

## **Practicing By Marie Howe (1998)**

I want to write a love poem for the girls I kissed in seventh grade,  
a song for what we did on the floor in the basement

of somebody's parents' house, a hymn for what we didn't say but thought:  
That feels good or I like that, when we learned how to open each other's mouths

how to move our tongues to make somebody moan. We called it practicing, and  
one was the boy, and we paired off—maybe six or eight girls—and turned out

the lights and kissed and kissed until we were stoned on kisses, and lifted our  
nightgowns or let the straps drop, and, Now you be the boy:

concrete floor, sleeping bag or couch, playroom, game room, train room, laundry.  
Linda's basement was like a boat with booths and portholes

instead of windows. Gloria's father had a bar downstairs with stools that spun,  
plush carpeting. We kissed each other's throats.

We sucked each other's breasts, and we left marks, and never spoke of it upstairs  
outdoors, in daylight, not once. We did it, and it was

practicing, and slept, sprawled so our legs still locked or crossed, a hand still lost  
in someone's hair . . . and we grew up and hardly mentioned who

the first kiss really was—a girl like us, still sticky with moisturizer we'd  
shared in the bathroom. I want to write a song

for that thick silence in the dark, and the first pure thrill of unreluctant desire,  
just before we'd made ourselves stop.