

Craft Talk – October 14, 2020
Work that will be quoted or read

The Prison Dictionary (if people want to get a copy of this I can put them in touch with one of the organizers of the prison education program that produced this)

Robert Frost, "Fire and Ice" <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44263/fire-and-ice>

Marianne Moore, "The Paper Nautilus": <https://poets.org/poem/paper-nautilus>

William Carlos Williams, "The Crowd at the Ball

Game" <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45498/the-crowd-at-the-ball-game>

Joy Katz's "In My Mother's 1935 American College Dictionary," from *All You Do is Perceive* (Four Way, 2013)

Ai's "Family Portrait, 1960" from *Greed* (Norton, 1984)

Ross Gay, "A Small Needful Fact" <https://poets.org/poem/small-needful-fact>

Joy Katz

"In My Mother's 1935 American College Dictionary,"

In my mother's 1935 American College Dictionary, between "holocaine" and "Holocene," I come upon "holocaust." It sounds cross and bored, a child about to tantrum. "Pestilence. Locusts," I read. The holocaust sits there humming like a bee-box. "From the Greek *holokauston*," I read, "burnt offering." Mad glare. "Wholesale destruction." Little holocaust kicks the kitchen chair.

I decide to take the holocaust around the town where I live. See, that's light, I explain. There are plants growing. Whole yards, people, a calm world. From inside my jacket that swarming sound. I walk the holocaust carefully back to the car. I take it to see an action movie, thinking crashes and bombs will seem like family. It goes into the bathroom and sets the towels on fire. Should I bring the holocaust home to show my mother? I do. She stops chopping onions for a minute. Don't let that thing get too close to the curtains, she says. On the street the holocaust tramples the flowers, eyes some old trees hungrily. It is a terrible nuisance. I hold it and let it beat its arms against me.

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Ai

Family Portrait, 1960

"Sutton," my wife says,
"the girls won't wash between their legs."
What am I supposed to do about it? I think,
having just come in
from buying round steak
that I will try to tenderize with a mallet,
then salt and pepper, dredge in flour
and fry
and serve with green peas, biscuits, gravy.
But Stella (Peggy to her friends),
yells from her bed,
"Girls, go in the bathroom

and take off your clothes.”
She leans back on her pillow,
a box of Melba toast,
cradled in one arm
like a cardboard teddybear,
a barrier against the poverty and disappointment
which have put her there. Colitis, doctor says.
And where is this?—
one of those apartments
with a courtyard in Los Angeles,
where waitressing in café once
she served the guy from TV,
Route 66, that is, coffee,
but now I bring her coffee, bring her cigarettes
and pretend to sympathize,
but now my daughters stand before me,
wearing only shower caps:
Roslynn, seven years,
thin and unpredictable,
and Florence, eleven,
also thin and obedient to a fault.
I hand them washcloths, soap,
and shoo them in the shower.
They stand in the water
and wait for my commands.
“Go on,” I say, “you know how to start.”
Necks and shoulders, chests, backs and bellies.
Down they go and in between the smooth,
hairless entrances into themselves.
“You call that washing?” I say,
and lean forward on my toes,
bend my knees and spread them.
“See,” I say
and use my hand between my own legs,
“like this, get in there,
scrub your little pussies.”

After dinner,
Florence washes dishes, Roslynn dries.
Stella watches television,
while I doze
and chaos kept at bay,
lies down to sleep with us
until daylight.