

Contents

PREFACE ix

one

That's Something	3
Jan's Orchard	4
What Happens	6
Diction	7
The Sandhills, Early Winter	8
November Night Driving	10
Birthday	11
Sarah's Wing	12
Conversation	13
My Daughter Home from College Tells Me about the Gods	14
April Teaching, Outstate	15
Native	16
Locus	17
Accident	19
Photograph of a Child Sleeping	22
Visions	23
Words	25
Town/County	26

two

Dishes	29
What Happened This Summer	31
Saying Good-bye to the Property	32
Divorce	33
Shame, or the Computer Uses of Natural Language	34
1 September, 100 Degrees	36

Trying to Buy Off Death 37
I Can't. Yes, You Can. 38
Worry about Meaning 40
Cradle 41
Family 43
Piecing 44
Plate xii 47
Assignment 49
Three Ways of Looking at It 51

three

Gossip 55
Father 56
Women Raised in the Fifties 58
She 59
What Is Good 61
Lot's Wives 63
Widow 65
Visitant 67
Some Other Women Now 69
I Am Sick 71

four

Piecing the Universe Together
with Dresses 75
She Speaks 76
Detail 78
Oracle 80
Pregnant Woman 81
Sabbath 83
Small Shelter 84
Pain 85
A Meeting with My Ex-Husband 86

High Ground 88
With Stanley Kunitz at the Car Wash 89

five

Advice 93
Restraint 94
Journal Entry: The Tropics 95
Friend in a Distant City 97
Sex 98
Alone 99
Look 100
Lacunae 101
C3 102
Ambition 104
Helios at Bread Loaf, the Album 106
The Man 108
My Dream, Your Dream 110
September: Getting Married Again 111
Prospectus 112
Atonement 115
Bear 117
Version 118
Inside the Geese 119
Life Outside the Self:
 The Uncertainty Principle 120

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 121

Preface

Readers will find in these pages a daughter, Sarah. She was born in my twenty-sixth year, a familiar transformation of one woman into two parts. She was called Sarah after her father's grandmother, who'd raised him; he'd followed after her during his first hot summer, holding her skirts to learn to walk, calling for *ice, ice*. Sarah was our second child and at the time of her birth nothing seemed more important to me as a writer and teacher than engagement with female identity through generations. In the next decade I began to write this book.

Robert Pack, poet, critic, and then director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, chose this book for publication in the Grove Press poetry series just as the press was changing ownership and the series was canceled. The manuscript fell into two parts: Judith Kitchen, editor of State Street Press, took one part for her series of chapbooks and published it as *The Bone Dish*; Eloise Fink chose the other for her Thorn Tree Press, where it was published as *What Is Good*. Both books are out of print. The original manuscript, called *What Happens*, was put away.

In the middle of my life, my daughter Sarah disappeared. The poems that traced her in the context of an ordinary life—the poems of female inheritance—had become unavailable in ways both literal and metaphorical. I continued to write and publish books—poetry and others—that redefined transformation: first in my own body because of breast cancer, *Divine Honors*, and then in the body of my younger child, *Trans*, both published by Wesleyan University Press. My daughter Sarah had become my son Aaron.

After Aaron's sex change, he and I wrote a prose book together, *What Becomes You*, published in the American Lives series by the University of Nebraska Press. The book describes our experience, asks questions about the nature of identity, and reveals details of

Aaron's sex change. And then another book of poems, *All Odd and Splendid*, again published by Wesleyan UP, pushed my ideas and poems forward.

Although I missed Sarah, who had gone from my life, I'd come to understand that my daughter was a construction—not of flesh but of words. She lived in this book. So when the University of Nebraska Press brought the parts back together and asked to publish *What Happens*, I said yes, with thanks. I hope readers will be as happy to meet Sarah here in our life and landscape as I am to have made her.

What Is Good originally was dedicated to John Franklin, Sarah, and Dale, and had these names and dates on the dedication page:

Franklyn Emmanuel Raz 1899–1957

Barton James Raz 1928–1968

Dolly Horwich Raz 1899–1969

The order of poems has been changed in service to the original manuscript.

Thank you to Robert Pack, Judith Kitchen, Eloise Fink, Ladette Randolph, and Tom Swanson for their support of this book.

That's Something

In Springfield, Nebraska
on the central flyway
in March, the geese
at sunset make such a ruckus
as you can hear for miles
either side of Highway 14
west or north on the gravel
marker roads, in the marshy
lowlands; you can park
and watch wave on wave
funnel and circle down
and down, peel off
from the main torrents
to land by what looks like
accident of blowing air
on farm pond or lake,
hog wallow, or bathtub,
or corn stubble or milo field—
to sleep.

All this, mind you,
against a black dish
of fiery sky that erases
detail and depth and leaves
these cutouts in the air,
scarcely geese at all
except where the final light
flashes pure white on their bellies
almost, not quite yet,
touching the water.

Jan's Orchard

Anything anyone human
might want of an evening
we've carried from the hold
of the station wagon
parked at the foot of the hill.
We loll on the grass and drink.

A spring orchard in Stella,
even the blasted trees blooming,
pear, cherry, and apple,
and we're eating a picnic supper
and drinking wine in the middle
under an umbrella of blossoms.

The sun at the horizon
catches rose in our glasses.
We say nothing.
If the good life is coming
to us in our lifetime,
surely it is here
in this orchard in April at twilight,
everything possible blooming,
the air — impossible — warming
as the sun goes down.

Everything here is becoming
summer if we let it,
three people who try hard
to drink and keep this air down
on the ground among grass blades,
while it bubbles and rises
and floats us, finally,
our pale quilts and jackets,
our jokes and stories,
into the night sky,
shrinking and whirling us
higher and higher
until we're dust motes,
no, lightning points,
no, star folds,
nothing around us cold,
nothing around us, no,
we are nothing
but sighing over the flowers.

What Happens

In Alma, Nebraska, at midnight
into a spring storm the young doctor
goes out. He says he is going
to deliver the widow's baby.

I am sitting in the parlor
with my new friend, our landlady,
who is painting my nails
what she calls *a good color*.

She paints her own and tells
the story of the widow.

Outside the window the rosy snow
comes down on the crocus.

Diction

“God is in the details,”
I tell the kids
in the public school
at Milligan, Nebraska.
They wonder what I mean.
I tell them to look
out the window
at the spring fields
the mud coming up
just to the knee
of the small pig
in the far pasture.
They tell me
it’s not a knee
but a hock
and I hadn’t ought
to say things I know
nothing about. I say
the light on the mud
is pure chalcedony.
They say the mud
killed two cows
over the weekend.
I tell them the pig
is alive and the spring
trees are standing in a green haze.
They tell me school is out
in a week and they have to plant.
The grain elevator at the end
of Main Street stretches out
her blue arms. The kids say chutes.

The Sandhills, Early Winter

The girl in the back row sits perfectly still,
doesn't answer my unspoken question
about her pajama top, why she wears it
as a blouse today in school, fifth period
when I teach her class, or why her eye
is bruised shut, her glasses broken
in the same lens, her skin cut.

Or why her paper is tattooed with hearts
and arrows, broken in places under the ink,
for yesterday's lesson,
but today's is blank and she's slumped

when I bend over her to brush the page
with my palm and ask questions
the other kids hear, about sounds and smells,
the texture of wind on gravel, on hard ice.

But as I move on, she bends to write
what I'd rather not read
in my gym corner office behind the stage
and later I wave in the face of the principal.
I read her lines out loud and when I'm finished,
he says a sentence coupling nouns and verbs
in a way I've never heard before
and ends by saying, "No,
No, we've tried, we can't do anything."

That night I buy her a bus ticket
out of there, drive fifty miles to the Greyhound
station and click her seatbelt shut before the motor starts

and again, a plane ticket for where it's warm
and the close sun heals
and take her home to my daughter's room
I drive to her trailer house in the country and when
her uncles and father come to the door
her brothers behind them, I smile and say
I'm the visiting teacher and we've got a problem

and on Friday, as always, I'm out of there.

November Night Driving

You can't find the brights
so when the deer flush from the ditch
we catch only the fists of their tails
as they turn, swerve away
from the front end where I sit stunned
twenty feet from their hard haunches.

All day I have been following
snow geese so high in masses
against flat sky
only pattern can be
the eye's subject.
Tonight the thud and rush of deer
pulled onto pavement
by legs so thin they are poles
pushing boats
through dark waters.

Now I see them
particular, clear,
a near miss, buff and flesh.

Birthday

You made a small grey dish of clay,
glazed it something purplish
and filled it, years later,
with minute bones, perfectly intact
you delivered with your scalpel thumbnail
from an owl pellet: scapula, mandible,
four perfect teeth the size of seeds,
and pieces of a backbone ladder,
all pure matte white, “from a mouse,”
you said, pushing up your glasses.
We sat looking, forehead to forehead.
The air was steamy. The shaggy residue
went, swept to the floor by an elbow,
but the rest is here where I sit by the window
on my birthday, looking out, missing you
daughter, preserver, maker, eyes.
I stroke the bone dish and write this down.