

Elizabeth Alexander

COLD WAR

1 Third Birthday (July 23, 1959)

strange little girl

black hair, brown eyes

bright-yellow party dress, white pinafore

looks like a bee

says *candles hurt the children*

covers ears

won't sing

she'll spoil my party

if I let her.

2 Kindergarten

you again

I know, *olivia*

yes, I am *tim*

leave me alone.

2.5

that tim thinks he's so cool

who died and made him God?

3 Invitation

mommy sits me down

“you’re going”

“no”

“I said *you’re going*”

“why?”

“why not?”

“I hate her”

“don’t be silly

“her daddy is my doctor”

“so?”

“so *you are going.*”

3.5

who says I wanted to invite him?

4 She Grows on Me

her blue stuffed lion that smells like spit

her nutty games

switch barbie’s head and g.i. joe’s

trade underpants

that she does yo–yo tricks, is scared of angelfish, reads comic books

that she can’t swim as fast as me.

4.5

so glad I’m not a boy

5 Gumball Machine

I get the alien

 olivia gets the ring

we trade, dad frowns

 makes us trade back.

5.5

I try on junior bras

and cliques

that's normal (right?) when you are 12

feel like a dork

and don't know who'll be gunning for you next.

6 Sixth Grade

she cusses like a boy

 throws like a girl

explains how It is done

 says she has done It.

7 Her Dad Is a Physician

“so?”

“he’ll set olivia straight”

“meanwhile she’s doing It”

“tim, don’t be silly”

does mom not know I know

(or kind of know)

olivia is lying?

sometimes I think that they both think

I’m dumb.

7.5

not dumb

not brave, not curious—

not trustworthy, either.

8 Bible Camp

they ship olivia off

and she returns like sunday school on steroids

all “jesus this” and “jesus that”

and “of the devil” (most things are)

“for god’s sakes, we’re episcopal!

I can’t ask christ into my heart”

“then when you die, you’re gonna fry”

I liked her better when she smoked and cussed.

9 Cold War

she snubs me on the bus

walks past the place I save at lunch

“what’s wrong?” I ask

“you started it”

“I never—”

“—no, you never *said*

‘olivia harkness is a social liability’”

liability?

I have to look that up.

9.5

the summer we dissected nutty buddies

(sucked out the ice cream, split the chocolate, tossed the nuts and cone)

those were the days.

10 Ninth Grade

her frizzy braids and pudgy legs

the way she slumps to hide her breasts

that she won't smile, except at me

that everybody knows we're friends

I am embarrassed by her.

11 Cotillion

our parents make a weekend of it:

fancy hotel, adjoining suites

color tv, remote control

olivia's puffy dress

my itchy tux

why the long faces?

smile for the camera!

adults are idiots

.

we would have killed for this four years ago

I loved her then.

12 High School

crossing paths

in the moth-brown halls

we nod like english lords

imperious and implacable.

13 Code Blue (December 24, 1975)

dr. harkness's heart

mrs. harkness keens

in mother's arms.

13.5

the shortest night, a child is born

noël, Noël

14 Olivia Embraces Me

but not like that

14.5

we go way back

he can be kind

just now I've learned you never know:

we may not meet again.