

MARY JO THOMPSON

Thirteen Months

April

I did consider the Blue Book value
against airbags, the other trade-offs: no
sunroof, loose bumper, tilt-back lever jammed.
Got the title, fair speed in general—and just
one concession, a speed bump's tenderness.
I have to thank the shocks, and certain thrills
out on the open road: tail-fires blasting
out the carbon, the license to stop or cross
the tracks and shriek. Other top features:
full blasts of heat, salt-damaged chrome,
two roll-down windows, at least one headlight
to track the sun back home. Dings. I hated
this marriage, damaged slowly beyond repair,
though I thrilled at rides that blew back my hair.

May 7 (your birthday)

For eighteen years we drove to your parents
through smog from steel mills and rivers
converging, the swift Connoquenessing,
the Slippery Rock. But they'd bulldozed
the ovens down, girders and rust melted
away, a graveyard where you once smelted
stainless tubes, ablaze, dark eyes smoldering.
Across from Loccisano's Grocery,
that ash hopper for dumping chemicals,
slag, where you and your cousins lobbed footballs,
snowballs: grace and iron. You held onto those
plays, kept your aim to forge raw elements
into enduring forms, choreographed
a life's dream that the mill would send you on.

Memorial Day

A in *alone* is a sound known as schwa—
a slight *uh* we make with our tongue low and level,
a common hum. In old Hebrew schwa stood
for letters not noted. Schwa, written *e*,
but upside down—remember? You probably
learned it on a first grade chart. But that's not
important. It's how schwa is spoken: just pretend
that I'm listening for your admiration,
for an unstressed *us*. I'm all anticipation, wet lips
barely open, then out your mouth it runs:
uh, uh—affair—your schwa, so ancient and
correctly pronounced, far back in the throat.
Say it again: *affair, affair*—now more
smoothly. Watch the syllabification.

July

Black soil over an ancient privy pit
where I must dig out clay chips. They threaten
the delphinium. I wonder who once
flung garbage into what is now garden.
Whole nuts, nit combs, buttons and pins, fragments
of lamp float up now and again. And this,
another pentimento: blue cobalt
tattoo of nightingale, without saucer
companion, soaring still on a cup's cracked
skin. Repented belongings that turn up
like runes, talisman discovered, taken
for woe. The time was when I didn't think
it odd to find a perfume stopper or
entertain the question it was raising.

November 11

Instructions for a plague: Burn entrails.
Always check the pulse with gaze turned away.
Obtain ring finger knuckles. Gather shirt,
apron, handkerchief. Squeeze vinegar through
or taint stays. Turn mirrors for protection.
Poultice thigh to trunk. For disinfection,
forget not bud roses nor herbs with strong
perfume. From solstice to the equinox
scatter blood meal. All this doth wring a cure.
Or flee. Sing, laugh, indulge every new
appetite. Choose finest sweetmeats, drink dry
wine, but temperately. Collect whatnots,
dulcet hours for hunting, dance, and suchlike
pleasures. When the sick fall, show them the stones.

December

I take the children bowling, yes, in hopes
that at the alley a little disco
bumps my heart, and if they turn the black lights
on and each pin glows, I can somehow gauge
the angles right, find the velocity
that knocks ten pins down. Silhouettes, neon
lights, rows and rows of worn black balls on shelves,
the shuttlecocks, young foosballers and league
bowlers times twelve, all of us hefting weight
to fling and slide, then wait, genuflecting
on one knee, all the right body English
imploring a strike, that resounding sound.
Christmas is next week. I'll be alone. Our
kids, your new girlfriend, will be with you.

February

Our children believe you when you say you'll live.
I hear you're wasting—you've lost sixty pounds.
From that crest of hill above the train yard
they're gliding down on their plastic Christmas
sleds, not too far from where the 280 bridge
straightens highway, combs train tracks to the ground.
Maybe twenty detached coal cars tonight
wait to hook up, load up, full again.
The distant overhead billboard says,
#1 silent killer? Depression.
The kids bring up other things. Their mittened
fingers' burning cold. That they toe the hill,
don't fall down. In a film at school some Bronze Age
man dug from a bog, skin and bone.

April 1

Breath in blooms, I cover new flowerbeds
in blankets. They're forecasting cold like pox.
Now the garden too becomes a hospice
and we'll likely see a spring killer frost.
As for death, we just delay the petals.
Doctors steep you in treatment, your mother
says her beads. Do you care they've made a priest
your accountant? Does he keep his raven's
scorecard of your soul? Do you give a lot
of thought to contrition? Arithmetic?
You'll see now what's behind the sliding door.
I haven't kept good faith or religion.
For this—contrition. Try to pardon me.
What can I add but flowers for the bier?

April 15

Aida, sharp and sweet as blood oranges
that young spring in Verona when you
led me to market, palmed a few lira
for stained labels: the village wine. Nearby
in a meat stall the butcher's knife opened
a stunned hare. He peeled off the skin, seized
the cardinal organs, the scarlet liver slid.
A clot with its syrup clinging, it filled
a small bowl. Today doctors call. We hurry.
You hold up a plastic bag, say: *Contents
of my stomach. Are you impressed?* Then our
daughter runs shrieking from your room. More bags
hang ungenerously from metal hooks,
silently ensure the coming encores.

Late April

You said *yes*. A secret was the twisted
part of you, and shame, in the end a debt
your body had been mortgaged to. The cost
of losing face—an organ turned to pus?
A slowly slaughtered faith, trust wormed through.
What couldn't wait, or last. You said *young*, and
young, you'd seen the lake. Why had you never
guessed that it kept from you its source, its depth,
how it looked at you and loved? Weeping
made the water cloud, lust the hidden ledge.
Reflected, the light from your abdomen,
the margins—of you, of us—changed just at
the end, your own face floating up, hopeful
lines, tubes, serum. *No*, your mouth and eyes said.

End of April

We were all leaving our bodies—but no one helped us, no one said, *Breathe into the spaces you can't feel*. We were all losing our bearings. We'd seen you, Vesuvian, you who grasped any hand to crush it inside yours, voice rasping out: *See how strong I am!* and your will greater than chemo. Do you agree it was your plan all along, your brand of curative violence—mind's NO versus body's letting go? How funny, dying, you didn't remember this: on a mountain, years ago, you'd encountered a vision. You would die young. You never got sick of your body. It kept you as long as it could.

Early May

Vermivora peregrina, pilgrim
warbler, old devotee of maggot grub
and upturned stump, mossy hummock lover,
ace catcher—who yes, slyly, took to branch,
snatched an insect then glanced around—*seet*,
seet, *seet*—and flew. Little molter, just
back from Panama this glazed May to make
your northern nest, ever the mover, straggler
from scrub, thicket breeder, builder of dome
from the hair of moose, fine moss, quill and here
in the city where larvae crawl trash cans,
dead. Near glass, one olive-gray handful.
Nothing sullied except your black eyes drying,
worm-eating pilgrim I rescue from worms.

May 7

What choice was there but to layer pancake
makeup deep, his undertaker cousin
says. Chemo mixed with embalming fluid
could work like that. My husband, eighteen
years, my children's father, laid out wearing
three of his father's shirts at once, and still
looking small in his casket. We all sob.
Up close we see through thin hair to green scalp.
I touch his chest, once barrel-shaped. Beneath
my hand the rib he broke the first time I
saw him on stage, a night *Newsweek* reviewed,
singling out his Drosselmeyer, to his delight:
“ . . . an unusual reading of the role—
like Clark Gable crossed with Dracula.”