

Each year my corn grew taller
 than my children, my grandchildren.
 Hard work but I could breathe
 out there. I could be out there
 and know that the break
 of dawn was more than the orchestra
 of birds pining and dusk,
 more than the bruising
 of light, more than the day failing
 by you. That there's a beginning
 and an end. There was no end.

(continues)

Only a different rhythm
and shape that your hands
would make in a different
colored hour.

Clear light of day, sort the seeds
harrow the fields, which meant
pull the hoe in, like this,
toward your skirt, scratch
the scalp of the hillock, forward
and back. Again and again
to make room,
to make the rows, a place
for planting.

Then in yellow candlelight
knead the dough
for noodles or for bread,
left thumb over the right,
until it's a smooth, shiny moon.

Out there I carried cabbages,
other days, timber. Like an ox. Plums
and potatoes. Balanced pails
of milk on my head, water the same.
Prayed for rain.

Some wage-earners
say it's too quiet but this is our work
here, women's work, not in the city,
and the hills out here,
in these villages, speak.
Don't I know. Each step is a sound,
a greeting of foot
and earth, and your breath,
pushing you forward, speaks
back. The wind washing
the needles of the cypress
extracts a voice. Some days it

(continues)

whispered, some it sang.

To live by the land
you don't rest—you abide,
you abide by the land,
by the sense
that work feeds you.
I had need for little more
than bread
and wine, the plums
off the trees. But
didn't I want.

I no longer report to the rain.
Too old for the fields,
I tend to my grandchildren,
to the stove. Apron tied, blood
sausages and kraut
in the kettles.

I don't reach
much farther than this kitchen
and the farmyard. I open the door
for the chicks and hen when crumbs
scatter under the table.

Too old for the fields
I see through my window, but don't
I know the shape that hunger takes.
And don't I ache.

TAKING WHAT COMES

Brooklyn Heights Promenade

The rain stopped
the tourists from peopling the view. Even though
the sky is a milkwash of gray

bleeding into the harbor,
it's drying some now, the wooden benches
barely damp.

The sound of joggers
pulling breaths as they run past
trench coats on lunch break.

A woman tears and tosses
her leftover bread
splattering blonde daubs

onto the granite's black skin.
Pigeons surround her
thick ankles, darting for scraps

around the white buildings
of tennis shoes, below
the clouds that feed them.

ELFRIEDE, YOUR HANDS

are fast at the skillet, and your eyes
fixated on the rooster clock. The brushed flour
dims the hibiscus on your apron; your hair
is a flourless white.

For forty years you've been on this farm;
somewhere between the empty red barn
with its many windows and the mirror
of the trout pond that captured everything
you've lost through time—the promise
of a new land; a daughter to an early morning
patch of ice, who would be, should be,
thirty-two; the sound of delight the hens
made after laying their eggs
that made you shiver with reverence;
and the German word for bacon.

WASHERWOMAN

Prayer-bent at the edge
of the river she finishes
wringing her last few
cloths and places them
in her burlap sack. Standing,
she finds her reflection in the river
just as she had yesterday.
She thinks she'd like to travel
along with the current as it flows
under bridges, over rockbeds
and empty somewhere else—
and not return to the foyer
with the empty shoes.
She turns and walks back
toward the mill switching
her bulging sack from hip to hip,
just as she has days before and will
in days to come, up the low rise
of the hill, consciously and continually
redistributing that weight.

LANDMINES

Waking on the ship floor at dawn, I reach
for my few belongings and pull them
in close the way a curl of hair coils
back into itself. Out on the deck
is an album of blue: bare light wetting
the Adriatic, islands that rise from under
a quilt of sea and fog.

What about the places I've already stepped?
There were no signs of caution or warning.
Yet I survived—though I keep falling back into
those cerebral explosions. Memory.

Miles away. Or yesterday, when I walked
over sun-slapped stones making quick, high steps.
From a distance I must have looked like a mystic
dancing across a bed of burning coals.

SOUVENIR

The National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City

The slice down his belly ran the length of my forearm,
his young face painted but the design smeared
by the tears rinsing his cheeks. His mother

on her knees cradled his scrunched shirt in her lap,
murmuring *infección, infección* as she anointed his wound
with a liquid sting. Stung, he retracted,

unsoothed by her hum of words and breath fanning
as if guiding a bit of lint off a wrist, surrounded by daisies
of tissues with blood red blots. Child,

while I was waiting by a wall of gold-lit, Mayan souvenirs,
you were wailing for things in Spanish that I couldn't
understand, as if suffering were a different octave of language.

Were you a warrior before? An ancient god laced
with obsidian hieroglyphs. Or was that a skeleton
on your face whose distinct shades I can no longer see?

NOTES

“Just After” is after the contemporary Hungarian poet Agnes Nemes Nagy—
and specifically her poem entitled “Sincerity.”

“Washerwoman” is a response to Paul Gauguin’s “Washerwomen at the Roubine Du
Roi Arles.”

“Planting” is a response to a book of photographs entitled *Carrying the Farm on Her
Back: A Portrait of Women in a Yugoslav Village* by Eva Skold Westerlind.