

## Lorri Neilsen Glenn

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### Learning the Words

#### 1. Blood

Something happens late July when the cool wind  
gushes through the screen, reminds you the season  
has peaked, dandelion and thistle have scattered  
their future in white puffs, and the sun has dragged you  
along the days until evening---earlier now, simmered  
and drawn, sweet butter. Reminds with each berry  
and grasshopper what happens to love and regret, and what  
grace can grow in the blue plum of summers that reappear  
each year. Deeper, and you didn't have to ask. Each  
a cell inside a cell inside--as your mother's hand,  
reaching from your body to cradle tomatoes  
is inside your grandmother's, searching in the clover  
in Selkirk for a four-leaf, and her mother's,  
gathering saskatoons near Norway House, touches  
a berry as though it were desire, drawing blood  
from the soil, drawing still.

#### 2. You write about your mother

because she tells you the Chautauqua came to Shoal Lake the year  
she was nine, and brown-haired Lillian and white-blond Grace sat overlooking  
the stage in the meeting house built by Carson, her grandfather,  
and the organizers of the program plucked the two from the oak balcony

to model clothes-- imagine! the Thirties, and the abundance, the burst of the moment when the stylish woman from the city turned to her:

“Dear,” she said, “you need to wear rose and blue.”

And because the year following, after her father died and Grace was sent to the McDonald’s

while her mother went to the city to train to be a nurse, Aunt Bell found curtains, old clothing sent from Boston, anything to fashion

something rose, something blue for the white-blond girl from an oak bluff on the Western plains.

### 3. Separation by Degrees

*What? You got boulders in these?* No, just books *come in* your father says *this calls for a scotch the first one in the family* and your mother scowls *you’re so thin, I’ll put on the potatoes.* You wait, poised on the edge of a worn brown plaid chair, looking into the cold ripples of the familiar. *So, he says, piled higher and deeper, right?* and places a cork coaster with an Irish castle under the wet circle of glass that draws your eyes inward and you open your mouth to ask about your little brother the dry spring the heat the tomatoes the dog the latest on the long reach of the neighbour’s tree over the backyard fence how the old Chrysler is hanging on but you hear a sharp exhale and a snort look up over the ice cubes to see the one who bore you leaning heavily on the door frame wiping her hands slowly on a tea towel. Chin pointed: *well, missy, I suppose this means we can’t talk to you now?*

### 4. St. Boniface

Walked out, the four of you, coats unbuttoned at thirty-five below, stepped around smokers who stood outside the atrium by the revolving doors – shots of warmth along with their nicotine—past holiday trees triumphantly lit on the boulevard, past taxis,

emergency vehicles, a native couple shielding a child and clutching a suitcase, everyone with a hundred yard stare, and with your shoes scuffing over ice and salt, you crossed over near the park to search for the car you brought –was it

only that morning? Somewhere around here. Snow had blown across the diagonal path so you made your own, heads down,

tracking each other's feet ahead. Nothing now but that  
small focus. Behind you, the cross on the hospital roof

was a beacon—against cold, despair; or just for salvation perhaps—  
and it cast light on your backs as you each, unaware, fell into step in birth  
order across the field. One held a bag with a nightdress. You walked  
slowly in the dark, like shepherds in drifts, away from miracles.

### 5. Hemlock Ravine: Spring

Walk the path where old  
trees slapped down by high winds

are now lying in grey huddles  
praying with their brittle hands,

broken arms. Inert, their memories  
of earth cracked apart in the fall,

their reaches, once psalms against  
rain, are sawn in angles, left

to dry. Climb over a trunk to pursue  
something green, your legs like a spider's

crawl slowly, spiny-limber with  
life. Oh, it was  
so sudden. You had much more

to say to one another; you were  
just learning the words.