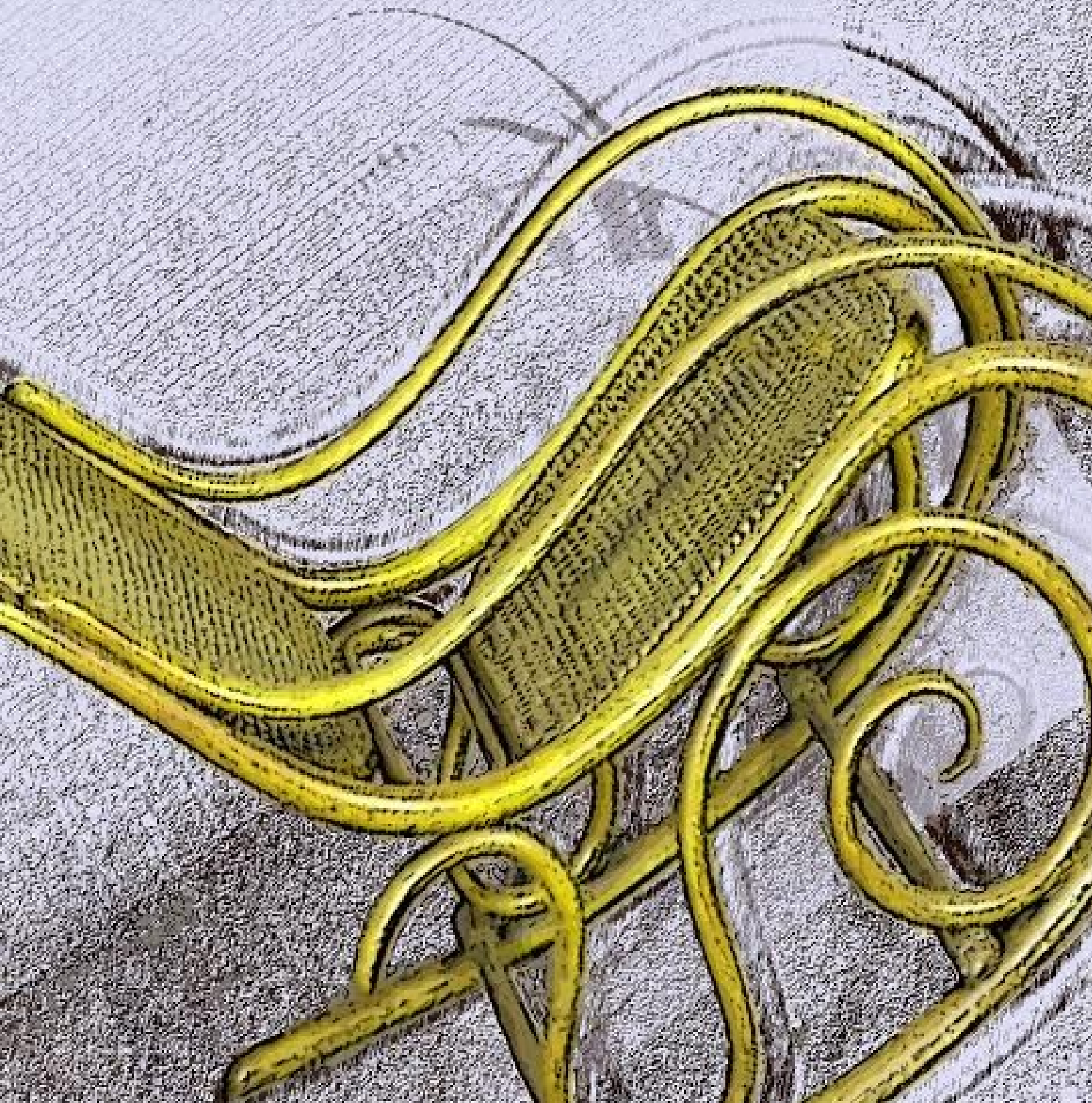


2016 Issue 6

YELLOW CHAIR REVIEW



Yellow Chair Review

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

Happy 2016! It's already shaping up to be a huge year for YCR. We've published our first chapbook and first winner of our annual chapbook contest! Matthew Borczon's *A Clock of Human Bones* is now available from Yellow Chair Press. We've also published the 2015 YCR anthology. You can purchase either of those books on our website under the available titles tab.

Aside from those, we have four new titles coming within the next few months: The In The Words of Womyn 2016 Anthology, Caseyrenee Lopez's QueerSexWords, Joe Nicholas' Wake Dreams and Jenuine Poetess' BloodStories.

Review copies are available for ALL titles.

Those are just the projects that the Press has in store. The Review is also going through some evolutions and upgrades. The most obvious is that we've gone to quarterly issues for 2016. Issue 6 is by far the largest non-themed issue we've had yet. The list of talent in these pages is remarkable.

Rock the Chair is going strong and so strong in fact that we've decided we will begin awarding the winner \$5 if their poem is chosen to be the most rockin' for that week. In an effort to put monetary value to our contributor's work we're starting here. The hope is that in the future we'll be able to pay ALL contributors.

We hope you dive into Issue 6 and enjoy. We also hope you stick around for the continued growth of YCR and its contributors.

We thank you for all of your support!

Sarah Frances Moran
Editor-In-Chief

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The Wreckage

Two sisters and an unborn child
died when a red Camaro
clocked at 150 mph
hit them like a bomb
and now the driver
wants to appeal.
The mother/future grandmother
was the only survival. What a gut-
wrenching “coming to”
in the emergency room,
the discovery of one’s daughters
being gone. I imagine
an empty womb
flailing, heart
monitor speeding up
nurses rushing in
while distraught husband/father
breaks the news to the one
who wishes she’d died
instead. The convulsing womb
buried in a tomb
of murdered fetuses, scars
an open wound oozing puss
abscessed in the recess
of one’s throat
trying to demand
justice. I imagine exhaustive
guttural chokes
infectious thoughts
silenced by
one’s desire for a do-over—
if-only violently kicking
one’s wrecked stomach
vengeance exhumed
from womb
like dynamite,
payback
aimed for the careless
heart of the one
who claims insanity.

Becca

i met you one morning at the hotel cereal bar. i touched
your hand quickly on the fruit loops and your eyes got very big
so we sat down at a yellow booth and talked about the hotel's pink carpet
and i liked talking to you so much that we went up and sat in room 323,
i had a fruit cup in my hand but i couldn't find a spoon so
i ate the peaches with my fingers and
you sat on my side of the couch, and you laughed at me because i had light fruit syrup
on my hands but i laughed at me because i knew this was the moment i knew i was lesbian,

and i kind of just ignored myself for the next few years but we texted every night at 12am,
you told me about the boys you liked and how your dad hates you
and i listened, i never got tired of you
and you wondered why i didn't and i didn't tell you it was because
i liked the way you text in all caps and use numbered sad faces instead of emojis
when you're extra sad, but when we met for mcdonald's coffee
your eyes got even bigger and so much more green. i
couldn't even look at them without turning inside out,

and a little later i finally told one person i was gay but
i made a mistake, i told the wrong person
and i guess you don't miss me anymore or something
but i liked texting you at 12am when we had wide big eyes
and giggled at silly typos like stupid teenagers;
but you found out i like girls and i like you too, you're catholic
and i know you don't miss me
but i still almost text you
sometimes.

Sounds

my wife
says her
favorite
sound is
the squeak
of sneakers
on a
basketball
court

my son
says its
the click
and hum
of turning
on his
guitar amplifier

my daughter
loves the
sound of
babies laughing
or sleeping
equally

when asked
I always
say I
like the
sound of
nothing

its easier
than trying
to explain
that after
almost 5
years I
still hear
the sound
of screaming
soldiers and

detainees

the hum
of suction
pumps and
wound vacs

the rumble
of helicopters
and artillery
near and
far away

the screams
of children
crying in
pain at
the loss
of their
families

I hear
this
on city
street in
empty rooms
everywhere
every day
awake and
in my
dreams

so I
long for
the absolute
quiet that
so far
I can
only find
at the
bottom of
my whiskey
bottle or
at the
maximum
dose of
my medication

it
is so
elusive as
to be
imaginary

not half
as real
as these
sounds of
a war
I am
still fighting
inside my
self
day after
day.

Being Handsome at Home

Our old shoes
Dripping off an edge

Of counter somewhere
&/or gunpowder of the eyes

Breaking darkness open
& so we go on digging into

Space these wonders engorge
& swear our love for

The old ways of seeing
But fall silent before them

It is always the same big sky
Erupting into pigeons

Into the brittle happiness of
The Earth moving its body

Out into the stupid cold
Daylight falling

& I think what I mean is
We are falling in love

With the ambiguous
Amber caution light

Its one jealous eye hanging
From a cable where just

Moments ago
A lightning bolt hit

Fate is a Duck

After years of casting rhyme at journals of much renown, I moved on. Things were not progressing, and I began doubting my writing abilities. So I began exploring the other, less acknowledged strains of verse. During that quest, I found ekphrastic poetry.

My world expanded, as I felt I finally found my niche. The act of drafting verse from an established art piece was enlightening -exciting. I no longer had to delve into my emotional recesses to imagine a scene. It was presented for my interpretation; longing preemptively for my voice.

After perusing masterpieces, and finding them well picked over. I decided on photography. But even then, the image carried overtones of the camera's user... voices I constantly struggled to outshine with my enlightened lyricism. I searched for the perfect scene, but always came up wanting.

Perhaps I needed to witness an inspirational scene firsthand. I travelled the world, saw limitless wonders of nature and man. Fountains of marble, and glaciers of indigo; pillars of granite, to trees of regal majesty. After weeks of bicycling through the foothills of Switzerland, I abandoned my quest. I returned home in shame.

As I drove from the airport, I watched a flock of ducks flying in formation. One was struggling and glided into a wooded grove. I skidded into the median and jumped out to pursue her. I trudged through marsh and thorny brambles, but found the pond to which she descended.

And I found my muse in that pastoral peace.

A female duck on the water. She was beautiful; she was perfect. I pulled out my notebook and began sketching notes. I described her every attribute. Her vivid and elegant nature. I captured the image with my phone's camera. She was mine.

That evening, over a brandy, I cast her into the perfect piece.

I remember my exuberance in mailing my submission. For the first time in many years, I was confident in my abilities. And as predicted, my target journal published my work. Reviews were strong; I basked in a literary limelight.

A few months passed, and I began work on a second poem featuring my avian savior. Mail arrived, and I was intrigued by one envelop. A journal sent *me* a letter.

How nice, I thought. *From periodical pariah to sought-after submitter*. I chuckled at my wit, as I scanned the journal's title. *Waterfowl Quarterly?* I smirked, and images of wooden decoys and Winchester rifles danced in my mind. I relit my pipe, and slid in the letter opener.

I read its missive, and my world collapsed.

Fate had used a duck.

Two hundred lines of blank verse about a female mallard. Her story narrated, her image aptly described. Her tale printed, published and immortalized in prestigious literary journals across the globe.

Her beautiful green head.

Her blue-tipped wings.

Her almond chest.

I reread the note:

"Although we loved your poem, the mallard you described..." I paused to press a kerchief to my leaking eye, "is male. The females are brown, and honestly -quite lackluster."

The Winds of Time



Live At Folsom Prison

In the jail's stink and sweat
you saunter on stage like
it's a cool spring night
at the Hollywood Bowl.

Your *git-tar*
is slung on your back,
troubadour, your dark stare
brackets a worn smirk as
you stride to the cliff-edge.

Hello, I'm Johnny Cash.

Taste the rapture and murder.
You, the common man's laureate,
prince, confessor,
hold a braying court
in your grip of the frets.
The drums nag and snap,
sharp lead guitar lines
crackle and jab white heat.

Your hardened subjects,
the short circuits of California,
barely stifle their seething,
roar at shootings,
are on your shoulder.

You survey the lags,
safe among them, of them,
reflect at the hairs' breadths
that have separated you
from them.

The Disciples

What zealous apostles these tongues of dogs
pouring baptismal kisses on the hands
of our miscreant species.

Proselytes of love and forgiveness
despite our capricious sins;

Our strayings out of the yard
selfishly sniffing the great wide world
on leash-less larks,
freely thrusting our heads from
the windows of cars—

our tongues and ears gyrating madly
in the glorious wind.

Then to straggle in to confession
past the hour of dinner bells
clanging in bellies.

Seeking, nay, expecting absolution
from these joyous wiggling neophytes,
these trembling dogmatists eager to anoint
our brows with wet, pink blessings,
welcoming our return to the fold.

The only father at 'Mommy and Me' gymnastics

is a white sheep in a field of black wool.
He is the setup to a whispered joke.
He is the first day of freshman year
at a school in a town his parents couldn't afford to live.

The mothers watch him,
smile politely
like they can smell ulterior on him.
His clothes look unemployed.
His daughter's wrist looks particularly not bruised.
His voice sounds too reassuring to not be rehearsed.

The only father
is trying to hard to be convincing.
No one, not even he
has figured out of what yet.
His daughter walks quickly on the balance beam
like he has pressured her into achievement.
Her smile keeps asking
where all the other daddies are

He imagines there must be some holiday
he can excuse for here on a Tuesday,
not providing for his family
as absent men do better.

The only father tells himself
his incidental presence is
breaking loose a few hammered nails
in the endless scaffolding of patriarchy.
He can't escape the certainty
That his shameless confidence in trying to fit in
reinforces something.
The other women,
quieter when he speaks,
If only to quantify the subtext.
He helps his daughter out of the foam pit,
knowing she can do it herself.
Every interaction is a trap door.
He looks across the floor
to a better version of himself

sitting by the front door
looking on his phone.
“Daddy is it time to go?”

The only father at ‘Mommy and Me’ gymnastics
was the only father at ‘Story Time’ in the bookstore;
was the only father grocery shopping on a Saturday morning;
was the only father at the top of the slide.
There were two other fathers in the park on Sunday
flexing for the non-existent photo-shoot
running fingers through receding hair,
glaring at other men they could measure
themselves against.

“Yes baby, it’s time to go.”

Seize the Day

Transfixion spinning, like a record that has played its last song, ongoing and uncertain, wakes me from what was likely an uncomfortable snooze. I pause, knowing I should understand. This has happened before, but I float and watch myself slip out of my bed and trip over the rug I never liked. I land on fours.

My aura is telling.

Still, I waver up, sweat dripping. I emanate a movement of hands towards the door, but nothing happens.

Paused, sweat stalls cold and perseverance floods to the floor.

An apparition hovering yells “Your eyes! You looked demonic! What happened?”

Moving as a wraith, I float back beneath the sheets and disappear.

Missouri



The Wild Girls Sing

My old boss and I
Would drink by an open fire

- Listen, he'd say

And we'd hear coyotes
Wail their incantations
Close enough by

Aaoo

- That's how the wild girls sing, he told me

I moved on
To wild girls of my own
Rock and Roll bodies
Asphalt hearts

Aaaaooo

He kept drinking
Through one good job
Two good wives
Three honest efforts at rehab
And four drunken rounds through the walls of his house

Aaaaoooo

Arrest and incarceration
Then he went back
To his mother's house
Where after a year or two
Of thinking about it
He took his gun to himself

-

I don't have a fire pit
I live in the city
But some nights, alone on the deck

In the last light I hear the wild girls sing
They are not so far away
If not as close as they used to be
They rhyme and keen and have never seen a fire

Aaoo

The Loiterer

“No loitering signs bother me. They're a reminder that there are many places where simply existing without the intent to consume is a crime.” – Nate Maxson

So here's the deal, my friend: I *loiter*. That's, like, my *main thing*. It's like my *life*, or something. I just *go*, and I find places to hang around and take up space – I don't contribute *to* anything and I don't *buy anything* either. You know how some people don't like to take risks, you know how there are some like that? Some people like to live *normal*, have jobs, be rich, be on vacations, be political, be active, save lives, be left or right of center but not me. Me? I loiter. Where? Well, some of my favorite places to loiter would include bank lobbies, drug test facility parking lots, and libraries. I'll go into a bank and just enjoy the nice furniture they have in there, their incredible air-conditioning and their feng shui, and I'll love their amenities like a sponge with eyes until the break of dawn. I'll sit alongside the people at a testing site waiting their turn to pee into a cup but I won't have to go at all, and if they ask me to go, I'll stay. Stay I will until the beginning of time comes around again. And I think I infuriate the proprietors of libraries because I hang out in the vestibules and never ever pick up a god-damned book. Or even a book that hasn't quite yet been damned by God. I'll walk into a library when they open up at 9 am, and I'll find a seat by the entrance of the place and just sit there until I turn 60. Until I turn a cold blue thousand. And people and customers and stars and perverts and reprobates and library patrons will pass by me as they enter and scowl at me and frown and curse and puzzle and wonder and stare at me doing nothing at all forever and ever in that chair. Libraries hate it when I do that, because when I do that, God, I'm doing what they were always told I should never do and it's manifest power against them when I do it. And I always eat licorice before I go in there, too, so I can blast them with my breath when they ask me questions. There's a revolution for every one of us somewhere.

Obituaries

are the first things my wife reads
these days - after her shower she puts on
the coffee water, then gets the paper.
It's the ritual I hear most mornings:
she troubles the front door -
it opens, then closes more slowly.
She stops before anything else,
stands perfectly still, rustles the pages,
reads so quietly I can picture it,
and then there's the pause,
the hush of it.

I lie in bed so many mornings
listening, anticipate the matter,
the world I knew holds its breath,
and then to end she either calls
an unadorned good morning to me,
or she comes to the bedroom door,
stands there holding that paper, shakes it,
and says, "guess who died."

Midnights Starving

I met him on the street
corner, where the world
crashed, and the stars
spun in the lamps; a
Mecca of forgotten bus
tickets and too many
starving midnights that
never seem to leave. He
had worked hard for his
sorrow as it spilled onto
the ground, seeping deep
into the roots. The earth
swallowed his words like
holy water, never becoming
fully blessed, only taking in
a shot of morphine right into
its heart. He followed people covered
in deserts, and talked to
ghosts, believing that if he
killed himself enough times they
would answer back. He told me
this, and when he finished it was
as if we had prayed on the same
cliff, but I had lost the ability to believe.

Stardust

a pre teen girl
small town values
traditional family
and this musician,
a man in makeup,
not scary ghoulish makeup,
pretty.
like a woman.
and futuristic,
alien-like
his image stares at me
provokes something
I didn't have words
or world experience to understand
I'm told it's just wrong
so I agree, yet
this image is so intriguing
fascinating
sexy? gay?
whatever that means
(it means men don't wear women's makeup)
but... why not?
and furthermore, why do women wear makeup anyway?
I forcibly dismiss him and this image
but it returns
confusing, intriguing, fascinating
yes, sexy and also
brilliant, brave,
futuristic stardust.

Post Apocalyptic Love

after "The Road"

Will you come tonight
when the moon waxes high,
as the ashes of your family
and friends float down,
grey weightless bodies
weighing down shoulders
already yoked by the gravity
of loss, for I will be there,
waiting steadily amongst
the blackened fingers of trees,
having already brushed off
the past from my jacket,
ankle deep in the accumulating
drifts of the old world,
ready to take your hand,
tell you how nice your hair looks
this evening as we walk
towards my campsite
and this fine dinner I have prepared
of canned beans, bottled water
and a bit of the gentleman
I found this afternoon wandering
the highway, pushing a cart
with nothing in it before him,
muttering just like the types
we called crazy did
back in the day.

Identity Crisis

A collage of fragments
soaks a vague paradise

Reality and delusion
twist like dark spiral

This fairy tale
has been played to death
like a percussion instrument

Those searching for an identity
will only end up lost

The industrial park roach coaches
stand a better chance of survival

Ponies and pooches
are a surer bet

When it hits the fan,
fakers slip in and out of their skin
faster than a heroin needle

Not everyone can accept
that square pegs don't fit
into round holes

Does the hand of fate
rely on natural selection
or who's got the most grit?

Is this your illusion
or is it mine?

sometimes a tornado is really a cocoon

and these urgent visions we absorb while our collective unconsciousness sleeps
these dreams that crumble out of your eyes when you waken leave rimey logs in mine

shrieking pulsars become insight they spew glistening grey matter from black holes
like some intuitive sex dragon
and persist in memory as a light speed a matrix of networked neurons
firing into a synaptic a clefting abyss

quivering quasars like aspen forests all of one root breathing
streaming oxygen through their microscopic milieu
just as with every exhalation we
erupt atmospheric pressures from esophageal event horizons

the warp speed of this destructive searing moment suddenly reversed
with the impossible gravitational desire to suck air in

the heartbreaking intimacy of every rhythmic breath
like slack prairie grasses flattening in the wind
just the way salty waves spread out thin and flat and rush to
curl in towards the shore like lovers

how we must agree that our organs were calibrated as resource redistribution centers
the way that flaming dredging supernovas recycle what the black holes have stolen
how we all tread the chiral points of destruction of creation breathing out or breathing in

and how, through the transitive property of pulsars, of congruence, of inequality
the paranoia I admitted to at grade school recess with woolen mittens that smelled of dog
 of how I'd converged every woman into my all-knowing mother
 and every man into my volatile dad
 into gods
 so certain I'd get caught for everything
it was valid enough

and I was just as sure that I'd crash through
the iron parking lot grates below built into sidewalks above
until I finally jumped with all my pluck onto them
because, by god if I was going to fall
 like all those unsuspecting people in the hotel walkway
 when it collapsed exactly one week after we'd been there
it would be on *my* terms

**To The Boy Who Sat Behind Me
At Washington Elementary School
and Ate Paste**

You arrive at the door of memory:
a random squeak that echoes you turning
in your old scarred school desk,
the gentle plunk of jar on wood,
the quiet burp of opening lid,
squish of fingers diving white paste.

I often wondered if one day
while riding around the neighborhood
your insides would just seize up
like a rusty bicycle chain,
or running to catch a football
your blood would freeze thick and stupid
in your surprised veins,
or maybe your hair sprouting
white even in the tan of August.

I can't remember your name—
your face even less a reminder—
but sometimes, waking too quickly,
the sun too bright in my eyes,
the air carries the familiar sigh
of that strangely contented danger.

Atlantic Line

There was three inch thick ice
trapped under the snow,
blocking the backed up rain water
from the sewer grate,
so we stood like railroad men swinging
alternating hammers at the spike,
armed instead with snow shovels and
garden tools chipping away a
millimeter with each arc.
Eventually the dam was breached,
and we used the broad flat shovels
to paddle our paper sailing ships
out onto the open water,
past the lobster boats and yellow slickers,
till darkness joined the sounds
of humpback whales.

Fragment

i crave for days when love was a caliphate
built with the svelte mud of harmony.

days, when love was a peony
that could not be destroyed by locusts of skepticism.

then, our conscience had crowns of truth.
they tangoed not with subtleties.

then, modesty & unity were our watchword.
they were tattooed on the sinews of our grace.

but now, love is only on paper,
in alphabets, words. love is equal to treaties.

love is only on his chest,
her hips. love is equal to nude geometries.

love is only in prosperity,
riches. love is equal to mammoths.

love is only in soap operas,
thrillers. love is equal to fiction.

love is void in our souls
minds, hearts. love, here, is equal to emptiness.

Motion

What happens if a shopping cart held all the stars?

We cannot really talk about it.

How hills have no motion.

Walk with whiskey in hand.

The sound of grasshopper legs rubbing together
is making the branches restless.

Feed the night

woodchips

watch nonlinear wind take

flight

as an airplane flies.

Swing

As empty plastic sea saw in motion.

We cannot really talk about it.

Write out of sadness

Some people say, writers write out of knowing.

This is the worst sadness.

The kind of sadness you cannot share.

Your father hit you in the face

and let your blood crust over winter
ice until spring
he makes you shovel
red for three months.

Run like the grasshoppers call out
In the night
One for love and the other forages for fruit.

catholic elementary

in kinder, tom something calls
me kato, the oriental sidekick. i
have no words for why i hate that.

the brentwood kids seem ill: pasty as elmer's,
freckles like peppery burns. their b.o. is
awful yet they call me dirty-faced.

filipino stores in my jewish italian valley block
smell of spice and saltiness. i hate it here. in
3rd grade i tell dad, 'no speaking chinese.'

mrs. m. teaches, 'you were born here. you're
american like me.' i claim my hair's dark-brown,
renounce my complexion, and tell my mom i'm white.

class dismissed. the parental caravans showcase
benzes, jaguars, an occasional rolls. the chevy
pulls in: i sprint to it before anyone sees me.

i hate math, but they put me in 6th grade honors
algebra. i drop out, getting a b-minus in the
standard section: this baffles everyone.

they like my people's food and karate but they hate
me and my crap music. for the talent shows they cover
hendrix awfully; i dance, i rap, i outcool them too easily.

happy at graduation: i won't see them again, and in
high school, they'll learn jesus wasn't rich white
trash, that the prophets look more like me.

Girl Lying on a Dark Stage

I duck behind the curtain
when the reading
is over and lie
on the cool boards

sometimes I'm laughed
at or ridiculed
but I stand under
the hot stage lights

and pour out
the terror
and tenderness
in my heart anyway

when it's over
I know there's
a dark
quiet spot

on the boards waiting
to absorb my tears

A Naked Declaration

-- found in the words of Justice Antonin Scalia

Persons who seek to enter
and go out the same door,
being the only sort
recognized in passage
(even if just visiting) –
not to condemn those
who would prefer other
lectures or enemies – are
the definition of what
the human race can get
away with. Any resistance
to this recognition
is experimentation,
an unsettled question.
This is not open season
on hearts or bare desire.
Errors though they are,
it takes real cheek.
It takes real cheek.

Kentucky Wonder Pole Beans

My grandmother's hands
were always snapping beans.
She offered these
as a holy act, with bacon
grease and black pepper.

Her family feuded over
land in hillbilly country,
land and honor
but not
the dignity of girls
at the hands
of their brothers.

She rolled her way down
blue hills. She transacted
her way out of Kentucky.
She hoped He didn't come
back from the war and when
He did, she planted beans
and bore His fruit.

And stayed and stayed
and stayed and stayed.

Her hands smoothed pages
when she read to me
and smoothed her pants
against her thighs
as she heard of all
His transgressions.

My grandmother's hands
shake
and she forgets my mom
is not her lover, that
her arthritis is not
her bones longing
for the woman she never
talked about until she was
too gone to know to keep
the secret.

Her hands held Bibles,
held checks from oil
companies, and family
documents that named
slaves and unclaimed
babies.

They held me.

When I left the Midwest,
I still loved my grand-
mother. I kissed the stars
of her temples. Outside,
 I waved goodbye
 to her window.
I didn't know anything
then.

She—from Kentucky
to Illinois. Me—from
Wisconsin to Oregon.
We—running, finding
bigger water.

Somewhere that our backs
would not be ground
into the flat dirt.

Lucy the Magdalene

Lucy the Magdalene
worked at a cafe in
Ocean Beach.
Married a sailor.
Make-up barely
covered the
bruises on her face.
This was not the
America she expected,
or the America
she deserved.
I told Lucy I was
getting out of the
Navy and heading back
East, but I didn't
tell that I wanted
to take her with me,
to show her a real
America, of watching
the sun set on the
plains and turning
around to watch
the moon rise, feeling
both oceans rising
as if sea monsters
and whales caused
the tides to wash
over the land,
standing where the
watersheds divide and
feeling the continent
spreading away,
flowing in all
directions,
sleeping in Frank
Lloyd Wright
designed motels
where I would trace
a map of the day's
travels on her body.
Instead, I ordered a
grilled cheese

sandwich with
a slice of tomato
and our fingers
touched when Lucy
handed me the change
and for a moment
we both felt electric
back in Subic Bay,
back under the vampire
Christ crucifix
in her room and the
sheet lightening
and the jungle
and hot sweltering
nights in the clubs
on Magsaysay
Boulevard.
I left Lucy in
that cafe, a sadness
rising up as she
refilled condiment
bottles and thought
about back home in the
Philippines
where another birthday
for President Marcos
united the country.
Later, Lucy went home
and left her sailor
husband a note and
walked out the quarter
mile down the pier
at the end of Newport
Avenue, out on the
right arm of the pier,
and in the thickening
fog, Lucy the Magdalene
took off her clothes,
climbed the rail and
dove in, a perfect
creature returning
to the sea.

Beers on the Wall

My father feels the need to sabotage himself, sometimes.

He takes my meager fingers, my skin glued to tiny plastic tubes of need, in his hand and walks me up the street. We pass by the convenient store that would sell me cigarettes – as long as I said they were for him. They have horror stories shoved in metal racks in front of the bulletproof glass at the register. They always talk about how there is a half-boy, half-vampire trolling through American cities. I'm afraid to tell anyone how afraid I am – of the blood.

My father coaxes me across the street with a pocket full of quarters.

There's a black door torn out of the side of a white brick building that sits next to the house my uncle tried to kill himself in. My father looks up at the sun, and then I look at up at the sun. We are barely awake.

My father holds the door open and pushes me into the bar.

My mother is sleeping. She works swing shifts at the machine factory.

She's going to miss me.

She's going to miss me trying my best to get the new high score on the pinball machine in the corner of the bar. My arms aren't long enough to reach from one side to the other. These tiny arms of biscuit dough, struggling with the buttons on each side of the metal chamber.

The 'binging' and the 'clinging' of the machine drowns out the conversation my father has with the woman who has potholes in her handbag skin. There are two other men who sit at the bar with my father. They didn't bring their children.

What terrible fathers they are.

I try not to listen. I try to bang my bones against the side of the machines; I try to leave the imprint of my forearms on the springs and the levers. I watch the numbers that I can't even count to turn over and over again. Every time, the last ball slipping between the plastic knobs – slipping between my gelatin palms, and into the gutter.

I stop.

I hear the footsteps that are retreading the footsteps that other fathers and sons have walked. It's my father; he's dancing with the gun to his head in the dark.

"We have to go," my father says.

"I still have another shot," I say.

"We have to go. And you must keep the secret," my father says.

And so I keep his secret. And so I lose my life.

You Are a Mountain

A river rock sits in you,
no, a rock face, no,
a mountain, yes

a thick, unyielding
mountain rises from
a solid place
within you.

Its foothills spread
into the corners where
your doubts take root

then dislodge, no,
displace, no,

tear, yes,
tear through the qualms
and uncertainties
that cloud you.

Now you rub its grit
between your fingers, now
you breathe this
grassy terrain

and it covers, no,
seals, no,

reclaims
the cracks and faults
in your shaken ground.

You are not a fragile
matter. You
are a height, no

an altitude, an elevation,
something higher,
a peak perhaps. Yes,
an imposing, irrepressible peak.
Yes, yes.

On Becoming A Sheep Again

I was eight when
the towers fell
my grandmother sat
inches from the TV
I didn't know much
but I knew life changed.

Thirteen years later
I met Travis in class.
He wore a fur-lined
North Face, hood up
and big sun glasses.

"I asked who are
you hiding from man?"
He said, "everyone"
And he was. He was
in school from the GI bill
had written for Stars & Stripes

Said he joined after the
towers fell, fought across
Faluja—sold his soul in Kabul.
He told me it was all a sham,
was all controlled demolition
a false flag to get us to mine
oil from the Iraqi fields or heroin
and lithium from Afghanistan.

See. The Fema camps were
there for us all after they
cracked down on Occupy,
they would take the guns
when the dollar collapsed
and wipe out all the poor
people.

I sat with my eyes glued
to my laptop screen
every day brought dread and alarm
but I was awake!

I wasn't no sheep!
We were doing something
policing the policers
spreading info on campus.
Called ourselves 'crusaders
of truth and knowledge'

They never cracked down
on Occupy, it just faded
into obscurity like the 1960s had
leaving remnants of rebellion
in coffee shops and hipster bars.
The dollar never collapsed
and they never took our guns.

I was never sure who exactly
"they" were but Travis was
and he is still out there, hooked
to his computer screen
dreading everytime a plane
flies over his parents home
in the suburbs, he stockpiles
guns and food and water
for when they arrive.

For me, I've hung up that hat
I don't watch the news much now
I just write poems about people
I know and some I knew
and if they, whoever they are,
are truly out there
I guess this sheep is ready
to be culled.

A Conversation with my Father after the Attacks on Paris

My father wants to know if I am going to join ISIS
 I am less concerned with the insinuation
 than the trail of thinking that leads to his question
 I, who am typically nonviolent
 and always on time for meetings and appointments
 who can punctuate with the best of them
 and yessuh anyone into submission
 tell me, do I scare you with my skill?
 Probably not
 but you frighten me, America
 you, who auctioned off my ancestors
 on slave blocks in the name of profit
 in the name of God
 you, who send me to subpar schools
 and force me to live on “that” side of town
 you, who breaks your promises to me
 still living the lie of separate but equal
 you, who launches a drug war against me
 and has the audacity to turn around and legalize weed
 you, who wields “all lives matter”
 like a shield against my blackness
 you, who made a devil of Malcolm
 made an angel of Martin
 then killed them, and a made a memory of them both
 you, who cause me to clutch my child
 in my arms every morning
 before I send them out into your world.
 Do I impose upon you?
 Have I overstayed my welcome?
 I am here, bleeding, hurting, and unseen
 my father fears that he will lose his only son to ISIS
 my father knows nothing of ISIS
 but he knows you all too well, America.

I Feel What It Means To Love a Man

in my chest, a
stirring in my
sternum, collar
bone kissed with
whisks of how it
feels to look at
him and see

joy within his
jawline, comfort
along the roots
of his chest, safety
in his scapula
blooming
above my adam's

garden—a wreath
of ribs i long
to plant myself
beneath and grow
into his strange
boy eve

The Tree to Her Human Neighbors

Don't romanticize my existence
It's been tough.

Please Don't Call It a Journey

There is a lot to be said,
I guess
in being the patient
kind
and understanding
cancer patient

the one that nods her head
and is here to remind everyone
else how strong they too can be

The one that is chosen.
The one that will define herself
by this journey.

But there is a lot more to be said
about raising your lips to the night
sky and screaming until you collapse,
of tearing the stars out of the sky
because you didn't know
that one little body
could hold so much anger.

Ugly pride

My scars are not character flaws.
My receding hairline another heirloom.
Insecure judgments bounce off of my bad skin.
I turn wounds into molten steel thorns.
Y'all mother fuckers need Jesus,
I am the drunkest preacher.
All that is left is us.
Us is the inclusive form of y'all.
The front yard of the mortuary
had spare engine part monuments
and memories we will never shake.
We shook like detoxing relatives
at the sight of the casket.
We had no idea that black paint
could be so dark.
We all knew the roses were yellow
even though the color was gone.

Insomnia in Hanoi Sky

distance down,
a narrow church with gold
lantern over the timbered door
moved her eyes from the pleats of
the moon toward the white-
tipped Long Bien bridge--

when the chorus
of black diving birds curled
down the heavy bottom-round rocks,
she watched the dune cloud over
in a montage of noisy triumphs--

supposing there was
no layover of comfort from
the thrust of her insomnia to
the portal of the universe, dear world,
she became a girl with lips
smeared heavy in red Hanoi sky--

tonight she let the dead
roam inside her, where their eyes
could carry the many miles
her legs will walk the length of her well-
worn script, as if inside the ocular
disk of time, she authored the tale of
a girl who was chained between
tangents of her insomnia--

Girl, You've Changed

The ones who knew you before we met never quite understood why we were together. I got why you were friends with them. They boosted you up, made your every thought feel somehow validated. Maybe some of them had fallen in love with you, but it didn't last. This world is full of distractions. You were mine in a medium sense; there when I needed to think about something else.

In college it was like a flood, so many blind opinions floating around rented spaces, the blank stare of restless eyes dancing in novelty lighting. You pretended to be a poet, and I desperately avoided inclinations. I couldn't turn out like my father. He let comfort slowly transform into self-loathing. Yours had a way of joking until his audience eventually lost interest, then felt small and trapped. Your mother told stories about their time together, getting off on the memories. He was a real dream now that they lived in separate houses.

I could never pinpoint which issue made your skin itch more, who had really done the most damage. Ex-boyfriends came up and occasionally passed us by. You meticulously kept track of some, while others only bugged by proxy. It was a life on the Internet, continual updates that I still check daily. Addiction never felt so unsatisfying, and while there are similarities, it's still impossible to relate. Guys like me, who knew you once, couldn't start a support group. We'd end up at each other's throats seconds after the cookies and coffee ran out. You'd change your favorite blend as often as the billboards. I took baby sips in the morning only so our kisses tasted the same.

I never really talked about you much with anyone else. All my boys were good at changing the subject. They had predisposed futures, lopsided hopes, and what I could only decipher as jealousy depending on the location and number of shots consumed. Their girlfriends probably talked a lot of shit on you. Insults rattled around and occasionally gathered dust only to resurface and make us regret the inevitability of age and wishful thinking. When you said you thought some of these girls were worth a damn, I took it as a cue to fantasize. You were good at flirting, engaging minor opinions on the decline. These grand epiphanies would then shoot up in the surrounding space like a geyser before the next drought.

We loved using one another as an excuse; my obligations helping us avoid yours. You'd get sick often, every symptom testing my devotion. I wanted to laugh at them believing you, to tell a few the truth. We were only leaving to have sex or beat the late-night drive-thru rush. It was rock, paper, scissors to see who'd answer the door, say less than five words and tip out of some mildly human obligation. The rest was a guessing game. Who'd come first, wake-up and use all the hot water before eating the leftovers for breakfast.

Indigestion led to uncertainty, then another city; working-class schedules and new hideouts. You were always introducing me to people, while I had enough common courtesy to leave you out of it. Trips to visit the ones we left behind always made us feel worse about the others. They were too invested, long days evolving into bitter opinions. You fed their negativity and occasionally nursed it back to health. We lost hours in arguments meant for them. Misconceptions seeped through our pores, grasping at sunlight only to whither like weeds.

The winter continued its crawl, and the spring made us into fools. When you dressed up, rooms shook, and I heard music. "How can you even pretend like it's the same band?"

"They play all the same songs," you'd say.

"But the guy who wrote them is dead."

"I don't think that really matters. I mean, the message is still there, right? Just so long as people believe in it."

"Well, I don't believe in it."

"Nobody needs you to."

"Why do you think it still means something?" I could've asked her that every day.

"I don't know. I grew up with those songs. I don't see what's wrong with the band still playing them."

"Why don't they just write new ones? Ones that aren't a dead guy's thoughts."

"You're such a purist."

"I'd say realist."

"You don't have to like it, but I'm allowed to."

"You're feeding the corporate machine. It's all about money, ya know?"

"Everything is. What does it matter?"

"So if I were to profit from everything you said, but only after you died, you wouldn't mind?"

"What have I said that's worth anything? You don't even fucking listen to me."

The next time I bought us tickets, you had a headache. I got over the idea of coming home on time, showing restraint, considering fatherhood a viable option. Holding your hand after the appointment, the bones in our fingers didn't lock the same as if domestic arthritis had set in. We woke in the middle of the night, stranded by noises heard in the back of each other's heads. Sometimes you snored and forgot to turn off the space heater. I put the seat down, but often let spots accumulate. When we were honest, it only hurt more. You were a pop song, but I grew out of the chorus.

Growing Space



Cardinals

They fought, fizzled and finked as I watched,
When the other boys felt different,
My eyes were glued on the nature of feathery red.

I never watched them take to the sky,
My time was spent watching them fight for morsels and seeds,
Soon after my grandmother called,
And I always left the cardinals fisting and fighting.

So my time away was spent dreaming,
Hoping and praying there was peace between,
Yet somehow I knew they were always watching,
If not over the nests above my grandmother's willow trees.

A Little Bird the Ants Have Gotten To

There is a factory, and inside this factory there is a boy.

A boy?

Yes. Young. He is working with his hands, assembling little wafers of plastic and wiring. And there is a foreman also. The foreman has a fake gold watch that he holds up to the boy's face, so close that the boy can see the skin around his wrist going green. The foreman stands there tapping the dial. Faster, faster. When the boy isn't fast enough, the foreman holds out a fist and waits for the boy to run his face into it, until there is a black eye or a split lip or a loose tooth.

Awful. Terrible.

Yes. Except one day it gets worse. This time there is no fist. This time there is a knife. The foreman pins the boy's hand flat against the workbench. The blade is razor-thin and very sharp. Slipping through the flesh, the joint.

I still hear the ticking: the sound of it will come drifting in through an open window, like a light breeze or a tune from the neighbor's stereo, and all I can do is lay there on top of my covers, watching the ceiling. Or else I'll be listening to someone's voice, and the ticking will bubble up from somewhere, getting louder and louder until it drowns out all the words, just swallows them up like a sinkhole. Sometimes I can feel the fingers clenching and unclenching. The ghosts of them.

I found another watch just like it. Bought it online. Does that surprise you? To tell the truth, I couldn't believe it myself. But when it arrived, and I held it in my hand, shivered at the cold weight of it in my palm—it dredged up a strange kind of sentimentality in me. It seemed almost a part of me, a stand-in for the pieces that are missing. And still. I have never worn it. Never consulted it for the time of day. I keep it in my pocket, like an anchor dragging me back to that factory floor, that flensing knife.

Before today, do you know how many times I've come here? How many times I've put my hand on the knob and lingered at the threshold? It was my cowardice that stopped me. A defect of character.

I wonder, have you been sleeping peacefully, all this time? Or maybe you have been waiting for this. Maybe you thought it would be like the movies—someone hurling steaks over the privacy hedge to keep the dogs quiet, suction cups and glass cutters. But there weren't any dogs. You didn't even lock the door. Can you imagine how it felt for me, standing in the hallway, listening to the icemaker grumbling? Imagine easing the door open, waiting for the darkness to soften, to see you sitting up in your bed with the covers pulled up around your neck. Staring straight at me.

After the factory, I found work where I could. For a while I took a job with the electric company. Maintaining streetlights and the like. One time someone forgot to screw the covers back on the streetlights and some birds nested inside them. Had to scrape all the nests out. A few of the eggs had already hatched, and I carried the babies down in the crook of my elbow one by one, laid them in the grass. Up and down that ladder with one good hand. By the time I'd finished, the ants had already found them.

That's what you remind me of, squirming around in your sheets. A baby bird that the ants have gotten to.

You see what's in my hand. Yes. This is what we bled for. Or, it will be, once you've put it together. Voice boxes for cheap children's toys. I had to see it for myself, had to buy one of them and scoop out its cotton innards. But there it was. Sure enough.

Before we get started, is there anything you need? Would you like something to drink? No?

By the time I leave here, you are going to understand. You'll see what it means to be haunted like I am haunted, to know that you can't ever get away from it, *tick tick tick*, until you are on your knees every night before bed praying please, God, please, just give me one night before it catches back up to me.

Are you sure you wouldn't like a glass of water? Alright. Let's see how nimble those fingers are.

Faster.

Faster.

Through What Sense Does A Woman Rise From A Body?

for Maggie Nelson

Did you see her staring at me? *Post-modernists call that a 'gaze.'* She has short hair and is wearing a man's shirt—looks like a man, might be a man. *We're standing in front of tomatoes. She probably wants ripe ones.* I didn't flirt, did I? *We came to buy groceries.* Now I can't find my list. When I woke up this morning, I was certain something would go wrong. Did you notice s/he's wearing sandals and socks? Let's forget about produce. S/he's making me nervous. *But we need eggplant and onions.* I almost forgot. I feel like I did last summer when I came down with the flu. Feminists say the male gaze is indirect, but s/he's looking straight at me. *You could tell her the tomatoes are ripe.* They say sex is a construct, but I don't understand so I made a grocery list and decided that ratatouille and salad would make a good dinner, but we need eggplant, and our onions are sprouting. I hate sprouting onions—like green thumbs. *This is our day to eat vegan—we can't make tuna salad.* Her shirt and her socks don't match, but her sandals are just like mine. S/he looks like someone I saw at the vet when I took Joy to get neutered. Cats don't want to eat vegetables, but today we are vegans so he'll eat ratatouille. *We could substitute dried food for fish.* I don't like to cheat. Once my mother told me to wear green socks, but when I got to school I switched them for red ones. Did you notice that s/he's wearing a red shirt but purple socks? That doesn't match, sort of like cheating. Another time my mother made me a cheese sandwich, but I fed the cheese to my hamster. Mother never did find out. *She's walking in our direction.* If s/he speaks to me, I'll never forgive myself.

Hick High School

Allow me to tell you about
The trashy things the Lee-Davis kids do:
Smoke weed, plug up the sinks with apple Skoal,
Rednecks brawl with other rednecks and
I'll kick your ass – *No!* – I'll kick *your* ass!
Bass Pro camo jackets tackle black
Slipknot shirts and several scrimmages
Break out and get locked in ISS while
A baby daddy gets locked in marriage
With the *tch-tch* of another shotgun,
Someone's masculinity is challenged
With the roar of a Ford F-150
*(I'll raise you a Chevy Silverado
With eight cylinders and the rebel flag!)*
Bonus points for how far it is from
Those hippie liberal eco standards, 'cause
If the tank gets more than 12 on the highway,
Your dick is the size of two tic-tacs, twice
Removed like the cousin you made out with.
But hey, everybody knows everybody
One way or another.

Firing

1.

Soft clay cannot be attached to hard clay,
the way our thoughts cannot be attached
to the darkening shadows of trees
at the close of day. Only pieces
that are leather hard or wetter can be attached,
beneath the Elder as flickering bats snap and dash down.

2.

We all grow old, due to the shrinking and flattening
of clay particles water leaves during drying.
Even dead wood flakes and splinters,
exposed to perpetual rain, snow heft, and streaming rays.
Pieces of clay to be attached must be scored with a needle,
painted with slip, or slurry, to glue them together.
It's here, that I say, I love you.

3.

Clay pieces maybe no thicker than 1 inch unless they
are hollow, and if hollow spaces are enclosed,
a pinhole must be made in the piece to allow gasses
and trapped air to escape. Our bones are hollow,
carry blood, shrink, and collapse. Thicker pieces
should be allowed to dry thoroughly before firing.

4.

Dry limbs slowly, away from temperature extremes,
to prevent uneven drying, shrinkage, and cracking.
This is especially true of pieces, which have been joined,
such as hands, hips, eye-socket, cheeks-to-chin.

5.

Avoid stress - unnatural bending or forcing
will cause particles to become unaligned,
resulting in chasms that will never be scarred
with enough tissue to bridge the gap.

6.

Clay must be wedged to insure proper alignment to create uniform texture, and most importantly, to drive air between the infinitesimal distance between us.

Bug Love

I stay up late. Watch the fruit flies fuck.

They do it dog-style, down in the trash. The female never stops crawling over peach pits, plum skins, banana peels – gorging herself, while up starts, as she piggybacks her mate, the next generation.

“Suffer, bitch,” I breathe.

She startled stops. Weighs the threat. The male keeps on fucking.

Does my syllabic zephyr necessitate flight? Or can grub, hump and a future of replicas uninterrupted continue?

The god falls silent – pondering, out of lazy spite, unable to sleep this muggy night, a pinch. The fuckers might, ‘natch, escape. Moments later resume elsewhere the same tomorrow. The dream of snatched flies unrealized.

Finger and thumb inch toward the infinitesimal rainbow-winged beast-with-two-backs. Overripe fruit stink thickens. The gap closes so close the stalker feels four chalky orange eyes flit.

Till the god makes the mistake, as gods do make mistakes, of gliding between the prey and the light. A shadow swallows the bugs and away they scramble – breaking apart before my eyes – for the ceiling.

I trudge back upstairs to bed. Perhaps at least to free a half-dream, if not altogether asleep to fall.

Evolution

Often
simple tasks
evolve into habits.

Like taking a daily shower
or saying a prayer before sleeping.

Habits like these seem harmless
bees are harmless—
until you're stung by one.

Then a welt will rise
and with enough welts
perhaps before a death
by asphyxiation
you will realize:

Ice cream can kill you.
Hope can kill you.
Stress can kill you.
Even love can kill you.

Evolution is:
learning how to avoid
oncoming traffic.

Untitled

)
Terracotta cobwebs, blue ants nibbling in unfinished mischief, some Coptic sense lying in precarious proximity to a wall of scruples, all these things create a mishmash in my mind as I fight to not succumb to more gates of hell than I'd ever imagined, till I stagger purposely toward the light of the past I tried so hard to avoid but which can and does pull me out of my stupor at last. One night at the Kessler Center for Rehabilitation

Breaking the Hourglass

After the cull
her lover had turned
into frothing water
churning in her ear.
His absence reproached her.
She looked up
at the sea lying upside down.
She walked on the charred
volcanic sky
where the others had swallowed
their words and hung on
to their children.

Light melted on the moon
where her child should have been.

She touched her lover's back
and felt the frost.
Violet ink stained her fingers.
She saw him looking
at the young beds.
The Chrysanthemums pulled him
towards their soft fragrant centres.
He turned around.
His hands were stained
with tangerine petals.
The storms in his eyes
told her he bit life.

The stains stayed on her mind.
Only bronze sand fell between them.
The memory of water
tried to drown her.
She broke the hourglass with
her numb hands. She ran.
The road turned into an ocean
but the air stretched inside her.
The moon rose towards
where it should have been.
But the absence still hung
above the centre of her world.

Paying with Monopoly Money and Never Knowing the Difference

His decline has a way of testing my dutifulness
as a daughter while I set the table for one save
the knife for safety concerns. There's no

fun in scolding your father though you'd think
it might be satisfying in some revengeful
way. He sometimes swings a pocketknife

in the dark though there are never
any intruders responsible for things
that go bump in the night. Fright can do

that to someone with dementia. He likes to store
pieces of himself in the upmost drawer.
Collectables, he calls them. Old badges

and rings among things from years gone by.
There are six cracked teeth like broken
parts of a jalopy that rattle around

above the nightstand. These aren't collectibles,
I say. He holds out his hand and asks
me to steady the tremors as if anyone could

intervene with his body's colossal display
of disease. So I grasp an unsteady hold
on what is quickly slipping away.

If there's a clear path from here to there
his is an obstacle course of tangled
trees full of ambiguities with little promise

for a bettered tomorrow's tomorrow.
He is fading fast into a haze of dimness
without the need to see and I fear there will be

less of me to remember, to recite our old stories
that only we could tell. There's a loneliness
that happens in the midst of letting go. And I

know I will soon be left with only
memories and a few abandoned teeth.
But it's not the emptiness that finds me

and swallows me whole, it's the image of all
those hollow spaces, vast as infinity,
every time he grins and says my name.

Turtle Rescue

Is it a child's joke
Or industrial-strength metaphysics:
"Why did the turtle cross the road?"

I positively do not know
But he was a third of the way
Across route 46 with his neck extended
And his miniature-elephant-shaped legs
Striding an inch at a time
When we almost had a close encounter.

He didn't seem to notice
Just kept putting one ponderous foot
Thoughtfully ahead of its brother.

I decide to keep him
From being an hor-d'ouvre for the vultures,
Pull over, jog back to him.

He's hefty—the size of a cereal bowl.

How, exactly, do you pick up a turtle
Without sacrificing a finger in the process?

I decide on a double-handed
Two-thirds back grip.
It works fine:
He doesn't bite,
Doesn't even look at me,
Just keeps walking steadily
With his legs four feet off the ground.

I carry him across the road
And a safe 20 feet into the far side grass.

When I set him down
He keeps walking
As though nothing had happened.

Amazing.
How does a creature
With a brain the size of a cornflake
Decide to see the world?
And then go about it
With such enviable
Perseverance and discipline?

Well.
Anyway.
I'm glad one of us knows where he's going.

Untitled

It is a subtle book, full of complex insights into people's tensions and
ambivalences over sex.

People write all kinds of shit about me.

There is the shuffle of people trying to find their way through the
emptiness, but no conversation, save for a few exclamations of
disorientation or terror.

Among these people I am my own forerunner, my own cock-crow through
dark lanes.

We socialize people into accepting the coin of reputation as status capital.

True, most people like crap.

another layer of understanding

he thought she might be the devil

&she hoped maybe he was/
would be
for those times necessary
only
to take her apart
from the ties that bind
push her farther
onto the edges
where everything
drips
indigo blue..
i know it doesn't make
any sense
but that was
the color
of her
dreams now

a poetic response to Annabel Banks'

'Second Person'

i am

araneae

webbed into

my obsessions –

tangled silk

dancing curlicues

of [toxic] smoke around

dreams – vanished

into the glaringly

visible : an

eight pointed plan

(a mirror

neuron anomaly) :

- sort the recycling
- meditate
- walk briskly
- buy fair-trade,
organic, ethically
sourced goods
- volunteer
- learn how to darn
socks, crocket, knit
- throw out the microwave
- pay mega-bucks for a
vision quest

hiding in the

corners (of your/my

our mind) –

i am locatable

on a map – somewhere

between chopping wood

and carrying water

i live between the

waste [waist] of

arthropodic

cartography : self-

injecting a

first person

cleansing

venom

Second Person

There is a dead spider in the sink. Now, you are not afraid of spiders, be they living or dead. What you mean by this is that the harmless fellas, the lotsa-leggers, scuttling along skirting boards don't make you scream. What you mean by mentioning this is that cultural carelessness forgot not all spiders are created equal, so when washing windows in exchange for a bed you shouldn't have picked up the creature you were threatening to drown. No one got bitten, no one got hurt. You only realised what you'd done afterwards. Realisation as a fist-bump with death.

An image: small brown smiler in the centre of your palm.

A whisper: *come here silly come here.*

You fish the spider out with the tip of a finger and wrap it in kitchen roll. You think about the loo, then consign it to the bin, which is already overflowing with microwave rice packets and brown banana skins. Now, you're not by any means suffering from an eating disorder. What you mean by this is that you imbibe ample calories from varied nutritional sources to keep the system alive, skin clear, hair shiny. What you mean by mentioning this is that you have learnt what combination of coffee, cigarettes and online-available off-prescription pharmaceuticals keep you just sick enough to suppress the urge to curl up on the floor and eat everything everything everything. Rationalisation wipes the fridge. Sits on your hands.

An image: some hint of the slogan is coming through. It needs another coat.

A whisper: *Now they'll leave you alone.*

Once the sink is clear of spider corpse you can do the washing up. Now, you are not the most house-proud of women. What you mean by this is that there are, at any time, piles of coffee-stained clothes, empty toilet rolls, scattered and gasping half-poems, twice-read books, and pocket detritus (lip balm, chewing gum, cigarette filters) set up as an assault course in your home. What you mean by what you mean is that you can get by, and that's enough. You privilege the things you want and so do them instead of dusting. Call it 'honouring your talent'. Call it 'ambition'. But there needs to be some washing up done every now and again, or there are no plates for carefully careless meals. Bubbles can be fun. Water-scalds can be antibacterial. A lack of poison makes a day stand out.

An image: you on your knees, scrubbing the floor, hair bundled under a white cloth cap.

A whisper: *Such a good girl.*

Now you are the good girl you can be a good girl forever. Now, you're not suggesting the personality will not reassert itself. What you mean by this is that there is an idea of the perfect version, a leaf-educated salad-orderer, a striding, right-side-of-strident Good Woman whose self-loving mindfulness spills from the generosity of her capable heart. What you mean by meaning this is that there is so much to control, to project, that doing the washing up leads to ideas of being a different person. For a few daydreaming moments you can outpace the spider saver, bad-food eater, fag-yellow-finger crumb-carpet roller, and sparkle like the floor would if you would just stop writing and get down on your knees. The retaliation comes in the next moment.

An image: you, perfect.

A whisper: *That's not you.*

Better Awakening

my tongue has detached herself
 from the back of my throat
 and is loose running wild
 through the streets
 she parades through gutter trash
 she twerks over car tops
 lapping up the dirt
 licking tossed burger wrappers
 cussing at school bus drivers
 peeing on your perfectly manicured
 Kentucky bluegrass lawn
 a wild predator in the city
 who can't be shot
 a woman who gives
 no fucks if her dance
 doesn't turn you on

my tongue has a mind
 of her own now in fact
 I'm sure she is now
 my actual mind and she
 is done being told what to do

think before you speak
 they always say
shut your mouth
chew slowly
don't be so bossy
be nice

this witch knows better
 she is a wild mare running
 and shitting through your malls
 a giant snorting boar
 invading your crops
 a fat angry rodent
 nesting under your stove
 she is beyond hungry
 and could care less
 if my pants ever fit again

she spits on your nice

doormats and work commutes
your office emails and reply-alls
my tongue ate all the sandwiches
in the communal work fridge
drank your sodas and burped
the alphabet on her way to the bar

go ahead
see what happens
when you say what you're thinking
ma'am, you're too loud
you're ruining it for everybody
maybe this shot
should be your last

Innocence

Imagine me like I'm still a boy
trying to hold a dead cardinal

that I found in the dirt in the park
in my hands, and then imagine me

as I'm digging a grave in the dirt
as I chew the inside of my cheek

so hard that it's bleeding and I spit;
now imagine the end of a world.

Dismemberment

I woke up in another life but I cannot forget the previous one. "Write loud and clear about what hurts" a voice tells me. I am writing. This. My story. Can't remember how or when I was abducted to a foreign ground, where family and friends ceased to exist. Yesterday I was. I had a name. I belonged. The memories of my bygone existence haunt me. How did I end up here? So far away from our house. So far away from those nights on the couch. My dogs, they need me to feed them. They must be terrified of thunders and waiting for me by the gate. How can I reach to them? Could somebody help? Or at least how can I forget?

And my mother's hands and my father's voice are so distant that I almost forget I am loved. And I wish I could go back, to my grandmother's songs *en el sillón*: "Ay turulete", *abuela* sing to me, "Ay turulete". Or to my *abuela's* *leche con quick*, *Ay abuela duérmeme*, with my pink blanket, *Ay abuela duérmeme*. And I wish I could hug my brother once more and never let him go.

My language was ripped from my ribcage and from the ink of my pen. The beaches were stolen from under my feet and the last glass of wine I had with my friends was forgotten on a table next to the red of my lips. I was condemned to silence and isolation.

I remember our laughter, our songs, our love... A distant cry, a little fight here, a big insult there. My husband trembling. Me shaking.

Oh I am writing. This. My story. The pain brought me here. Can I go back to where I belong? Could you take me someday? Or at least could I just die?

On dark nights naked men take my husband's place and use my husband's wife. His smell his touch, oh I do remember. And I disappear myself to sleep trying to forget *las manos ajenas* that went home.

And sometimes when I close my eyes I hear the cries of the babies I never had, and I feel the emptiness of my cramped womb while there is blood in a trash can that reminds me of my dismembered life.

And there are women giving birth in ponds screaming at me "empty womb, dry tits, lifeless woman" And I hide my face so they cannot see my tears of rage. And I write to be healed "loud and clear". This. My story. Some nights I feel his arms holding me tight. But then I open my eyes to realize: "he is not here, you were just dreaming." And I remember the important ring in my now naked left hand and I cry myself back to sleep thinking about the life I had, missing everyone, but longing him: my friend, my lover, my husband, my phantom limb...

What's Gathered There

It's there in the dark
Like someone's plastic saint,
Like a child's model train.
Around it the wicker ends
Of the light keep burning,
Keep pushing back
Against the great black spiders,
The emissaries of night.
It's shaped like one or two
Gnarled elms on the witch's hill.
Like a molted dream
In the dim and greening silence.
It's hidden in the planks
Like a corpse or termite,
Like a trapped, speechless wind.
From it we learn the language
Of walls,
Why they always creak,
Or drip in soft water.

Assurance

"The roosters speak with assurance"
Thomas Ames in Thailand

These roosters know their place,
they crow a Thai sunrise awake.
Assurance, what a comfort to the world.
It seems our friends in Washington
have heard the roosters too, they crow
affirming words all day.

But our world is full of lions, tigers,
dogs and birds, all sure that they each
have the right to speak their piece.
Instead of one voice we have tweets,
barks, roars, and none is capable of
understanding all the others. We may
hear assonance, more likely
dissonance, cacophony.

For we must listen more than speak,
distinguish fright from anger or calm chatter.
Most animals know how to read
the signs from other creatures in the wild.
We seem to have forgotten.

Past, Present, Future

These tenses of time
aren't true,
fists feeding from our hands.

A moment beats erosion
until it doesn't,
succumbs like a succubus.

Everything else
will be the love of our lives
we cocoon in skin

that peels back
one layer at a time
to reveal the crack

between our lives.

That She'd Jump

I sketch out irksome maps, civilizations for the history test. The white page gleams like a nacreous pearl, I envision spirits rising out of the book. Earlier in the day my friends and I had gossiped, snatched each other's biscuits and tossed them around class. We had braided each other's hair, while criticizing our own. We tried to concentrate during history, but learning about old kings was boring. So we passed chits with smiley faces.

I get a call.

I never knew that a dead voice could shatter one's soul; that tears could burn your eyes like lava; that hysteria could rise up like a tide, taking away the seashells and leaving behind a shore of pain.

That a girl would jump, her soul splattering the pavement. That life could end at one's hand, crumble like the chocolate chip cookies I'd juggle in class. That the mild winds blowing in my mind had formed a tempest in hers. That air would never enter her lungs again; that the earth hadn't cushioned her deliberate fall.

I sit two weeks later, tears making the page shine like mythological constellations. And at that moment, I could swear that her soul joined theirs, joining the misty tide. She'd never truly leave, I think comfortingly; much like how past, living souls induce us to study century-long tales, inspire us to peruse the skies for a sign, for a hope — that we're not sailing alone in uncharted waters.

Dream #12

Particle beams
of flashing strobe
lights permeate
the lids of
my sleep covered eyes;

Blinding me
to the ways
of the worrisome
woeful world.

A hand grasps
my own from
across the river
of Silence.

Blasts
of Technicolor
sound reach
my pierced
lobes.

The taste
of cobalt
and Nickel
awakens me
in a cold sweat.

I was only
dreaming,
not drowning.

Love Letter

My dear Nina-

A window above Graham's desk clatters. It's noon and still snowing. The world outside is only a blur.

I'm late again aren't I? I guess its becoming part of our theme; I'm usually late, and you leave early. Still I'm sorry I haven't written you sooner. I promise I will try to be quicker about it next time.

The last "e" in "time" is little more than a squiggle. Graham steadies his right hand with his left; the shaking isn't as bad today, but writing is always difficult. He tries to say something then about the pain in his hands. To no-one, to anyone. To the faces that look back at him on the wall. On the desk. Nothing. His voice is softer than the creak of the chair. Confused, he returns to his letter.

Where to start? I think last time I wrote you that I was on my way to Lincoln, and I'd be staying with my Aunt here for awhile. Glad I did , don't think I could afford it other wise. Sales have not exactly been brisk..I've sent what I could.

Graham shivers. A cold draft sneaks under the window, and leaves a trail of goosebumps up and down his arms while knocking over a small picture along the way. Two faces look up at him, frozen in black and white. Behind them the white shadows of petals fill the background of the picture in an impressionist smudge.

But enough about that - It's spring! Yesterday me and Aunt Beth had a picnic up near the old barn. I tell you Nina, you'd of love to seen all those wildflowers. My gosh, there were more pink ladies up on that hill than at your friend Gabby's wedding!

Taps from his pen echo. First one. Then two. Then - no, wait, that's not him. Is someone at his parlour door? Or the window? He can't tell where, or what, or - that photo. Graham's eyes fall back to the picture of the man and a boy lying flat on his desk. His scribbles are now slower, more deliberate, than before.

It was a beautiful day, probably one of the prettiest i've seen in some time. Though it can't help but be second in my heart, to any day you've told me "I love you."

Not a boy. A girl, he notes.

I miss you Nina. God, has it only been six months? Six awful months since I have held you!

"Mister Doyle?" But Graham stares right through his caretaker.

Ellie, he remembers. Ellie was her name. She was the man's daughter.

I want to ask you about everything that's happened back home. About the pleats on the dress you were making. About little Tom's leg.

The nurse leans over the old man's shoulders, but he doesn't notice her. "It's time for your lunch?" Mister Doyle?"

His daughter. His and Nina's. Graham's face falls into his shaking hands, and all but one question slips from his fingers. After a few moments of silence, he reaches again for the pen. The scratch of his writing speaks over the nurses's pleas.

Why did you die before me?

Space

Everybody has his or her
own way of finding it

Like my kid brother,
who tells me it's when he thumbs through
his vinyl record collection in forgotten milk crates;

cataloging each transparent
and splatter-colored disc
by the mood he owns that week.

And my eighty year old neighbor, Alma,
who stops me before work sometimes,
to show me her latest accumulation of banana sticker logos

all the way from Vera Cruz, Assam, and Ghana;
pointing at them like photographs of grandchildren she never had
beneath sun glares stained on scrapbook pages.

As for me,
It's usually when
I sit at my dining room table every morning,

searching
between a ballpoint
and a spine of scribbled pages.

When some times,
It feels like a therapeutic breakthrough;
Where I imagine myself in a chaise lounge

listening to the subtle strikes
of my ideas like Newton's cradle
and pondering each meaning afterwards

as if I'm staring at a wall
of Jackson Pollock paintings
while the exaggerated part of me

sits like a shrink stuck in a brainstorm,
whispering *yes*
and jotting every revelation.

Other moments, however,
It's more like capital punishment.
When time rats me out

and my thoughts
sharpen their tiny knives
on my back just to prove a point;

before strapping me to *the chair*
and flipping the volts switch
to highlight that I'm a failure for the day.

And for sixty minutes,
one carved hour
before the world awakes,

I could take a jog around town to exercise my demons,
learn a foreign language like I always wanted to (French or Polish perhaps),
or even start my own assemblage of corky objects,

yet I don't mind sitting at my dining room table every morning,
searching between a ballpoint
and a spine of scribbled pages,

trying to find a little
space
between my words.

A Flower in a Frost Cover

"I live
like a hobbit
in a hole", he said,
the day I thought
he was dead.

He
staggered out
into the blizzard with his
burly aching feet,
wearing

no
shoes, no
pants, no shirt,
only boxer shorts like a
flower in a frost
cover.

"I live
a pathetic
Dean Moriarty", he
grinned. "You know, the one
who found **it** in the chaos of music & mist
but without his
appetite."

He
talked and
talked it out in dragon
licks until smoke rose when he paused and
choked on his
sick

.
no
amount of
words soothed the
dungeon beast from his malignant mental
trap.

"I live

like a shadow,"
he said. "So I'm just
gonna lie here until my candle
burns to the ground
with

Xanax
and firewater
at my feet; don't worry,"
he assured me, as I watched like a rabbit
in a snare, "I'll come through by spring in a heartbeat." _____

In Transit

"You're not damaged, pet. You're just a bit battered-in-transit." -Sally Jenkinson

I wish I could say
I remember a time
when we were both
genuinely happy,
but I can't.

I can only remember
today and today and today
I had a cup of tea
in a near empty cafe
writing about us,

but I'm not sure I'd even
call us an us anymore.
Us means singular unit.
You and me, we are two
very different people,

separated by our own choices:
I chose England, you chose
loneliness in the house on a hill.
Oh, how I used to love that
house. How happy I once imagined

it would make me if I lived there,
but now I know I would feel
prisoner, captured, bird in cage,
and I wonder why you chose
that for yourself when I offered

a world of opportunity
just waiting for you to sign
your name upon its surface.
Instead, you left me with
a heart, suitcase empty,

and eyes so doting on who
I always imagined you to be,
until the day you chose
solitude and captivity

over my presence.

I remember loving you
and I remember you saying
you loved me, but I
do not remember wedding vows,
only in sickness, only for worse.

I do not remember saying goodbye
when the time came
or telling you I loved you more
than I let on for months,
but somehow, I couldn't.

Words choked back tears
and I have been choking back
bits of you for months
and running away as far as I can
until your pain cannot touch me,

until I cannot feel your heart
beating in my chest at night,
until I let go of the string
that you used to puppet me
for your own purposes.

I'm not damaged.
I'm just battered-in-transit,
and this train is taking me
far away from the scared girl
you once knew and lied to

and straight to a destination
of forgiveness, mercy,
honesty, and love.
For better and in health,
that is my vow to myself

until I can find myself
in the corners of truth
that your rough and calloused hands
will never, ever, ever
be able to reach.

My Relationship with Grief

Jump on my back,

I tell him.

It's really no problem.

I've been toting you around for months anyway.

His scruffy graying beard chafes my neck.

I hold my breath.

He clings to me.

What have you been eating, I ask him.

You are heavier and harder to lug.

This may not work you know-

I may have to leave you behind this time.

You're beginning to weigh me down.

You smell like you haven't showered in months.

And I'm not sure how to introduce you anymore.

pain goals

how many times
do I have to tell you
about shame

almost always a
useless emotion; it feels

like being shackled on the inside

to a 12 year old boy
mean freckles
& fat rolls in a dirty t-shirt
or your father

& how many times
do I have to say
that grief is not a contest

we do not compare pain

let's just say
if bereavement was competitive; if
our losses could be tallied –
you & I, we would
crush the competition
in our orphan fists, we would

ball them up like tissues
toss them across
the playground, our
heads held high.

& they would go wild
with excitement. they
would hold us up
as heroes
as true examples
of resilience.

this is how you live, they
would say.
this is how you die, we
would return.

How To Stand In Front Of A Camera

"She takes off her shirt,"-
Is the beginning of this poem.

Sometime when we are not looking, she
puts it back on
and makes herself breakfast.
This is a parade in a warehouse with no lights.

By then, no one is reading, anymore.

She writes down, first,
what a scream sounds like.
She uses words like
'intrusive,' like breaking down great wooden door frames,
sending cracks splintering through their bodies,
a tremor of terrific end.
Like 'dissonant,'
as in
do not make me go.

She writes down, next,
the way the water compares, analytically, to her sadness,
all mouth full of black tar
in the middle of a derailed train.
Trying, in the way that makes you want to look away,
to fit its hands back inside, to catch the wilted body
of its desperation on a loose fingernail.
She says,
"it is everywhere."

She will sometimes ask, when we are
alone on the bottom of the swimming pool,
when we are attempting self-dissection on the floor
of the living room,
when we know we are not being watched...

"What I do to keep them interested,
how is it different from what I do to keep myself
safe? I will tell you the way this goes, and
of how we survive," -
Is the end of this poem.

Druze Read My Death in the winter Stars

Druze read my death in the winter stars:

Drowned

Said the Druze.

Drowned

In the desert

Drowned

In the dunes;

A Desert cathedral

Ruined by rains.

Druze read my death in the winter stars.

My name became

A Solar barque

Buried

Near

An oasis;

Where

I ate

Bread, figs,

And drank absinthe.

Druze read my death in the winter stars.

Plaything

He fixed the date, he bought me flowers,
chose the wine and paid the bill.
He chose the quiet park we walked in,
held my hand and said '*with her*

I always have to walk in front'.

I saw my future self behind him -
sugar daughter, pretty trophy
kept a secret in his toy box.
Caught myself, threw him away.

River of Sky Between the Trees



Fall, Spring, Summer

October brought an online lover
her name was Crow
our sultry love tangoed on my screen
electric impulses before, behind my eyes.
In March she flew to me, wrapped me in her wings and then I knew
the ways we could, the ways that we could not
glide together.

In our time
a hawk, her talons wrapped around a writhing snake,
loomed huge before the windshield,
flying South as we were driving West.
That night I was a poetry star
and star-tripped over my own feet. Broke my leg,
the very night Helene flew from her cancer body
to the stars.

In May
walking in my leg brace on the bridge above the dirty stream
a block from my house, stagnant water that doesn't seem to have
source or destination
but there it is, leading to the hospice for wounded birds.
A crane walked the demi-shoreline
one foot in the water
the other on the land.
I waited there
knowing eventually she'd lift off and away like Soaring Crow.
But when the crane stretched her wings she swooped so low
she almost skimmed the water.
The rivulet mirrored her, pristine,
untarnished by the mirror's imperfections.

On the Summer Solstice I whirled dervish style and sang
"Only the heart with wings can fly."

So many birds appear to me
and women in my life
go where I cannot follow.

When I check my breasts for lumps
I think I feel the wings
my heart is growing.

Trash

She always had one foot out the window; small patent leather shoes that were never broken in. She counted the stories – calculated the velocity – imagined what she would look like – the amount of blood – her delicate brain gracing the concrete - then remembered she had a back apartment and no one would take notice until the trash went out.

**The Woman Who is Not the Nanny Answers at the Grocery Store Concerning the, Evidently,
Mismatched Children In and Around her Cart**

1.

I stabbed her,
the skinny half caff in the high waisted yoga pants
so I can only assume that she is still in the alley
behind this fine establishment
bleeding out: I aimed for the femoral artery.
Hopefully it was quick and painless -
as painless as these things can be.
What I like to do,
after a kill,
is abduct the children of my victim
and then, this is my unique signature -
my M.O. if you will -
I like to take the children on mundane errands.
That's why we're here: buying
frozen, microwavable chicken nuggets
because nothing quite says murderous spree
like organic chicken breasts
dipped in a 7 whole grain bread mixture.
I couldn't help but notice how hungry your children look.

2.

No, no. Don't stop now.
I'm enjoying the very specific
and prying questions that you,
a complete stranger, are levying at me.
There's a level of brutal honesty
that I can only achieve with people
whose names I don't know:
for instance, this one, it was so hard to get him.
I had to practically bribe the IVF doctor
to put that white woman's eggs in me.
It feels good to say that out loud.

These two? They aren't even twins.
I stole one from a yoga instructor
busy berating the barista at Whole Foods.
This does feel good.
Let's pick up some hummus
Then head to aisle 7 for chips.
I have so many questions for you:
about your home training
about the one in your cart and his uncleft chin.

3.

I don't know what you'd call me
in relation to them. I:
feed them; dress them; read them stories.
And I have been called things so much worse than nanny;
you know that, though, don't you?
They're adopted. All of them. These. The three brats
in aisle 9. The unattended one in Dairy. The two screaming
for a mother in checkout. All of them.
I've been eyeing yours.
I'm starting a band. We're going to do only cover songs.
Only Sly and the Family Stone. Or only Ted Nugent.
I'm still deciding. I know we can only be one thing
or the other.
Do you need a nanny? Can that one in the cart hit a high E?
Are you in the market for childcare services? How are her teeth?
I'm truly sorry that I don't have a resume
or list of references handy.
The nonexistent nanny position
that you have made up during this brief conversation sounds
delightful. Especially the detail about traveling with the family.
I, too, like to have the help with me.
I mean can I really be trusted to care for these
mixed matched children here
on my own?
Do you know hard it is to get the blood of strangers
out of cotton?
Oh, look at your girl smiling up at me; I think she likes me.

4.

Since we're on the topic of families and parents and children:
how do you think I should explain your questions
to the three small people
who are here
watching and listening and
learning?

Even Little Things Can Get Too Heavy

1.

At the moment, he is even more
out of alignment than before.
Head drastically crooked.
Shaking like crazy.

He is not dead though.
The disoriented shape of his neck
is a living bonsai sculpture
that will never snap.

He is not ready to leave yet.
Despite his uneasy discomfort,
his misshapen tail is still wagging.

2.

I remember the neighbor
offering to shoot my childhood
dog when its back legs stopped working.
What about its brain?

Wounds and bodily damage
don't make all our thoughts go away.
They just change them
into strength or fear or

knowledge of who can be trusted.
We find out who really cares about us
and who is only pretending.

3.

Who will lose interest now
that your body is breaking?

Who would rather shoot you,
because you are too painfully heavy
to be lifted up onto their bed?

Arizona In January

Within my Ambien dreams,
this desert in my throat
is where
my tiny spirit lives at night —
where the skin on my knuckles
cracks
and bleeds your name.
And I wait for you to meet me
in a half-circle
of Arizona barrel cactuses.
You will be here
soon
to make me moonstruck
again from your gibbous eyes.
Until I wake, we could
fuck beside the lizards —
fuck inside the sandy wind
with the sand creeping
into
our ass cracks. And you could
save me from the comedy
that sings in my flesh.
You could remove the slugs
from my bones and the leeches
from my arteries.
Stay with me here
as New Jersey gets
frostbitten and amputated
from the rest of the states.
Stay with me here —
and if you
want, I will show you
how to let go
of science and we'll hover
naked
into the stratosphere to get
a closer look
at the western stars.

Sometimes, if you love
hard enough,
a desert will grow a rose.

Coda

trying to remember what i meant to say
which was not so very much

something about suspenders rotting
on an old man's chest
as he stands
comfortably in line
to get back to the place
he once was

isn't it always like that
the suspenders often missing
the circle the same

most days
we live without a because

our puzzle box
has 79 pieces
not the 100
we were promised

the hole in the sky we notice
not because it's
in the sky
but because it's an absence
we didn't plan for

that is what
i've been trying to remember to say
all along

Deck of 51

In open fields of rundown
 American Neighborhoods
Where crabgrass is just as common as
a boys blood
 & murals of a childhood extinct
Is on concrete battlefields.
 Underneath bridges
whiskey taste better than shame
and memories of past lives is strength-----
 the poor eat the unfortunate
Just to get by
& unclothed children
 with scrapped bloody knees
are brave because they have to be.

29 Unwritten Love Songs

1) How did you make food poisoning romantic, even the second time? 2) Sometimes you have to let the meal burn in the pot. 3) We fought the waves with our bodies and made hard love with the beach. 4) Never write a love poem about otters, people will mistake you for a romantic. 5) I've always hated the ukulele. 6) You told me the devil is in the details and I began to obsess over tiny things 7) like the tiny scars on his arms I kissed the third time he stayed over. 8) Can love be measured in mileage? I have loved you for 3748 miles. 9) There is nothing romantic about a car crash. 10) Every poem I have written about you is also about cigarettes. 11) A headbutt is like love note from an earthquake. 12) My hands were shaking so badly. 13) I fall for people far too easily. 14) You are too far away and I miss the soft curves of your voice. 15) I was only fifteen. 16) We both knew I was never going to marry you. 17) You wanted to get matching tattoos on our wedding day, and I downloaded Pinterest for you and now I just upload pictures of dead birds. 18) I met you when you were 19) I was too young. 20) I have never forgiven you. 21) I still find myself writing apology notes for the things you did to me. 22) I'm sorry. 23) I'm so 24) sorry. 25) We were never anything, and that was the best thing I ever did for you. 26) We were drunk, she was older. 27) What do you mean whiskey doesn't taste like bottled love? Darling you just aren't drunk enough yet. 28) One day I will cook us breakfast, sloppy drunk and burn the pancakes again, like I did when we were kids. 29) Hello, for the first time

A Letter from Eve to Barbie

—after “A Letter to Rhianna from Eve” by Jaz Sufi

Just as Adam
 was made in God's image,
 you were made in mine. Every
 big breasted, thick hiped, pointy toed, smiling replica
 is me
 and not me,
 again and again.

I see my daughters
 with their child's fingers
 and how they braid
 your too thick, too blonde hair
 into stubby ropes,
 how they push
 you around in your shiny pink convertible,
 how they dress and undress
 your body scrubbed bare
 of nipple and cunt, unburdened
 of the garden of temptations
 plumped up, thinned down, bleached out, homogenized,
 sterilized of apple and snake— at last
 the woman they wanted me to be.

I hear
 how you whisper
 such slivered words
 through clenched smiling teethe.
 Oh, how you hiss
 as well as any devil,
 offering such plastic promises
 of beauty, privilege, wealth,
 such manufactured lies.
 But I do not blame
 you, who have been molded
 from polymer and wire,
 as I have been
 molded from a single rib.
 We both

bear the marks
of our makers
too heavily upon our soles/souls.

My daughters
are rising, striding
away from innocence,
away from youth.
They are leaving you
and all false promises behind.
They are cultivating their own Edens,
nurturing their own
apple trees, tasting
of their own forbidden fruits,
and swallowing the sweetness
of their own knowledge. My daughters,
oh, how they laugh
as well as any dust-born child can.

Barbie, the world
will never forgive you, as I
have never been forgiven,
but then you
never bothered to apologize
and neither
have I.

Labor (Paired with "Unfurl")

The thick-headed fly injects the bumblebee with her egg, which hatches and manipulates the bee into burrowing into the soil. The larva will be safe to emerge there once it has eaten its way out of the host's body.

At first, you were just an itch. I shivered, leaned
into the spines of catmint, scratched with the dignity of a dog,
but I couldn't quite reach you. The queen, that bitch, ordered
me to keep working. I found a delphinium, wedged
into the folds of its mouth-pink petals, where your ache
spread like a pesticide—thirst choked my intestines, hunger
slit the split-second beat of my heart. I flew frantic, inarticulate
coordinates until I landed on a stone, sucked its nectar dry.

I longed for the shrike's skewer, the patient ambush
of a crab spider, or even the undignified underfoot squash
of a child. Without willing it, I dropped to the dirt at the base
of azalea, watched my legs dig deep into soil, the effort
more idea than action. I moved into the divot,
dirt dusted my body like pollen.

By then, you were more me than I, and would soon emerge
from the days-dead husk of my body. I thought about the queen,
perched on her ridiculous pile of eggs. My co-workers, preparing
for the birth of a thousand brats. The thankless, never-ending workday.
I imagined a deep breath of lavender and slipped into its calm.
Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

It is easier than one would think, accepting this final gift of the body.

Unfurl (paired with "Labor")

Let others spin it, try to make it pretty.
I have no soft words for you.
I will track your fidgety flight, follow
you while you fuss at the azaleas
like a nervous virgin. I won't insult you
with kinship despite our twin stripes,
the striking contrast of our black
and yellow. By the time you see me
I will already have carved you open,
stabbed my egg into your round belly.
I will not seduce you into believing
my young is yours. My child
will spider through your guts, sink deep
into your need and siphon off
your own survival instincts.

There is no comfort even in death.
You've never seen the azaleas
from this angle before—the matte undersides
of the leaves, the pink blossoms
hidden from view. Even they have turned
their backs on you. My daughter will unfurl
from your body, emerge like a lover
from crumpled sheets, shake her wings
and lick her hands, the scent
of you still on her.

Myriapoda

I was thinking of you just the other day, while I sat on the toilet
in my cheap as sin hotel room.

I was wondering where you are now and if you are still like the Cone Snail,
a handsome shell filled with venom,

when a vile house-centipede dropped from the ceiling vent
and began to burrow in my hair

giving me gooseflesh and reminding me of the stubborn nature
of invasive species

EMILY AS SHE TRIES TO CONVINC ME THAT I AM NOT A GHOST #1

There is a generous
& sincere portion
of my mind

that is concerned
that death might be
coming for me

a second time,
that when I was
twenty-two

& terribly drunk
all of the time
I crashed my car

through a barricade
of construction
on Route 3

in Ohio, between
Wooster
& Mount Vernon.

I know I almost
shoved my legs
through the floor

of the car
to slam on
the breaks.

I know the sound
the car made
was the opposite

of a holy sound.
I know pieces
of me left the car.

I do not know

if when I opened
my eyes

& turned around
the car, that I
did so as a person

whole enough
to keep living
on different roads.

EMILY AS SHE TRIES TO CONVINC ME THAT I AM NOT A GHOST #2

Emily says
that however often
I dream

that I didn't
make it back
to Wooster

that night,
that I didn't try
to find Elizabeth

or I didn't eat
six tacos
on the floor

of the student
that was to house
me after I got done

with my reading
there, that what
I know happened

is the opposite
of how I feel
it should have

happened.
She says I feel guilty
for how much

I remember crying
that night.
She says it didn't rain.

I remember rain.

EMILY AS SHE TRIES TO CONVINC ME THAT I AM NOT A GHOST #3

I thrive
because
of my obligation

to thrive.
That does not
mean I'm alive.

The Marriage Wake

“Are you sure, Meagan?” I ask, my voice a raw rasp of a whisper. She sits still, her hands clasped together on her lap, looking at me with...concern? Pity? Remorse?

Finally, she nods and in a quiet yet steady voice, says, “Yes.”

I struggle to form coherent thoughts as my mind reels with the news, the electrons in my brain firing like a string of firecrackers, a trillion thoughts per second, never able to slow down enough to cohesively join with other thoughts.

I try to ask a question but a sob catches in my throat and I can't speak. My pulse quickens and my breathing is labored because it feels like someone—she, has put a huge weight on my chest. My stomach churns and I'm afraid that I'll be sick. My vision blurs as the tears fill my eyes. “Sorry I'm such a pussy,” I manage to mumble.

Her sob startles me. “I'm so sor-” her voice cracks. “I don't want to hurt you and I know I am, but I don't know what else to do. I can't do this anymore, I have to change to be happy.”

It's like she kicked me in the nuts. How did I not know she was unhappy? How did I not hear that her laughter was not genuine, her terms of endearment insincere? How was I so blind that I never in a million years imagined this moment?

“I do love you,” she says through tears. “I always will. Hell, I want to *be* like you—but I'm not.” Her next words are the predictable, perhaps even inevitable cliché, “I love you, I'm just not *in love* with you.”

“Fuck that,” I say and throw my beer bottle into the trash can from about five feet away.

Tears stream down her cheeks and immediately I regret my anger. I still love her so much that seeing her cry is unbearable. I step toward her but she holds up her hand to stop me.

“I'm so sorry,” she says, between sobs. “I would rather have died than hurt you like this.”

I believe her—I feel the same about her, which is why none of this makes sense. I want to flip a switch and shut off this surreal movie because it's too intense. This cannot be happening.

“I have to go,” she says. “I can't stay here, I feel like I'm suffocating. I'm going to a hotel.”

Before I can protest, she's out the door. She starts her car and I listen until I can no longer hear the engine. I lie on the couch, bury my face in a pillow and cry.

The next afternoon she calls. “I'll come by this weekend,” she says, and I'm both elated and petrified.

Saturday morning we spend hours in intense conversations interspersed with laughter as one of us makes some movie reference or silly joke that only the other truly appreciates. It's bizarre. We cry, hold each other like it's the last time, and profess our love for each other. She says it's not enough. She's convinced she's not *in love* with me and that's an imperative. Before she goes, she says that she'll return the following weekend. Once she's gone, I go into the bathroom and vomit.

The next weekend she frowns and tells me I'm losing too much weight. I joke that I should write the “high stress diet book” and make lots of money.

After doing her laundry, she settles next to me to watch movies. We share so many laughs and easy conversations that I can't believe we are where we are. She tells me she still enjoys being with me, but considers me a friend. She asks if we can still be friends after we're no longer married. Kicked in the nuts again, but the answer is “No.”

Like so much of our marriage, this is unconventional. Friends and family file past the *For Sale* sign on the front lawn and make their way to the tent in the back yard. It's a pot luck affair, with each guest bringing a favorite dish that they had once shared with us during happier times. We sprung for an open bar, something we regretted not doing for our wedding reception, and I take full advantage of the liquid courage.

She looks lovely in an orange sundress and smiles effortlessly as she greets our guests, always the perfect hostess. I read my brother's lips as he tells her, "We'll miss you." I look away and swallow hard. This is what we agreed to do, to allow our friends and family to say goodbye, with no animosity, no blame, no guilt.

I almost make it through dinner unscathed, only coming close to losing it once, when my father put his hand on my shoulder and growled, "You okay?"

For sixty years, my parents found a way to make it work. It wasn't always easy, hell, sometimes it wasn't even civil, but at the end of the day, love won.

The lights dimmed, a signal that the final stage of the party — of this marriage wake — was about to start. It seemed like a good idea at the time, to allow those we love to say a few words about us, our marriage, our impending futures, but now I'm not so sure. I chug a bottle of verduzzo like it was beer.

Some roast, some toast, some eulogize, with no fewer than twenty guests taking the microphone to say their piece. When they finish, Meagan stands, a picture of grace, and thanks everyone for their love and support. At this moment, my heart relinquishes the hope I had secretly stored there. I can't look, staring down at the table in front of me as I await the coup de grace, my eyes fill with tears. I feel her hand on my shoulder and I'm ashamed that I cannot be as strong as she. Tomorrow. Tomorrow is a new beginning.

Cutting Deeper

I will use a blade now,
to shave, no longer
an electric razor.
My facial hair
too grizzled, too coarse.
My face too creviced.
My face too like my father's
who knew love
only as a hard thin edge
of glinting blue steel
scraping across the cheek.

Last Scenes

The monstrous oak
out the window
never budged
as I rambled on
about our shared moments –
too few to forget –
like vividly painted portraits;
flash cards you had
Mom shuffle over and over at me
or our contentious Latin lessons –
you having passed in high school,
sacrificing so I might pass like you.
Ignoring me and our memories,
you focused on
the tree from your hospice bed,
as though it wielded
the power to pardon your sentence.
That tree winked green buds
upon your arrival,
serenading you
during your last trip as
each growing leaf,
slowly unraveling
into wide palms,
waved farewell in the storms of summer.
The next disappearing soul
rolled in as you left.
How many more temporary residents
before irony finally sings
and the dropping of leaves
in the golden autumn
becomes someone's last view?

Crayon Markings

The door of the trailer opens
 and you emerge into a night of humid breezes and cricket song,
 arms outstretched, a knife in one hand.
 Blood falls from your wrists onto freshly-mowed grass
 and your neighbor's new deck.
 Curtains part and faces peer at you through windows.
 You shout, cry, pound on doors,
 swaying on bare feet.

I'll clean up the mess, you say, dabbing
 the neighbor's deck with your bloody fingers.
 Give me some water. Let me wash my face and hands.
 Open the door.

This is the third time she tried to kill herself this month,
 You hear your daughter-in-law's voice behind
 a curtained window. Call the police.

At home, your husband wanders through rooms,
 a cell phone in one hand and a beer in the other.
 He looks away from the messages crayoned
 in purple on the bathroom walls :
 "Bastard! Who is she? I'll cut her throat!"
 In the kitchen, over the dish drainer your husband never uses:
 "If I hung myself, would you cut me down?"
 and over the bed: "I'm going now."

Your husband curls in an umbilical sack
 on a couch of blood-stained sheets and pillows.
 One blink and he flickers in and out of shadow,
 a dying candle, a priest lifting his knife
 above a lamb squirming below his hands.
 You back out of the house,
 certain you can still hear the chants of shadow priests
 and the lamb's agonized bleating.

I didn't cut you, he says, rubbing his hands
 over and over again, as he balls up the bloodied sheets,
 shoves them into the dumpster.
 One sheet wraps your neck and another
 entwines your arms as your body falls
 past mildewed boxes and empty beer cases.

In a room that pales the moon in brightness,
blankets peel back, a turtle's skin
exposing you to the orderlies' hushed whispers.
Your arms and legs twitch under fresh straps
as they lift your gown, palpate your chest,
press their cold lips to yours
and fill your lungs with their cigarette stale air.

The room, heavier now, sways like water
lifting you high above your mother and your brother
who paw over your things, a few soiled fives in a wallet,
a tarnished wedding ring wrenched from a swollen finger
as if you were already cold
and were not floating above them, watching,

begging them to touch your cheek, your hands,
tuck the blanket over you, offer some small tenderness
rather than this, willing you death
swift and neat,
as if, in slipping a knife under your sheets
they are daring you:
"Pick it up. Strike now."

The Painter & His Model

Long before, Mr. Picasso had tossed
tradition to an accepting ocean

swimming w/the exaggerated limbs
& large eyeballs of ladies primitively

featured. Noses too long on the edges
of cubist faces. Hands & feet as large

as those of the construction workers
transforming Belle Époque Paris ideally,

more likely a mid-century Paris still
recovering & readjusting re: war.

Paris is nowhere to be seen except for
perhaps in his model's astonished eyes,

eyes reveling in her painter's estimation.
We are all models. Also in her eyes:

Picasso's own reveling. Not just in her
propinquity but in her keen interest

in life & the world, her raison d'être &
joie de vivre & for the painter himself,

for Picasso in his blasé lemon hat, his blue
suit w/its understated royal purple streak.

We are all painters. Here, the painter's
face is pink & white. An eyeful of pupil,

button-like & knowing. He's to the left of
our focal point: His easel, warm & brown,

organically asunder, not at all
monolithic but thematically

fundamental & the only thing there
save the model on the floor & the painter

in his chair. All of us easels & canvases,
but the canvas itself isn't so clear —

no doubt the painter is busy depicting
his grayish-white model's quirky pose.

She's a tasteful nude, folded comfortably
in knots. Beneath the painter's pointed shoe,

a floor to match his cap—its yellow bright
yet sooty, but apparently clean enough

for his model to pose on; sturdy enough
for his easel to perch on; level enough

for a chair for Picasso's behind.
A window is present, if not a mirror,

but it's implied. Beyond, his studio—
snug & melting to paletted perfection,

into smoke & shades of red & green
& the random shapes of things.

after *The Painter and His Model* by Picasso, 1963

Super Bowl CTE

Blue fifty-two. Blue fifty-
Two. Hike!

He screams
and throws his future, pig-
skinned, inflated to
regulation
across the field of
numbered jerseys –

Does he know
he could be
the one
in three
affected?

Tackled in the
end zone
Number 22 falls
to his knees, the clock
barely begun –

Does he fall like that
to pray
that his white matter
will live
to remember this play?

Get up, son!
His father shouts
from a living room two-
thousand miles distant
from the violence.

Does his father know
that getting up on
the field will be
the first
step of degeneration?

Get up, Rod!
His coach yells

through the callous
tear of a ligament, overcome
with the promise
of a gold ring
and fame.

Does the coach
realize the sting of
death by dementia,
dementia by sport; is number
22's life really worth
the ring's weight?

Rawwwrrrrr!!!!
The crowd cheers
to lift up
the team's spirits,
to elevate their odds
of winning
an office-place pool.

Would they pay any
more if they knew the
bet was a
gamble on a life,
on a man?

Let's win this!
Number 22 finally
rejoinders with maximum
expiratory volume, his hand held
up by a teammate,
his health
tangled up in a game.

Star Gazing

It's late. Past seven. Cyrus lets in Dr. Skargo's emergency patient. Her cheek's puffed up like Cyrus's morning corn cereal. When she opens her mouth to show Dr. Skargo, Cyrus stops his broom. He sees from the corner of his eye a pearly constellation. Beautiful. Like his grandmother's teeth shining bright against the night sky as she pointed to the Big Dipper.

"You better come on back." Dr. Skargo steers his emergency past Cyrus, who presses with his broom invisibly against the wall.

Cyrus shoves paper scraps and metal clips and hardened bits of dentist goo into the dustpan. He shakes gummy bristles over the garbage to loosen the stuck gunk. He keeps every sense, though, taut on the room beyond. He hears the chalky scrape of metal against enamel, the slight "ooh" pressed from the woman's lips, the throttled suction of the hose that catches tongue. He peeks past the door and glimpses grey-pink sneakers nosed ceiling-wards, and Dr. Skargo's rounded back.

At last, bells jangle against the glass door. Cyrus snaps around. All clear. He spends another heady minute sweeping around the receptionist's stool; his heart runs chords against his ribs. He nudges into the room where Dr. Skargo's muskiness lingers above the pasty-mint stench. Normally, he'd rifle through the medical waste bag with bare hands, searching for another perfect tooth. But tonight he doesn't have to. The newly pulled tooth sinks in a glass beaker, ext to the horseshoe metal trays, carelessly forgotten. He deftly sweeps his fingers around the chlorinated concoction; he pulls out the singular beauty.

Sated, he leans his broom against the counter, slides into the dentist chair, stares past the ceiling, and imagines the stars beyond. Behind his eyelids, Grandmama murmurs and points out the dippers; her knobbed fingers wisp once more through Cyrus's hair; Cyrus feels again the fine strands snag on her bitten nails. He is small, and when he looks at the sky, all he sees are her white teeth and the ridges inside her mouth. Then invades the afternoon his father came back. He'd dried out in Hazelden and bought a buick and pulled into Grandmama's drive—but no, Cyrus will not think of him. Not there, in the dentist chair, with the final tooth in his fingers: he'll only think of Grandmama's smile—her teeth and stars beyond.

Home, Cyrus flips on the desk lamp. The shot of yellow strikes sheets of black construction paper taped across the ceiling. On each piece, hundreds of glo-painted teeth shimmer iridescently against their paper sky: all the constellations, painstakingly recreated.

Grandmama only knew of the dippers. But there were so many more. Canis major and minor. Ophiuchus. Andromeda. Orion. Cyrus tugs the tooth from his pocket. His thumb slides over its polished face and jagged root. Eight year's work. His father, who drove them very far in that buick, into sandy places with hot sun where Grandmama would never find them, has not lived to see his son's masterpiece.

Cyrus paints, glues the tooth, then nestles it into line with the others. He tapes this last constellation to the ceiling. Perfection. Cyrus flips the light off. He waits for the dark to settle in, the teeth to glow. Then he sees it: Grandmama's grin against the stars...and he feels her fingers trickle through his hair.

It has been so long.

My Grandfather, Like Kylo Ren's

My grandfather, like his,
was tall, rigid, pissed.
Every word I heard from him
I heard through a mask
of an era unknowable to me.
No wonder their sons, our fathers, fled,
a generation hiding on islands,
or wise-cracking across the galaxy.
My own rose to prominence,
outdid his father, their battles fought
with dark comments over drinks at the club.
When my father fell to cancer,
his father fell into silence,
dark, infinite, spinning.
We were abandoned to the outpost
of our mother's widowhood,
where we grew up trying to turn grief
into something we could fight with.

Bottom of the Fifth

Miss Olivia Dupree was our
 next door neighbor, a widow,
 mother of a blaggard, an alcoholic
 and a part-time saleslady in a
 fine women's clothing store.
 She loved the Atlanta Braves, knew
 the stats of every player and never
 missed a game, although she had
 never traveled to Fulton County Stadium.
 She would watch the games on television
 late into the night, topping up her glass
 of Evan Williams bourbon as many
 times as necessary if the contest
 went into extra innings.
 Because she had alcohol sweats,
 Miss Olivia kept her air conditioning
 set at sixty-five and we could see
 the condensation on the single
 pane aluminum windows of her house.
 She baked the finest cheese straws
 we ever tasted and brought a bowl
 over to our house on special occasions.
 She always looked elegant in a high-end
 pants suit and impeccable makeup,
 her breath smelling faintly of
 whisky and mouthwash.

When she developed cirrhosis
 of the liver, she refused to go to the
 doctor and didn't want any visitors.
 She said, *If I'm fixin to die, I'm damn
 sure gonna do it my way at home.*
 She was just lucky it was baseball season
 and she could lie in bed sipping her
 bourbon, watching John Smoltz throw
 his fastball, slider, curve and change-up
 while Dale Murphy tore the cover off the ball.
 One day, when her son came to borrow
 some money, he found her dead with

the television still tuned to TBS, three
empty bottles of Evan Williams
and the thermostat set at sixty.
Thanks to the Atlanta Braves,
she didn't have to die alone.

#1

They—
 a wake. the main character of our story
 felt himself perfectly
 understood by his wife for the first time: walked out
 feeling the yellow
 traffic bumps of the suicide
 lane under his hooves counting
 on the diligence of the lap
 texting grammar
 Nazi gaze
 lowered. They—
 arrive. after fever Orchids appeared
 a vortex this question mark on the end of fragrant purple
 fireheads fragment in the meditation, stamen, pistil some
 noose her children just appeared disheveled from
 her cincture gasping
 pollen breath. They—all wave. for her
 the home appeared from nowhere no one lived
 cupboards opened the trespass of lips
 and Vicodan, the red van
 bypassed, listless, she looking down
 thumbs gouged into the eyes of words, un-tears
 would never miss him hair bitten
 through blood and safety glass each evening's
 suicide to morning eyes and shuttled
 phantasm stapling documents to endless scanned attachments. they—
 a rack. her undress, a silk lantern
 slotted
 head thrown back, neck locked
 in by pulled hair all of her
 in the mirror gasping
 her belted hand lashing jaw
 clenched.

Onward—seven
 syllables! The tin soldiers
 vie for her eye every monocle
 I want to be a free lance
 photographer I want to be
 amputee of. Danger cries director's chair tail
 feathers twitching eye
 in the wound! Process—sent

dirigibles! The enlisted step
into space[to light'n the load of] each cadence [the strick'n
air ship] I want to be
an airborne ranger
I want to live
a life of. Stranger
screams the elevated
perch
our reel itching eye of the wound!

Medusa Skirt



Asea

The temperature was not right, the air
too uniformly hot, the water like piss.
No seaweed, never any seaweed
along this Catalan coast. I stood
breast deep in tears like the girl with
no friends at the edge of a dance floor
but the dance floor was the ocean, bigger
than the world and there was no one
I knew anymore, and I'd forgotten
all the moves, forgotten how to hear
the music. Forgotten it was a sea.

What They Say About Birds

Hassidic Jews say you should never cage birds, it's their gift to fly free. Birds fly in calm, wind and storm. Travel in flocks, brave all seasons. Even when snow falls heavy on seeds, grasses and weeds, buries food under ice and leaves them to starve. And clangorous cold turns the world silent, hushed as death, dark as the heart of Beelzebub underground. Birds pulse with life and motion. Hop on air, dart, climb clouds. Fold wings, dive in abandon to catch dinner in talons. Land in a bare tree for shelter. Blanketing trees, their feet wrap around branches in a hug. A flock lifts together. Rolls, rises and falls. Wings paddle in unison, a pendulum sweeps over the sun. Birds fly free. A murmuration of feathers. A milling shadow over corn stubble. A sky heart cast to the earth.

Muse

She replaced the pawns
on Norman's chessboard
with turban squash
and poured hot Jello-O
over Jimmy's toy soldiers.
She swore a bungalow
on Graceland Ave. scudded
away from its foundation
and left behind a couple
Eskimo pies stillborn
on the porch. She claimed
junk mail arrived in Fibonacci
sequences, hominy grits
primped, and the mumps
wept. When some mad lad
shouted from a crowded porch,
"Whatcha looking at, homegirl?"
she answered: "Sunsets
that taste like grapefruit."
The old folks say she moved
away long time ago, just
picked up her grip and split.
But every now and then I see
her at the shoeshine stand,
riffing on polishing rags
and spit or giving cockleburs
in the alley a shave with her
daddy's razor. Just yesterday,
she stuffed an amaryllis
with malted milk balls.

Blue Monday



Shore of Women

1. Waldeinsamkeit

The deepest breath. We set soft
feet to ground, find it receives us,
then sends us severally on our way.
Then nothing else—no other eye
meeting mine, no other smile shaping
itself to my lips. Here every branch is
a path. All paths lead forward.
I am dappled. I am green.
When I reach the shore, I am alone.

2. Mångata

No sunset, just a lengthening
of blue. The woods turn black;
the shore becomes a bruise. Small rocks
skitter underfoot; echoes repeat
where they touch the flat water.
How still, then—how breath is
the only air, breathing the only answer.
When all becomes light, I set foot
on the water's road, rise to meet the moon.

Note: Waldeinsamkeit (German)—the feeling of being alone in the woods. Mångata (Swedish)—the road-like reflection of the moon on the water.

Anxious for a slice of bread

I'm a hungry child in a rich country,
striving for survival, anxious for even a slice of bread.

My country is so wide and her heat so hot
that I cannot bear.

As today comes,
I strive with the birds on a mango tree
and when tomorrow comes,
I go feasting with flies in the dustbin.

I toil all day for even a little wage
but I come back home in rage with no wage.

My father has gone to meet his ancestors
Following my mother who went cleaning the house.

My sisters never came into the world,
my brothers came but even went back before I knew them.

In my littleness I lament,
though I can't but rejoice about my being.

Even though I toil all day getting nothing,
contented I've often been.

Even though I've got no pen to write with,
let alone a paper to write upon,
as I go on searching for some crumbs,
I write on the walls along the road.

Though life in Nigeria seems hotter than the sun,
it's been all the while worth living.
I'm still a hungry child in a rich country,
striving for survival, anxious for even a slice of bread.

Chirp

"A team of scientists announced on Thursday that they had heard and recorded the sound of two black holes colliding a billion light-years away, a fleeting chirp..." - "Gravitational Waves Detected, Confirming Einstein's Theory," *The New York Times*, 2/11/2016

"It's not as though it's brain surgery." - "bruce," commenter on previous article

"Billion-year old echo of the collision
of two black holes,"

what bird are you?

Your chirp starts as volcanic
groan, drips like the notorious
broken faucet amplified on
helium

I listen for the light that can't
escape you.

I watch for the space-time
double helix you self-mutate.

Would you bring people back
for me, take me back to love
them loud and wise?

An Einstein critic says
grasping you is
not "brain surgery".

Which is true since your
chirp starts to feel cardiac
the ninth time I hear it.

As if you've pinned yourself
to the operating table

and touched your bare heart
like a winged, flaming Jesus.

This machinery rhythms us.

the shape of this heart

the shape of this heart
is tits up
on the wings of a dove
a fallen three on victory
camel humps
in wonder woman knickers

Season of Change

It's cold outside and my fingers are stiff like boards,

It's hard to hold things like pens

Or hands.

Or attention.

Or breaths.

I wish I could hide behind a coat of fur like a wolf

I could keep the warmth in and your cold out.

The ice eats at my pink innards

chewing them like a pile of bubble gum sticks.

I see red,

but I feel green

and the creaks and moans of my body are a telltale sign

that the seasons are changing—

a telltale sign that the next time I hear your voice might be the next time the earth mother rotates around

her

su(o)n.

By then my fingers will be thawed like the icicles hanging from your roof,

the glaciers to our North.

By then I will have grown a fur coat

as thick as a wolf in winter time.

Swoon

After the mind-winder,
 after the fun-house, after the double
 rocket capsule spinning upside down,

powdered sugar deep-fried machinery
 blaring its passionate rock songs,
 the children begging for more tickets

in the blazing sun, last gasp of summer
 burning itself out like a dying star,
 we seek shade in the tent behind the barn

filled with prize rabbits and sawdust,
 velvety calves on clean ropes
 nudging their wet pink noses

while we loll in the grass
 beneath a nylon bower
 and watch a man shearing sheep again,

reminding me of you, not the show
 but the ease of it, how he talks us through
 the yearly ritual, throws one down

and rolls her on her back, keeps her feet
 off the ground, keeps her comfortable,
 scissors his legs to pin her still

until she softens
 in a swoon— head lolling, eyes lidded,
 legs splayed, limp as a rag in his big hands.

“She’s dead!” cry the children
 but it’s only surrender— she’s faux-fainted
 like a Victorian lady in a wool coat
 as he wields the shears close to her skin,
 the insistent metal snipping
 the background rhythm to this clamorous day.

He’s loosening the stays,
 cutting off the excess
 of the past year, freeing her from the weight

of everything she no longer needs,
his blades sharp and deft, the dark fleece
separating into its own entity, hot and dense

like the shadow of a hot wood, a field
teeming with a million crickets, his hands
slick with lanolin as he throws her down

quick and calm, the way you once
threw me down in another barn.

Springtime

Every year there's the first lilac gasp
with sunshine-gilded grass, the scent of soil
instead of frost, the denim jacket
in place of gloomy wool. And every year

there's that yearning hooking me
below the sternum. I'm somewhere else,
still here, still aging, but also someone else
again: smoother, shyer, stretched out on the lawn,

legs bare at last. A young man plays his spring
recital nocturne on my spine and I wonder
in which jars and at what temperature
one can preserve such joy. But even then

I'm reaching backward still: that hammock
outside Montrose Hall, tee-shirted girls
all piled in, exams ahead and college envelopes
at home, but laughing for the moment;

then I'm at my childhood bedroom window.
A silken breeze is whirring at the screen.
I'm wracked already with nostalgia
for everything that's still unknown, bewildered

that we trail behind a ruthless march of hours
when the joyful earth keep twirling back
to fresh-mown spring, and every year
that yearning catches me below the sternum.

