PROVOST’S PRIZE WINNER
REMAINS OF THE FAMILY
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POETRY

It’s easy to reconstruct my mother’s
guilt-tipped grief as she failed to
conceive.
I can create an imitation scene of sorrow,
complete with her tears, absorbed and
stored throughout my childhood to furnish
these borrowed memories.
I feel her straining to give life to me, a child
who refused to enter the world through her
womb.
Unable to satisfy the aching of a uterus
contracting around its emptiness, she
patches me into her flesh.
Before I formed you in the womb I knew
you, before you were born I set you apart,
she recites.
God made you for me.
She intones this in a low voice on first days
of school, on the anniversary of the day
they brought me home and after letdowns
and sad stories.
There is a painful parallel between my two
mothers that I cannot un-see.
One sabotaged her maternal mold when
she made a husband of infertility. The
other ruined before innocence could ripen
with maturity.
Before I formed you in the womb I knew You.
I’ve heard resignation’s refrain: The Lord, he
works in the most mysterious of ways.
Did God orchestrate teenage sex, forceful and
confused in the silence of a late December
night, or fabricate the child molestation charge
that clawed me from one mother’s arms and
fed me to another’s wanting embrace?
Maybe it’s best to say He makes what He can
of our mistakes.
There remains a broken path I cannot follow.
Strange names my denaturalized ears cannot
swallow. Osaffer and Toffic, barely discernible
in my fifteen-year-old mother’s curled and
dyslexic print.
One of them raped her, though she doesn’t
know to call it that. One of them she thought
she loved. One is my father. Both left before
she knew of me. It is a broken path.
I cannot follow.
I never thought I would get pregnant. I was
only fourteen years old. Though her penciled
cursive betrays naiveté, I understand exactly
what she means.
A world lies between me and my would-be
parents. Whether my Pakistani father returned
to a melting land of smeared kohl, musky
scent and music that saunters through the soul,
or lived inside the twenty some miles that have
separated my one time mother and myself, I
feel they exist in separate planes, though I’ve
rubbed shoulders with their shadows.
A sixth-grade classmate’s mother cried when
she recognized me from photos her best friend
treasured of the daughter she surrendered.
The next day the girl tried to lure me to the car.
Come meet your sister, she begged. The new
baby followed two half-brothers I had seen in
photos sent in care of CSD.
At my refusal came the truth: There’s someone
who wants to meet you... it’s your mom. I
hated her for thrusting lies on me with three
words I knew were wrong. I hid in the dark
cement hall between locker room and gym
while they searched for me. Through a back
door and pouring rain, a payphone brought
Mom, frantic, to rescue me.
Now I see vague outlines everywhere. An older
woman with marbled hair smiles as I pass.
Was it she who found her foster daughter was
pregnant with me?

Is the haggard face pumping gas the one
labeled “uncle” in the scrapbook child services
sent?
These fringe people form the blurred edges of
a puzzle I don’t want to complete.
I can count on one hand the people I like to
hug. What could I feel toward this woman who
thinks she knows the twisted lines my soul
follows through my body (and might be right)
though to me she is as foreign as another sex,
culture or race? The strangest stranger I could
meet, how would I cringe to recognize myself
in her face?
I’ve never known the longing pain of adopted
children who grieve the mothers they could
not keep.
I have been grafted onto another familial tree.
Though my branches clutch cones while theirs
bear fruit, there is no sorrow in my harvest.
Something of that early separation has made
me a family unto myself.