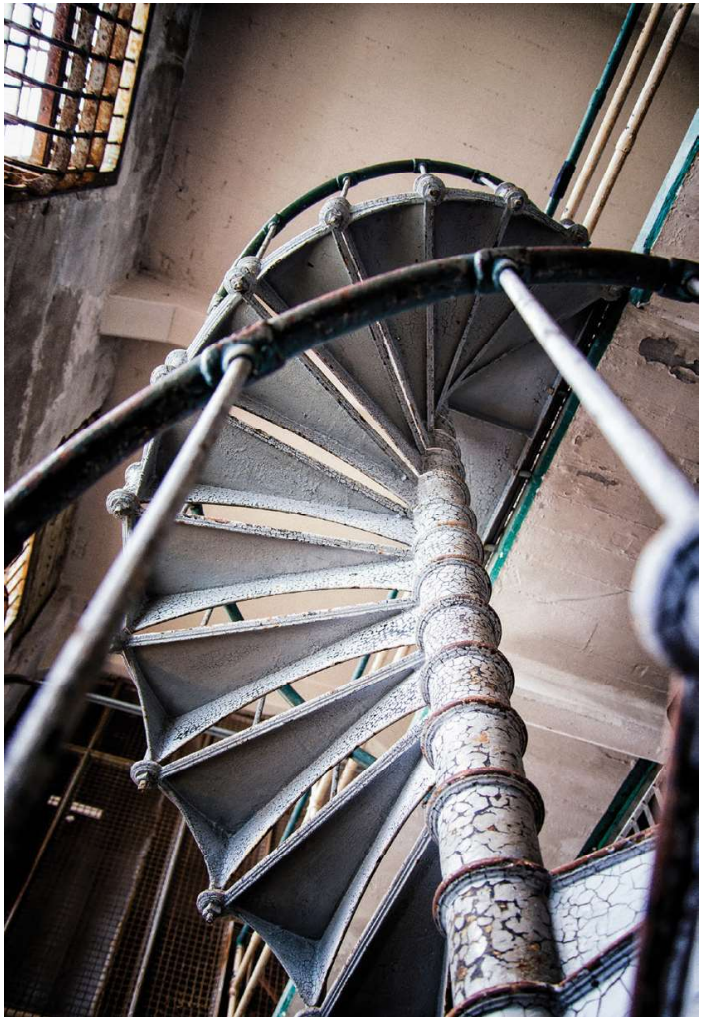
ANITA SAGASTEGUI

Staircase Between Cell Blocks, Alcatraz, 2015
Archival photographic print, 24 x 16 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SUSAN BROWNE

The Yard Sale

Creating poetry from suffering

In 1996, I took Kim Addonizio's poetry workshop. She was encouraging but also unrelenting about clichés and the sorry lack of imagery and metaphor. When she said, "Not the most compelling language use," ow, it hurt. But she was right. Her comments showed me how to become an artist and not just someone who was writing about emotions. Feelings and passion were important, but they didn't make a poem poetry. Through Kim's teaching, I was learning more about voice, having something at stake, tension, surprise, the strange and the familiar, syntax, sound, the music of the line.

Kim and I both admired the poetry of Jack Gilbert. I had recently taken a three-day seminar with him. For inspiration, I reread the notes from that seminar in the journal I always kept on my desk:

Poetry is a living object.

Poetry occurs between one word and the next. The energy comes from what words you put by each other. They have overtones and create an energy field, things chiming as you go.

Get stark, primal energy into the poem.

In revising your poem, make it twice as long; you have to get into territory you don't know.

Steal the engine, not the hubcaps. Notice the strategies of poems.

Good poetry is truly caused by something.

Be available to seeing, not just willing to see. You don't look at sugar; you wait to see sugar.

Take the normal and introduce something strange. But if everything is crazy, nothing is crazy.

Giving shape to suffering is healing.

Tell me something about love that matters.

Kim and Jack, in their teachings, also introduced me to

duende. As defined by the poet Federico García Lorca, duende is irrationality, earthiness, a heightened awareness of death. The duende is a demonic earth spirit who helps the artist remember that "a great arsenic lobster could fall suddenly on his head." I'd known such lobsters, falling like rain. It had taken me seven years to start writing about those days of duende. I sat at my desk, remembering:

* * *

On the morning of the yard sale, my father asks me to kill him. He sits in a chair in the family room, the one my mother always sat in, dressed in white boxer shorts and black socks. He's all bones, having lost twenty pounds from a diet of raw hot dogs, canned spaghetti, and vodka.

"I can't kill you, Dad. You're in charge of the price tags," I joke—my way of dealing with life, which I inherited from my father—but despair jolts through me like nonstop electric shocks. It's been two months since my mother died, and I'm at my parents' house in Roseville, California, helping my older sister, Cheryl, clean out the place, selling off pieces of our mother's life for a few bucks. Our father will sell the house, and, we suspect, go live with his girlfriend he doesn't know we know about in Castro Valley.

"Please get him dressed," Cheryl says. She's stacking plates and bowls on the already-crowded counter. I feel guilty because I should have gotten here earlier. I told Cheryl there was traffic getting out of the Bay Area, but actually it was clear sailing from Berkeley to Roseville. I almost made up an excuse so I wouldn't have to be here today, but Cheryl, who lives a few miles away from our parents, has been working for a week on this dismal project, going through every closet, cabinet, and cupboard, separating what to sell and what to keep. Our younger sister, Kerry, can't help. She's in college and on weekends works at the tennis club stringing rackets. And she's been through enough. She survived the car accident that killed our mother.

"Get dressed, Dad," I say. "We're having a yard sale. Remember? It was your idea." My father's gray hair is going every which way.

"How you doing, babe?" His blue eyes are shattered, cracked through with red lines, his face striped from tears.

"Not so good."

My father's glass on the table next to him is cloudy, finger smudged. I think of all his glasses filled with vodka on the table for all the years. Nothing has changed, except now my parents' forty-two-year marriage is finally over. God, how I've wished for it to end. I never thought it would take my mother's death to get my wish.

I look away from my father, out the sliding glass door, and see Max, my parents' golden retriever, who is chasing his tail around and around like a doggy dervish in the patio. I'm thirty-six, and my life is a mirror of Max. I fall in and out of love with men, divorce them as fast as I marry them. I leave, move, and stay in exactly the same place.

Max makes me dizzy, but looking at my father makes me want to get drunk or die.

I shift my gaze to my mother's rosebushes, heavy with blossoms. A pair of blue gardening gloves lies on the redwood table among a row of terra-cotta pots. Cheryl said she's taking the gloves and pots. Makes sense. My basement apartment in Berkeley doesn't have a garden.

On the back lawn, my father's tools from the shed are laid out like metal corpses, ready for the yard sale. His girlfriend in Castro Valley must have her own tools.

"Susie! We're running out of time." Cheryl walks into the family room and turns off the TV. I watch John Wayne's head, topped with a Stetson hat, dissolve into blankness. Cheryl and I stand in front of our father.

"Dad, please get up," she says.

"I was born rotten." Our father finishes off his drink in one gulp.

"Nobody is born rotten," Cheryl says. "You did this to yourself."

I walk away, into the living room. Cheryl joins me, sighing in frustration.

"It smells in here," I say.

"Max pooped behind the couch. Dad didn't let him out last night. I had to clean it up this morning when I got here, but the rug needs more cleaning."

"I'll do it."

"Thanks." We go into the dining room. "And please help me with the rest of the tags. What should we sell this table for?"

Our mother loved that table. Cherrywood. Every holiday, we gathered around to eat, play cards, be a family. She wouldn't want us to sell it.

"Two hundred?" I have no clue what a table costs. I live like a bedouin, migrating from rented studio to rented studio. I have a bed from Macy's, a love seat big enough for one and a half people, a bookcase full of poetry. Cheryl has a husband, three kids, a Mercedes, a dog, a cat, a bunny, and a hamster. I envy her life and am terrified by it. There's so much family in it.

I extend my hand to my father, but he bats it away and stands on his own, wobbling a little. He shuffles over to the fireplace and squats like a sumo wrestler, flexing his deflated muscles. He used to be in good shape, lifting weights every night in the garage, playing tennis every weekend. I've seen this pose hundreds of times before, the sumo guy, and it made me laugh when I was a kid. Today, it's tragically charmless.

After a series of rapid knocks on the kitchen door, a woman barges in. "Excuse me, isn't this the yard sale? I read about it in the pap—"

"Hellllooo, little lady," my father calls out, mimicking John Wayne. The woman takes one look and rushes back out the door.

Cheryl walks into the room and puts her hands on her hips. "Who was that?"

"An early yard saler. She got a load of Dad and left."

"Kill me now," our father says, un-sumoing himself. He looks like he's about to fall face-first onto the carpet.

"Fine," Cheryl says. She walks into the kitchen and comes back with the electric carving knife used on the holiday turkeys. "Here." She holds out the knife to our father. "Get into the tub, run some water, and plug this thing in. I don't want any more cleanup."

For a second, I think he'll take the knife. Then he walks away, weaving, into the dining room and down the hall.

"Good job," I say to Cheryl.

She shrugs. "We need to figure out prices. Or you can try getting Max's poop out of the rug. Use a Brillo pad."

"I love the choices in this family. It might take more than a Brillo pad."

We get to work. About a half an hour later, Dad reappears. Cheryl and I are pulling the living room furniture to be sold into the center of the room. Our father has put on a gray sweatshirt and black sweatpants. The outfit looks like it hasn't been washed since our mother died.

"Howmushareashkingfaevrythin," he asks. His words bump into each other, linguistic car wrecks.

"Don't worry," I say. "We'll keep the accounts in order."

"Sitsmymoney." Our father looks at Cheryl and me as if he barely recognizes us. He is the loneliest man I have ever seen, and drinking only makes him more lonely. I've made it my life's work to learn how to be alone. I'm good at it. Sometimes I think I'm addicted to it.

My father navigates into the kitchen, makes a drink, and wanders back down the hall, thumping against the wall. I hear the television from his bedroom, John Wayne's muffled twang.

"I hope he takes a Valium," Cheryl says, "so he falls asleep and doesn't come out here all day."

"Too bad we can't sell Dad at the yard sale."

Cheryl snorts. "How much do you think we could get for him?"

"We'd probably have to pay."

"Hey, we have to keep focused."

"Why don't I go get us some coffee and scones?" I've only been here for a couple of hours, but I already need a break. Maybe I can meet a man in Starbucks and marry and divorce him in the time it takes to conduct the yard sale and sweep out the ashes of my parents' marriage.

"Not now," Cheryl says. "It's almost nine. I brought a chicken casserole over a few days ago. I don't think Dad ate any of it, so if you're hungry, it's in the fridge."

In the kitchen, I open the refrigerator and see the casserole, a package of hot dogs, an empty can of spaghetti, and, on the lower shelf, a carton of my mother's cigarettes. I stare at the carton like my mother is attached to it. I throw the spaghetti can in the trash. Lifting out the casserole, I see a small box in the back corner. It looks like a ring box. When I open it, a diamond ring blazes up at me, princess cut, definitely more than one carat.

Why would my mother put a diamond ring in the refrigerator? Did she buy it for herself? I can't imagine my father buying it for her.

"Have you seen this?" I show the ring to Cheryl. She's sitting at the dining room table cluttered with yard sale items, gazing into space.

She takes the ring from me. "Where'd you get it?"

"In the fridge, behind the spaghetti can."

"Jesus."

"What?"

Cheryl's eyes close. "Renee."

It takes me a minute to compute.

Renee is our father's girlfriend, the one he doesn't know we know about. He dated her in high school. She called him the day of our mother's funeral to offer her condolences.

"I guess he's asking Renee to marry him," Cheryl says, setting the ring down on the table. She puts her hands over her face.

I rub her back. "Dad's a fucking asshole."

"Don't say that, Sue. Just . . . don't."

She's right. It's our father's business if he wants to give Renee a diamond ring three months after our mother's death. And besides, I don't see how he can live on his own. Maybe he'll marry Renee and all will be well.

Like hell.

The doorbell rings.

"We've got customers," Cheryl says, but we don't move. I look at our mother's mosaic of fruit leaning against the pile of furniture. I wish I could take it home with me, but my place is too small. The mosaic is huge. It hung on the wall in the family room in the house in Alamo, but my mother never put it up in this house. She carefully placed each piece of the mosaic, creating a bounty of bananas, peaches, plums, watermelon, grapes. A fantasy that her life was like something sweet, nutritious. The thought of some stranger taking it away makes my throat hurt. But it's all gone anyway. My mother gone, disappeared in a wreck on the freeway, trying to escape the wreck of her marriage.

"Fuck," I say. "Let's get this over with."

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I walk into the foyer, open the front door. Five smiling people, expectant, eager.

"Welcome to the yard sale."

ANITA SAGASTEGUI

Through Broken Glass, Alcatraz, 2015
Archival photographic print, 24 x 16 in

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