

## Bearing Witness

Five-year-old Derick has fallen asleep  
under the church pew, thumb in his mouth,  
eyes red from the disappointment  
of a paper airplane that won't fly.

Down front, his parents, aunts,  
uncles, grandma, and cousins,  
crowd in prayer--a stutter of tongues,  
dance, tears--raising their hands  
in a chorus of spastic acceptance,  
in a letting go of what holds them  
down, weightlessness somehow tied  
to acceptance, forgiveness.

They call it a "leap of faith," an ecstatic  
float above logic, "A covenant  
of levitation" I call it to myself  
as I sit at the back and, like Derick,  
feel the sting of grounding.

One of the teenagers is trying  
to get the Holy Ghost, the circle  
around her coaxing. I squirm,  
readjust, the wood underneath  
the padding an evangelism  
of the solid. I settle into it.

My Aunt Helen stretched her hand  
across the television screen  
one Sunday afternoon in 1965,  
"I'll do that for Mama" her answer  
to Oral Roberts' call to prayer  
and healing, sudden hope  
folded around despair.

I stood in a living room quieted  
by the grief of Grandma's  
empty couch and felt a new envy  
of the adult who could forget  
the earth, the underneath,  
the in-between.

Flood waters came up to their front door  
that year, mounting slowly like the dread  
of old age. Even the uphill back yard  
where I went to breathe stood sloppy,  
hopscoched with pools and mud-slick grass.

I imagined I could see a path, lines  
connecting drier humps of grass, lines  
horizontal, vertical, diagonal--at once  
static, upright and falling, a gameboard  
that gave me comfort, not in the metaphor  
but in the idea of clean movement up  
the narrow rectangle of the yard.

I looked down at my white socks  
and penny loafers, imagined them  
blurs of determination.  
I would use the gravity of Sundays,  
jerk each foot before it had time  
to lift up dark clots of mud and stamp  
out a testimony of loss, my only object  
to make it to the fence clean.