

## Words For My Daughter

About eight of us were nailing up forts  
in the mulberry grove behind Reds' house  
when his mother started screeching and  
all of us froze except Reds --fourteen, huge  
as a hippo-- who sprang out of the tree so fast  
the branch nearly bobbed me off. So fast,  
he hit the ground running, hammer in hand,  
and seconds after he got in the house  
we heard thumps like someone beating a tire  
off a rim his dad's howls the screen door  
banging open Saw Reds barreling out  
through the tall weeds towards the highway  
the father stumbling after his fat son  
who never looked back across the thick swale  
of teazel and black-eyed susans until it was safe  
to yell fuck you at the skinny drunk  
stamping around barefoot and holding his ribs.

\*

Another time, the Connelly kid came home to find  
his alcoholic mother getting raped by the milkman.  
Bobby broke a milkbottle and jabbed the guy  
humping on his mom. I think it really happened  
because none of us would loosely mention that  
wraith of a woman who slippered around her house  
and never talked to anyone, not even her kids.  
Once a girl ran past my porch  
with a dart in her back, her open mouth  
pumping like a guppy's, her eyes wild.  
Later that summer, or maybe the next,

the kids hung her brother from an oak.  
Before they hoisted him, yowling and heavy  
on the clothesline, they made him claw the creekbank  
and eat worms. I don't know why his neck didn't snap.

Reds had another nickname you couldn't say  
or he'd beat you up: "Honeybun."

His dad called him that when Reds was little.

\*

So, these were my playmates. I love them still  
for their justice and valor and desperate loves  
twisted in shapes of hammer and shard.

I want you to know about their pain  
and about the pain they could loose on others.

If you're reading this, I hope you will think,  
Well, my Dad had it rough as a kid, so what?  
If you're reading this, you can read the news  
and you know that children suffer worse.

\*

Worse for me is a cloud of memories  
still drifting off the South China Sea,  
like the 9-year old boy, naked and lacerated,  
thrashing in his pee on a steel operating table  
and yelling "Dau. Dau," while I, trying to translate  
in the mayhem of Tet for surgeons who didn't know  
who this boy was or what happened to him, kept asking  
"Where? Where's the pain?" until a surgeon  
said "Forget it. His ears are blown."

\*

I remember your first Hallow'een  
when I held you on my chest and rocked you,

so small your toes didn't touch my lap  
as I smelled your fragrant peony head  
and cried because I was so happy and because  
I heard, in no metaphorical way, the awful chorus  
of Soeur Anicet's orphans writhing in their cribs.  
Then the doorbell rang and a tiny Green Beret  
was saying trick-or-treat and I thought oh oh  
but remembered it was Hallow'een and where I was.  
I smiled at the evil midget, his map-light and night  
paint, his rubber knife for slitting throats, said,  
"How ya doin', soldier?" and, still holding you asleep  
in my arms, gave him a Mars Bar. To his father  
waiting outside in fatigues I hissed, "You, shit,"  
and saw us, child, in a pose I know too well.

\*

I want you to know the worst and be free from it.  
I want you to know the worst and still find good.  
Day by day, as you play nearby or laugh  
with the ladies at Peoples Bank as we go around town  
and I find myself beaming like a fool,  
I suspect I am here less for your protection  
than you are here for mine, as if you were sent  
to call me back into our helpless tribe.

*Words for My Daughter, 1991*