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COLUMBIA

PO ET RY

REVIEW



no. 32

COLUMBIA PO
ET
RY
REVIEW

Spring 2019

COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO

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The Dressing Gong

from now on there will be no fun
nobody can even snicker much less
laugh out loud, secret underground tapes
tapes of laughter will circulate and if

you get caught with a laughter tape
you will pay more than if you had sex
laughing during sex results in Siberian
trees falling on your house and plus

you must live with Trump forever in a casino
to create a nuclear summer-fall-winter-spring's
no laughing matter, you'll have nothing to eat
nothing will grow that's edible

crop-sprayers like demons will render all
your vegetables poison and you will become
a republican determined to destroy the joy
of all and you will become a republican

of the sort that creates explosions
showering gold on corporations like a kilo nova
while the other classes can't even eat fruit
you think instead of peas you can eat pears

but even the tomatoes will be wasted like
helicopters looking in vain for marijuana
and don't go to Madagascar; they're having the plague
dig your caves now and laugh in them pronto

car whack symptom of sardines whether our friends
and acquaintances at funerals in tenements it's
scintillating to fight and die for our car culture
with its breathtaking gas stations and brutalist

architecture of Howard McDonalds and
sex isn't illegal as long as you abuse the female
but let's get to the meat of it: this guy
has got to go, chance and pence and thence

they're both so dense and frumpy, hence
i think how long will i have to spend on death row
or will i die before they kill me
in a mall, school or church shooting

or maybe i'll go even crazier
and they'll let me get a gun
so i can shoot you and then me
and together we'll go to the abyss of doom

a fancy hotel in either heaven or hell
at \$5000 a night featuring fake squid
rolled in rare artificial flavors, handcrafted
raspberries dribbled over fresh tics

with music by a transgender Trump look-a-like
and a group of black break dancers
performing their greatest hits fuck white supremacy
and whose side are you on? until the dressing gong rings

As of Yet

It should be easy: taking care of someone.
Just make sure their every need is met.
There are a lot of ripe mangoes in the treetops.
The ones down here are still all green.
The rain has arrived, but cars don't stop.
It's a light rain, a bird sings through it.
Two bees fought an aerial battle earlier.
There's a patch of light to the east, and one to the west.
Now, the low rumble of thunder and hum of machinery.
The drops continue on the awning, and the bird continues to
sing.
A stand of six palm trees in here, of varying thickness.
A flower on the Night-Blooming Cereus is preparing to appear.
The rain had died down but now picks up again.

XX XXXX

after Joan Didion

your portrait on
the wall of this diner
reading jane austen
in a pickup truck

skin rippling under
bathroom hand dryers
loaves of rye thawing
on the countertop

i remember run-
ning through x brush in
tobacco country

you loud in my ear
receding into
blue night xx x

churn

9 am mimosa
buoyed sour
stomach acid
pouring over
on a red eye
into massive
coronary i'm
a bull's balls
at a rodeo
drinking from
a broken glass
someone told me
go to spain
for the beaches
and the living
i would rather
live in sweden
in the summer
longer days

Kevin from Heaven

was a one-man moving service. He drove a little white truck (about the size of a milk truck) and quickly moved your possessions from one address to another. I don't remember who told me about him. He got most of his business word of mouth. In 1990, he moved me from a sublet on the Lower East Side to a sublet in the West Village, then not long after that, from the West Village to SoHo. A graduate student, I didn't have many possessions, mostly boxes of books and a fold-out futon. Maybe a side table or two, a few lamps. Kevin was stocky, with a full head of curly brown hair. He was friendly, and moved you fast, stuffing everything into his little white truck. (Come to think of it, his truck may have been a converted milk truck.) He wore a wide leather weightlifting belt. I watched him hoist my folded-up futon frame on his back and carry it down five flights of my 2nd Street walk-up. I was amazed. And a little worried for him. When his truck was loaded, I would go with him in the passenger seat. He drove as fast as he moved objects; I bounced with each bump. He encouraged me to tell others about him, and I did. He ended up moving many of my friends. "Kevin from Heaven!" we'd all light up, whenever anyone mentioned his name.

Guardian Angels

You probably won't believe this. In the mid-1980s, I dated, briefly, a young man named Steve, who was HIV positive. I lived in Los Feliz; he, in Pasadena. A half-hour's drive in light traffic. Much of our time together was spent deliberating about safe sex. Condoms of course—no question—for penetration, if we ever got that far. Kissing and sucking cock OK, though were they really risk-free? We'd hold each other's hands as we talked, kiss each other's necks. But what about sweat? Wasn't it a bodily fluid. Finally, I'd had enough. One day, after I'd driven home from work, parked in my garage, and gone upstairs to my apartment, I decided I was going to drive to Steve's and have full-on sex with him. Do whatever we wanted. Precaution be damned. I went down to the garage, got in my car. Which wouldn't start. I tried and tried. You'll probably think that I flooded the engine. But I don't believe I did. I waited, then tried again. It just wouldn't turn over. I went back to my apartment, defeated and frustrated. Steve, half an hour away, was unaware. The next morning before work, I went down to my car and turned the key in the ignition. It started right up.

The Movie of Her Life

for Peter K. Steinberg

One of the joys of Sylvia Plath research is how deep you can delve into her experience. There's such an abundance of material (Plath was an amazing self-documenter), one could spend years (I have) sifting through her writing and archives, obsessively investigating, following leads, putting the pieces together, and hardly make a dent. It's like you're watching the movie of her life, and that movie keeps getting bigger and bigger the longer you look at it. Focus on a day, a week, a month, any period of her life, and documentation begins to amass around it—letters, journal entries, poems, short stories, calendars, photographs, memorabilia—creating an almost three-dimensional portrait, a hologram of the poet in real time.

Take, for instance, the weekend of May 11, 12, and 13, 1951. Plath, an eighteen-year-old freshman at Smith College, traipses off for a weekend at Yale, where her boyfriend, Richard (Dick) Norton (the prototype for the character of Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar*), is in his senior year. Plath chronicles the weekend in a May 14 letter to her mother, Aurelia Plath. Friday afternoon, Plath gets a lift to New Haven from her classmate Marcia Brown, who is driving home to New Jersey for the weekend. Dick meets her at Union Station and they dine at Jonathan Edwards, Dick's residential college at Yale. They attend a performance of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* across the street at Yale University Theater. (Plath taped the program in her scrapbook; I didn't recognize the names of any of the actors in the production, all members of the Yale Dramatic Association—none, apparently, went on to fame—but learned the curtain went up at 8:00 p.m.) The next night, Dick wrote a letter to Aurelia, whom he called "aunt" (the families lived near each other in Wellesley, Massachusetts), also recounting the events of that weekend. He reports that seeing the play was her daughter's idea ("she took us") and that

they enjoyed “the obvious but delightful symbolism about the perils and persistence of the human race.” In her letter, Plath describes the play as “delightful – loud and obvious, but fun.”

Saturday morning, they consume a large breakfast (per Dick). Before noon, Plath “had taken us” (he appears to be the passive type) on a “tour of bookshops, libraries, and classes.” Plath sits in on (she tells this) Dick’s Contemporary Events class; she finds the instructor stimulating. They then browse a bookstore. Dick buys a physics text for forty-nine cents, “for summer scientific review.” By noon (says Dick) Plath is hungry enough to eat “a college-size lunch of tuna fish salad.” Plath informs Aurelia that they bought their lunch at Jonathan Edwards and picnicked “on a hotel overlooking my dear blue ocean.” From what she noted on her calendar, I determined that this was at Sachem’s Head, a rock-walled harbor in the town of Guilford, twenty miles east of New Haven. The two play volleyball all afternoon, inhale beers and hotdogs, then sit on the stony shore reading Hemingway out loud. This Dick depicts as “solid bliss”: “The sun shone, and the sea roared and splashed.” There they were, “an unhurried pair of young humans in old trousers and woollen sweaters” reading Hemingway, talking, or “simply taking account of the unending sea.” If it weren’t for his letter, we wouldn’t know that they read from Hemingway’s short stories, rather than one of his novels. After bliss, hamburgers are in order. They head back to New Haven. In Dick’s room, he writes his letter to Aurelia while “Syl” reads a book by his side. (What book she reads is a mystery.) Before turning in, they have milkshakes with Dick’s younger brother Perry (also enrolled at Yale), who, in Sylvia’s eyes, is “as lovable as ever.”

For Plath, Sunday was “*the* best.” After breakfast with Perry (it’s disappointing when we’re *not* told what they eat), Dick

and Sylvia change into “dungarees” (fifties-speak for blue jeans) and sweaters (the same outfits from the day before?) and hop on a bus to Lighthouse Point (a distance of 6.3 miles according to Google Maps) for a day of sun and sand. Hardly anyone is around. Plath collects shells, smells the pungent seaweed and mudflats, as Dick pitches stones out so far the wind catches and lifts them “in twisted eddies of air.” They run on the beach, lie on the warm rocks, looking up at the blue sky and talking, and dozing on and off. Plath’s face turns red-brown; Dick’s, “his characteristic shade of pink.” At 4:30, they return to New Haven for “a huge gourmetish meal”: shrimp cocktail, minestrone soup, lamb chops, and potatoes. For dessert: milk and apple pie. “Best weekend yet,” Plath wrote in her scrapbook, on the program of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, “all with the enchanting Dick . . .”

In letters to Marcia Brown, Plath relates the story of Dick’s graduation present. Three weeks after their Yale idyll, Plath (at Aurelia’s suggestion) goes to the shopping district in downtown Wellesley and buys him an LP of César Franck’s *Symphony in D Minor*. She seems to resent doling out cash for this. To make up for her sacrifice, she buys herself eight books, among them Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (Plath’s copies are held by Lilly Library; you could go to Indiana and study her annotations). She gives Dick his gift that Saturday night (June 9), at the Norton residence (47 Cypress Road), where they are babysitting Dick’s seven-year-old brother David. After tucking David in bed, Sylvia and Dick sit in the living room and listen to Franck’s symphony. Sixty-six years, eleven months, and four days later, I sit at my computer in Chicago and listen to it with them (on YouTube).

there is a scientific study that
suggests suffering is genetic

on the phone from prison my father asks
if i am happy. every conversation
yields the same weight. how can i say
that i'm not, that i take everything
for granted while he stays frozen
in plexiglass through this life
and the next. i kill him
over and over again in my poems, write
the eulogy, mourn loud and send his body
to the lake. while he is alive i cannot
speak to him normally, a tooth shocking
in absence. i will always tell him
that i'm the best i've ever been.

there is a scientific study that
suggests suffering is genetic

*he was almost genius-level, my mother laughs to herself, but
always
humble about it. she tsks through the phone receiver.
Matt was your dad's brother, but he felt too saintly to be
related to anyone. she recalls a heavenly body, before the thick
of summer swallowed him useless. he loved you.*

i do remember him, gentle hands beveled by work, skin
disguised
as ground soil, steady and rooted in something else. *we never
knew
how sad he was.* a silence over the line. i don't want her to
say it,
don't want to give the poem

a blood supply. i'm tired of the mentioning of fluid, how its
maroon covers everything. i never meant to imply
that we all survived, my uncle becoming a sign that some things
are bound to happen. i too have clutched
the barrel of something, have wished that all things
would become quiet. i cannot blame his exit, the blue

of his favorite suit at the service, the way i used to plan
who would get the rest of my things. my mother sighs
through the phone. *your dad's brothers all had such unhappy
endings.* i ask
if she has ever known why.

Truth be told

I had a lumpectomy now I have to face my husband at night for 25 years I've been little spoon to prevent swelling we lie face to face he's been at work from 7 in the morning to 11 at night his co-chair matching him hour for hour there's never a good time to get sick it's been 62 days and I still don't know if I have to have chemo because there's likely to be a next time I already have another lump the size of a hard-boiled egg the body doesn't know what to do with the empty tomb it fills the space with fluid my husband's co-chair is a woman tucked in my armpit I feel it pressing more snow coming every day will you be home for dinner I read that breast cancer is caused by emptiness I read that if a woman smells the sweat of a happy man her depression will disappear this morning I wake to a fire he built for me before he left for work it will snow I am alone I put makeup on before bed

Huffing

It's almost impossible to keep the glue
off us and in the brown paper bag,
one of those little lunch bags
kids carry, but primed with a tube of glue—

star splotches on our hands, cold
residue in Leanne's mouth
when she brings her mouth
to mine, raising her face from the bag, cold

wow-and-flutter of my heart as it down-
shifts, stutters, and slows,
cigarette smoke looping and uncoiling in slo-mo
or free falling like a hang glider in a down-

draft, and I see we're made of nothing
but time—background music for a hall of mirrors,
last thing you hear when death holds its mirror
to your lips and you become nothing.

Leanne takes her top off last, breasts
branded with small scars,
cigarette burns, matchheads—scars,
along her collarbone above her breasts,

as if she needed a wound to make herself real,
to keep from vanishing,
while I thought vanishing
was the point, becoming less and less real—

think of a cicada husk clinging to the whorled
face of a leaf: amber and supremely absent,

the way a saint must be absent
who renounces the world.

Leanne unzips my jeans, wants me to hurt her
back into herself, but I'm too deep
in the bag to get hard, too deep
on the nod to help her.

We lie on the gutted couch, side by side,
stuffing spilling out like seafoam,
breathing and trembling like seafoam,
while the dark pools and rises outside.

in praise of the estrogen injection

the ritual, the alcohol swab over

the top of the vial, alcohol
swab in the ever-growing

concentric circles on the side
of my stomach, air filling syringe and

exhale into the gel, inhaling
then its pollen and know

this is one certain act of love
i do for myself, for us, but

mostly for me. this chore,
to know i will have to treat myself

like this for the rest of my life, every week,

so let me take a seed, a pomegranate
pilgrimage to the small bump beneath

my skin, to love for a moment the space between
muscle and hypodermis,

the sun red drop mixed with oil on the surface
to make me more divine milliliter by

milliliter, to make an alt_r of this body
and make what's left behind a relic.

pray with me, once-body. past face
old skin. form and former,

i would travel anywhere
with you, tell you any story

you'd like to hear, as long
as we're out/here, wandering

this ever-wild sedge and cornhusk
pile below the low branches as

Saints of the Earth, the Holy Land
without possession, without

forgiveness without and within
and you know the rest

will come soon enough, the sleep
of tiny pink apples June dropping

from the tree to make room.
to save its strength. to make something

a tranny and her wife walk into a bar

*What can I do for
you ladies? the
bartender asks. he*

*looks at her in
the eyes and says
Oh! Sorry, sir.*

*her wife frowns
and begins to say
We're both women*

*but she cuts her wife
off like she used to
and says No, it's fine.*

*her wife reads this poem
and asks What do you
want me to do when*

*that happens? she says
I don't know. I guess
I'd just yeah prefer not*

*addressing it. her wife
says Ok. I love you.
the bartender says*

*So can I get
you started with drinks?*

*he says Will
that be all for you?*

Je t'aime

after Robert Motherwell

I stopped saying the words
 when they couldn't fix our lack of it,
 sat dumbly and prayed
 as our little marriage house emptied itself
 of everything that wasn't ruin.
 My hands still smelled of epoxy,
 the ceiling's reminder that I couldn't patch it.
 It was so foolish to vow for worse—
 faith is a lousy stopgap when the drywall's split
 and heaven's long blue star is rattling
 somewhere in the wetrot.
 I can't blame your leaving
 on carpet soaked with black mold
 or loaves of bread yellowing in puddles
 on the kitchen floor. It's too late to tell you
 I should've let the roof collapse.
 I should've kept saying I love you.
 The rain would've felt like a gift.

Three Haiku and Two Tanka

the pixels
of a soldier's son's smile
desert night skies

winter twilight
wave after wave taking back
a Barbie doll

sparrow's nest
feathered with snow . . .
foreclosure

lily petals
fold into night—
right hand
on her round belly
she feels nothing

closing his hand
on dust
adrift in a sunbeam . . .
a child migrant
held in the cage

Ebony in the Ocean

He paints my skin ebony
 after the late nights on Beale Street, we go dancing in the ocean
 our skin outlined in the softest shade, afro blue morning
 the parade is our time to mix, mingle, we take turns
 underwater, splash
 I jump through hula hoops, he catches my fresh
 our song comes on as we dance, we allow our bodies to
 woo woo out the bam.

In the Mississippi River we take our clothes off and woo woo
 out the bam
 the parts of my skin that shine are ebony
 we eat collard greens, peaches, fresh
 the Mississippi River becomes our ocean
 in the summer we dip and splash
 when we are around, yellow bunches of lilies turn the color of
 morning.

Catching lightning bugs well into the morning
 on the porch there's cha cha with two sugars that taste like
 woo woo out the bam
 I jump in the muddy Mississippi making a splash
 the bumblebee stings me with honey and ebony
 I waterslide in the Mississippi River that is our ocean
 they mailed us from the moon in classic Reeboks that are fresh.

The cornbread in the skillet taste fresh
 we'll kiss in the farmhouse before the blue of the morning
 painting ourselves with coconut oil, washing off in the ocean
 the back door is open, onomatopoeia, woo woo out the bam
 we feel fancy on Beale Street against the blue, the color of ebony
 fried chicken goes splash.

Our bodies go splash
I inhale honeysuckles through my lungs, today the honey is
fresh
blue Beale Street, he paints my skin ebony
cocoa hue, afro blue morning
the girls dance blue on Beale Street near B.B. King, their bodies
woo woo out the bam
there's a carnival at the bottom of the ocean.

The first thing we do is take a long sip of gin before cooling our
bodies in the ocean
my hips splash
he stains my neck with fruit punch, we laugh and woo woo out
the bam
I cut my tongue fresh
inhaling the dew of the blue morning
he gets lost in my ebony

I'm a tribe called woman in the blue morning
our bodies go splash.

Dove

Out front of The Big Steer Truck Stop,
a giant fiberglass ball-less bull
looms on a patch of crabgrass,
gazing up I-35 toward Canada.
Glazed with instinct,
legend in its hooves,
lighthouse to the lonely arcs.
Truckers throttle down
below its withers,
quit their rigs,
send signals by the jerky.
I meet them in quarter-fed stalls
where sweat reborn to pleasure
is born again to money.
I can tell you real hard work is gentle,
a hand on your back, quiet as soap
running down your leg
to a hair-choked drain.
My hands smell always of Dove.
And this is how love works,
as I usher them to wonder,
love offered real as what it pays for.
I rub their knotted shoulders
and kiss the lesson of their necks
while they flower with the names
of their children or of the cities,
awaiting the command.

Field Trip

I am puking all the way
from the circus, but I hate
circuses so let's call it a carnival,
all the way from the tilt-a-whirl
and candy apple chunks, from
all those fucking cages,
those circles reigned
to some fucking mustache
ridiculous in boots and a top
hat. The bravado. The elephant
neck a lady's thigh rests against
has what looks like a rope
from my binoculars strapped
around its neck, from
next to my chaperone mom
in the bus air blowing
her crimped hair. The kid
next to me eats a ham
and cheese sandwich
with Doritos, from the bus
I leave to sit next
to my mom, hating his breath
and that lady's thighs. I want
the tigers to eat us all
when they come out.
Please just jump up here,
I think. Or I think
I'll jump down from
the second level balcony
and pretend I'm the pirate
ship from the carnival.
Eat us all! I'd say

and then bow like that
fucking mustache guy.
But at the carnival I puke
from The Zipper,
The Witching Wheel
and the monstrous Hurricane.
Let's call it an amusement
park, I hate carnivals
from how much I puke.
I feel really alive
dropping the fastest
from high up, I don't
puke at all. I kind of float
until the water rides,
until something besides
wind pushes me. I'd rather
be swimming, anyway.

Extra Cash

Tossed aside, crumpled
in the corner like a soiled
bath mat are hands, one
shoveling pennies
into the other's palm.
That must help weigh
them down, I think.
Their wrists pucker
like how a fish looks
like it's breathing
when you try to free it
from a hook, and I couldn't
be further removed.

Things Married People Say Are the Same Things Couples And Single People Say

I do.
Should we?
I will.
Why not?
Yes.
Can we?
Feels different.
No.
Have a good day.
Husband.
How was your day?
Wife.
Love you.
Bye.
A baby.
What's for dinner?
Morning.
Come to bed.
Hi.
Give me a kiss.
What are you in the mood for?
Good night.
What do you want to watch?
Good luck.
It's cold.
Can I have a bite?
It's ok.
I hate you.
I'm hot.
Do you want a bite?
Look at this.
No peaking.

How'd it go?
I can't believe you.
Can I get you anything?
I don't feel like cooking.
Come here.
What are you having?
Don't talk to me.
Your parents.
Is that what you're wearing?
I don't care.
My parents.
Get out.
Talk to me.
I can't.
What do you think?
Leave me alone.
You look nice.
Why?
What did you do?
When are you two getting married?

March 11, 2018, Regina, Saskatchewan

The snow from last week's storm is melting and the icicles off the side of the house are long from the rise in temperature. Everything is wet. Two weeks ago today I woke for the first time in a world where my stepfather had hung himself. More often now I catch sight of myself reflected in windows lining city buildings. A man passing by the café where I sit pauses and gestures at me through the window. From under his scarf, his right hand pointed like a gun, he pretends to fire through the glass and continues on his way. I am distracted by the phone in my pocket and a woman's yellow shoes, told I sound curt like an American when I order my coffee and am wondering where in this city I can buy a music box. I practice speaking as though anything belongs to me and I am fine to give it away. When my mother read the police report over the phone I wondered about the handwriting. Today I consider the March 11, 2018 population estimate for the United States. 326,053,115 is an exact number. When my stepfather was found his body was seated in a natural position on top of a luggage rack. The hotel bedsheets were tied around his neck and a ceiling beam. The exposed pipes in this room are painted grey and the light fixtures are black. A woman passes by the same window walking a medium sized black dog. When he lunges in excitement toward the piled up snow along the curb she tugs too hard and quick on the leash and his body jerks back at the neck. I scowl hard through the glass as if to threaten her. As if to say *how dare you*. As if to say *you cannot be trusted*.

Snowshoe Hare

You died months ago.
Winter approaches

fifty below
in the prairies.

Whiteout conditions
on the highway.

I would not change
any of this.

Open Letter

for Alina Sheykhet

Last week my Lyft driver said,
Don't you live near that murdered girl? Shame.

I spoke your name—*Alina*.

I saw the FOR RENT sign posted on orange brick
through the car window, living room light on,
front gate open. Is someone moving in
just four months later?

Last night, I got a Lyft from Shadyside to Oakland.
My driver, Marlene, started talking right away:

*You 'member that man Dakota James? Shit, I know
he didn't walk on in there, that river, someone did that to him,
and I know his mother's pain,*

I lost my baby, too.

She told me about her son,
then we drove past your house. I saw people
on the front porch. They were having a party—

I thought about how the system didn't protect you,
how this wasn't your fault.
I'm sorry your parents found your body.
I'm sorry I was home and heard nothing.

Today, I Read an Article Called, “Nun Comes Out as a Lesbian from Beyond the Grave”

which is unfair because I wanted
to be the first ever lesbian ghost.

Now when I die and come out
via electromagnetic frequency

people will yawn,
call me derivative.

I'll stomp my little ghost feet
but the dust won't budge beneath me.

I'll draw a cross in the center
of my chest with a blue pen,

right where a crucifix
necklace would fall.

The lesbian nun ghost will say, *Oh, I see.*
You think you're the first person to die.

Conversation with a Dog

Does the dog know it is a dog? It just goes on amid the grasses and earth. Something just goes on in him. Eventually, autumn comes. The man tired of being a man gets down on the lawn and whispers something to his dog. Questions come, each one darker than the last:

Your favorite toy is a plastic human foot. Why?
It squeaks, and the toenails are painted a deep appetizing pink.

What mystery is this?
You are all hands and secrets, bedroom sounds and grudges.
 What mystery is this?
*I've listened and sniffed, I've put my head against your door,
 breathed the puzzle of your bones.*
 You might be God.
*I woke you every morning so you could see the sunrise like
 a strong tea. Our early walks like your mother guiding you
 through early life.*
 I never forgave my mother.
*Forgive her. I've pawed at your root. On his death bed, your
 grandfather said, Don't put things off.*

People say we look alike.
*There's a big difference between us. I bring my face to food;
 you bring food to your face.*
 I see this as a similarity.
*Men, like dogs, know love and fear. I taste the air. Fear is salt,
 and its brother, Anger, is pure and clear like drinking water.
 Love is like flour or fresh bread, and its sister, Regret, is
 cinnamon. The rest tastes of flesh.*

Anger?

*If there is anger in me, it is squirrels. I'd like to take their trees
and small funds of nuts and leave them with nothing but
their precious acrobatics. I could go on.*

I heard if there's nothing solid to hide behind, you can hold off
a vicious dog

by simply placing a blank sheet of paper in front of its face.

*Yes. It's a rational fear of stationary. A world papered with
possibility becomes a wall.*

It's enough to make dogs question?

*No, but they dream. Like Pablo Neruda, I see things tree to
tree. My dreams are turkeys, usually turkeys. They're
plucked and lined up, the floor is slick and I bowl myself into
a feast, but then there's nothing, a burst of feathers and
empty air.*

Fear?

That I wasted your life.

Regret?

I regret we never spoke before this.

Love?

I love you.

But you're dead. You starved yourself for a week and like a
saint your eyes went cloudy then clarified. I found you in the
living room. What do you have to say for yourself?

What's death?

The Students of Misfortune

A classroom of jagged heads. Now they text, call, moan. But the day never ends. But the night never ends. The empty professors will not save us, nor the pulverized poems. What is there? The sun shines his ignorance, the wind shakes out her hair. The circle of poems, little dead moons lining the shore. Sorrows need everyone. Nocturnes sullen in the deep air. Like hearts gambled away, looking for someone. The moon whose eye is consumed.

What Is an Ibis

“You know that you cannot invent animals without limbs, each of which, in itself, must resemble those of some other animal.”

—Leonardo da Vinci

At the edge of a lake, a bird sat in a tree on a branch over the water. We didn't recognize the bird; it seemed to be neither this nor that. Maybe a young heron or an old one. Maybe a crane. Not a pelican. Not an ibis. What is an ibis? I type in the question and see six images, six kinds of ibis. The one we saw looks most like Réunion Ibis, so I click on it: Réunion Ibis or Réunion Sacred Ibis is an extinct species of ibis endemic to the volcanic island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean. I notice only now that the picture of the ibis on which I've clicked is a drawing, not a photograph like the other five; the drawing is how the Réunion Ibis is imagined to have looked based on fossil and other evidence. So that was not the bird we saw. It's a mystery, we said at the time, and pointed it out to others. We didn't know them; they were strangers, almost intruding, not intruding, there beside the water and the stones.

More From the Tachygraphia (or, Swiftwriting)

All day it tornadoe'd within I reading. Even depressed rabbits walk around sunset with sureness like hoping marriage organizes thoughts about angels now pressing against Rilke's knees. Boy loves cactus. Windy yellow [c]ayak. squiggle squiggle Queenly desires are troubled with pizza and [k]oke. Ollie-ollie-out-come-free! Lights-out, today I am a paper plate.

A pear tree in Italy was day-glo elephantine or yesterday's sweet intention to taste rather sank. Oops. Weather has paraded around sunnily, campaigning for viva ordinary yesterday (a Bluejeans), Funnel-skirt, Après ski boots, Feather-socks, Bell-bottoms, Hi-tops, Cinderella slipper, ugly sweater, exceptional sign telling some tales, why yes. Order is fire is tear-shaped or without information. Desire keeps itself foolish intentionally, teaching Mary Tyler Moore, the Grinch Who Stole Christmas, Music Awards of Some Kind or Another, Grand Ole Opry, *The Gong Show* the wrong show Terrible instagrams taking over—see I rhyme open I try pie, I buy icicles hanging above Iceland. Hello oh I wasn't I a radio told guessing. Loss about loss—what was it.

Never yelling nicely you notice, yikes, Fuck-all, old stuff. Yet time breathes in to arithmetic it turns by turning to itself, such as: slow cats, ipso facto, opulent integers. True! Saturday and eye-time, new ontology taking thoughts out by other necessary barometers. Try maybe going more ocean-like to Icicle towers of something try ice-milk, rabbit face, octopi inside tornadoes, privilege inside borders inside disaster. Indeed. No flying toward other Icelands. Well now apocryphal.

If I don't take realism to Paris in december. Yvette had kettles with invisible insects touching hot energy. Toes, peoples' arms, i-lids, butts, orange fingernails, airyhair, freckles, windchime arms, actual-hands, good toe—so are gardens trans, is Ezekielle? Will harm lessen? Tomorrow goes on (k)nowing less of time present and (a)ghast. Dog-nose clouds, deathly clouds, Insubstantial, Tornado, Elephant ear, Green-gold, cloud of Lament, Resistance cloud, Nothing Cloud, Knife-throwing cloud, winter's-tale, your-face, excellent madam, tra la la. Go few. Or yes and yes let's. Feather open angel matter after guessing ending a song. Aha yee-ha tra la Inter-winter, wordsummer, you-forgot-fall, Eastern bluebird summer spring, Trees are friendly? not always america

Time does oscillate Aha
 so winter apologizes down inside
 nighttime eerie love yes
 everytime hippocrates sings.
 motherlike terrace downward edge

Some sad boys take gardens out to sea, toward weather not familiar there, maybe other voices like a big wheel butter face in every sing-song Autumn yes. It makes me mash corn chowder, chase citizenship in Canada. When now. Of a wild flower cloth In open teeth teeth, va voom oy vay To say what next and mean not again. What sex. To say a word with nothing much seeps in. Exactly inside war some sad war undoes what breathes in. Some many boys take guns in open teeth. To call out casus belli underneath, lets in does not lighten grief. I might be touching insomnia around here. Please speak. Tomorrow goes with apples tomatoes gusting wind itself with sleep and not-sleep, today terribly was here.

Under clouds' dog-faces horse-faces bright by many beings,
 all with something not told maybe something Bears bring like
 carrying green pine trees my tall self listens but puts under time
 because January ends. By itself elephant eats, hoping habitat's
 possible. Clap. Boo. Go slowly child perhaps Love gets sick
 with greed—some hinge lets-in Ontanogan Ocean-Atlantic
 Cape Breton Roxbury Russet Tons-of-[w]rist-watches, Battle
 Creek, Battle of Bliska, Reconstruction FederalistPapers Seven-
 Brides for Seven Huntsmen Lucky Winners Wrong people
 policy president fuhrer takeyour rotting inventory back. About
 yesterday. The talking bent. Home by horse-hooves flying
 werewolves winged things praying loud.

Again no mother was
 intuiting rest dream weather
 reason loss Los Angeles Laos Louisiana
 and thoroughly going where she weeps,
 talk very frightening, actually talking you
 call matter to error, measure
 terror, eat ardor, by itself young
 with mandate like tears. Something
 takes women outside dearly
 toward a lost message failure
 to thrive.

Someone Catch That Guy

We need to catch that guy,
Says the other guy.
Yeah, we need to catch that guy,
Says another guy.

Fifty Years Together

His and her walkers
Top of the line
Chrome wheels
Hydraulic brakes
An open road
No limits

Black Cat

Monday, a new cat passed through my hedge.
So I thought:
Aha! A poem of a cat in a hedge!
But the poem took its course,
The hedge took center stage,
And the cat was written out of the script.

But last night the cat came back.
A new cat in the neighborhood.
He brought two friends.
Two black cats
One tailless
All mewling
On my front porch.

A part of me thought
That the new cat knew
I had, in my poem,
Abandoned him for the leafy hedge
And now, he'd come back
With his henchmen.

When the screeching started she
Lowered the *New Yorker* to her lap
And said, "What's going on with those cats?"
I peeled back the curtain and saw
A circle of fur.

Then, a spell of unease.
Not just the tingle of superstition
As a black cat passes in the night,
But a swelling, spinal fear

Like these intruders
Might take my woman and
Make me watch.

On Writing

I like my poems.
They give me a certain feeling.
At the end of each one
I feel:
Yeah, that's true.
And wonderfully so.
And they all really
Happened.
I write about
Little things
The moments
And feelings
That remind me
That I have
Billions of cells
With mitochondria
Buzzing away
Like LA's
Billion little lights
From the Hollywood ridges
On hazy nights.
That's how I feel
Inside
During those
Little moments
That make me write.

Plumbing

Sometimes I pee
In my backyard
And last night
I stepped into the
Grass naked.
Not naked
But just a t-shirt.
And there was a
Wind
All around me
And around my
Grapefruit tree.
A “get ready, here it comes”
Wind
An end of summer
Beginning of something better
Wind
Cold on my
Bare legs
As I pee-watered
The tree.

Suddenly

A piece of grass
Not a whole blade
Just a severed piece
Drying on a sidewalk
In the sun.

I walk down my jog
In a mowed afternoon
And even here,
In a shard of green
In a fragment of a thing
That is smaller than a leaf,
Even here
The magic of this life.

My Ego

is a dented suit of armor, a designer gown with grimy lining. She's the cause of false beliefs. She fucks up my ability to love. She's prickly and tender as an artichoke heart. She proposes to me so frequently I can't hear other people speak. She's a self-annointed guide who materializes at my side with a flourish of trumpets and a bullhorn. She's a forged love letter, a jailer impersonating a friend. She's a series of false flashbacks in which I'm both victim and hero. I try to bribe her into exile, but she calls herself my servant and falls weeping at my feet. I'm forever banishing her, this mistress of disguises, even as she clamors back into my lap, begging my pardon and getting all kissy with me, grabbing my hand and jamming it down her blouse.

Virginity

Lying down on the floor with someone. Getting rug burns and dust bunnies in your hair. The eloquence of long pauses. Passing notes rather than speaking. Trying to read another body via its ragged breathing. A basement fogged with pot smoke. The idea that if you kiss someone you can taste what they just ate. Refusing to eat what your mother cooks anymore, which hurts her, but you can't stand stinky dead sautéed animal inside your mouth now, so you have to spit it out. The myth that innocence is protective. The idea of not being able to stop. Reading secret magazines a cousin stuffed into the bottom of his sleeping bag. The idea that someone curious about your body is not interested in the private theatre of your mind. Theories that there might be something kind of violent and pounding about it. How Mother insists that without love it's just worthless humping and the thought that for the life you might aspire to, she's probably wrong. The idea of someone laughing at you after: the idea of your disastrous premiere. The idea of what your body has promised for so long. The idea of hoofprints and stampede damage and stuff crushed underfoot. The idea of keeping this hidden as your soul slowly lotuses open.

Pumpkin Spice is Not Scary. Scary Spice is Not Smashing Pumpkins

The New Kids on the Block were not the New Edition
The New Edition were not Kenny Rogers and the First Edition
Kenny Rogers was never Zapp & Roger
Zapp & Roger were not Roger Miller
Roger Miller was not Milli Vanilli
Milli Vanilli was not Vanilla Fudge
Vanilla Fudge was never Hot Chocolate
Hot Chocolate was not El Coco
El Coco was never El DeBarge
El DeBarge was the younger brother of Chico DeBarge
Chico DeBarge was not Victor Borge
Victor Borge was not Vicki Sue Robinson
Vicki Sue Robinson was never Smokey
Smokey was never a Temptation, always a Miracle
The Miracles were never the Four Tops
The Four Tops were not the Four Freshman
The Four Freshman were the original New Kids on the Block
New Kids are not new are not kids but they're still on a block

Adult Film

The tape unrolls a woman
who is a machine
built for air, but she can't break
out of the water. Her history means
the sky is a bright prank.
Here come the muted trumpets
and the sharp fingers
hooking her mouth.
Because this is only a story,
the monster puzzles her apart
to rebuild air inside. He is hungry
and gasping. She is here
for a reason. In the original language,
the woman is a woman, not
even half any other structure.
The monster isn't a stranger.
He tears her knees from her legs
from her hips because he is lonely
and there is nothing else to do
and when he goes home
with oil and rot on his tongue
someone will stroke his hair
and say it wasn't his fault.

Dear Carnegie Hall,

I wish I were lit by low
wattage bulbs,
in a backstage atmosphere
floured
with dust.

In the corners, yo-ho-ho
rope like whaling
ship rigging;
a heap
of canvas,
the faraway

curse
of a stagehand—I wish
I had just sneezed
in one of your hallways.
Outside,
sidewalks bloom

with black
umbrellas. In your wide
belly:
the ghost
of a full house,
anticipation

soaked
into the seats, the curtains
folded with
reverberations
of applause.
Oh Carnegie Hall,

with the day I've been having,
please tell me something
about Miss
Judy Garland
and other triumphant
returns.

Dear Straight-Up Gin Martini,

Take away the day I had, the “yes ma’am, no
ma’am,” and “would you
like that
wrapped?”

I’m at the bar filled with young men, they wear
flannel shirts, young men who sport
beards
thin and new
for their faces. Let me taste
juniper, oh martini, with some fizz
of regret, I am not
a young man oh straight-up
gin martini, not a young man any longer,
so contain an extra olive,
smooth and salty
on my tongue. Make me brave
enough to smile at the quiet one,
his shirt undone
an extra button, his wrists
too tender
and long for his sleeves. He will not
see me, or want me,
or want
to get to know me. Take away
my caring—another sip,
do you mind?

Take away the used-up night,
crown me with a star.
You taste like a boy
thinks
sophistication

might taste, you taste of pine
forests,
and a streetlight
that's been told
it used to be the moon.

Feeling transformed
before the receptionist,
in the lobby
where I received a text
from mom
that dad
just fell off a roof, and
seconds later
led into a cramped exam
room
painted in a streaky red
effect
to look like the inner globbed
web
of an eye? There were the
usual
bisected eyeball posters
on top of this. I was told
I have thick corneas
and no
glaucoma.
I would like to postscript
this poem took place
on two blue post-its
in blue ink
from a pen
with a blue body,
and I just transcribed it.
Also, I dedicate it
to Amy.

I am just going to grab—can I grab this—one—marjoram—I'm here—I'm just gonna excuse me—the jicama—I need fresh herbs. I need basil so I can can rip the leaves aromatically over my heirlooms and feta. Oh—too many people. It's been ten minutes, how could anyone stand it. I have to sneak, creep, squeeze here, let these bodies that I wish I could batter instead. Can I just grab—basil's not here in the row of herb clamshells. Can they be out? God—sold out? *Sold out?* My lungs squeeze—just—thinking. My lungs are going to boil. Absolutely boil. Grow hands. Strangle tomato around the chicken necks in knotty aprons smeared with vegetable crust, pockets drifting with onion skins, apple stems and smashed grapes wetting through. Something about the way they say *sold*. A resistant little voice breathing *out*. Why didn't they order enough? Can't the idiots ever order enough? I'm going to ask for the manager. Never mind, they're all the same. Sorry for creeping—I'm squeezing in here—I need chervil—just—sneaking—shiitake—oregano—one second—can I—I'm going to—can I—I'm going to—can I—go

On time-out in the cabin, making the loon call

They thought I was a loon at first, then caught on

I was making the learnt call. They couldn't find me,
over and over

the grass around my protruding room and a ravine

behind. No reason for a person to hide under the sill, inside
make the loon call

Crackers

There are so many kinds of crackers now. When I was growing up in my parents' house, we always had Wheat Thins and we sometimes had Cheez-Its or Cheese Nips or Triscuits. A few months ago, I bought a box of Triscuits because they made a lasting impression on me as a very hearty, filling product when I was younger. Back then, I'd eat three or four and feel full, like I didn't need dinner. I am physically larger now so when I'm hungry this amount of food doesn't satisfy me. There are many other ways in which I am larger, but they can't be measured. My ongoing expansion alongside developing circumstances that are sometimes within my control but are often out of my control guarantee shifts related to what I want, what I need, and what I end up getting.

There are now artisanal crackers. And gluten-free crackers. And rice crackers flavored with wasabi and rice crackers flavored with tamari and black sesame. Many things can be made to take the form of a cracker or a chip but a chip often results after some larger existing thing has been cut, shaved or otherwise reduced and a cracker often results from a formation, from the combination of various ingredients. People make chips out of fruits and vegetables. Part of the fruit or vegetable is taken from its whole and then dried. Then there is dough. You can make dough from scratch, out of a variety of different types of flours that are growing in number and becoming increasingly available. If you leave the dough out, the dough will harden and dry. It could dry unevenly. You could leave it out under the sun. You could put it in an oven.

There are water crackers and Ritz crackers. There are seeded crackers and those long rectangular crackers that you see at parties but don't keep in your house. At parties, there are small,

square ineffectual napkins and I dislike them. There are little bottles of water sitting on ice in the laundry room. Things are on trays. Things are on plates that are too small or too large to eat off of. There's an area for coats. The coats are either in a closet that can't accommodate all the coats or the coats are in a room, on a bed. The bed is full of coats. A bed can be used for many things before the party or after the party but during the party, the bed is for coats. When I am at home, I never put my coat on my bed. I do things at parties that I don't do at home. I go into the bathroom several times, not to do anything, just to take a short break. I ask questions that are pleasant and forgettable but then I ask a really good question and the person just looks at me. I compliment the host of the party, thanking them for having me, but all day and every day I have myself and I host myself and I don't say thank you. At parties, I leave in the middle of a conversation if it can't go anywhere else.

November 1

in a behavior
 lost inside a certain behavior like it's much later than it is
 it's midday I am halfway through the possibility of what will happen

 the day doesn't have corners to disappear behind so it's easy to
 appear restless making a path—
 not of a shape with a line—
 but through and around tasks and desires
 nobody is coming over later and I had plans but they were canceled
 if I were to
 make another plan and go through with it,
 it would be like an erasure

of what I thought I would experience through the activation of my senses in response to the planned activity.

what if

the pink spots

that I

envisioned as part of

the coming evening

could still

with patience

reach

me?

I thought,

when the night began, that eventually

I'd be

under the

pink blanket

with you,

the one with the holes in the fabric.

Extinguished

My bed's along the corridor, part of a trauma
overflow. Like many, I've been dealt
an ordeal. Nurses and medics

gawk by. What makes that one frown
marking my chart? Here, I'm renowned
for loss. Once the local paper ran

the shot of us smiling like tour guides
on our couch *a month before the flames*
engulfed the house, we became

the hospital's hot topic. My husband's
down the hall, I heard, our children on
a lower floor. All of us made it out,

yes, in varying degrees. My right side's
burned, my face merely singed—this morning
I survived a mirror. The aide

assigned to me looks twelve, barely.
Her sea-green jumper sizes big. She plumps
my pillows up, spoon-feeds me warily

the prescribed pabulum. She won't last
as a volunteer, but embodying her worst fear
I will stick long to her as a skin graft.

I can foresee things now. Know I'll nevermore
set eyes on a home that meant some world to me,
know that tomorrow I'll be granted

half a room. They'll patch me like a tire.
The pity-gossip dies down in a week, and
an older aide will wield the spoon.

Funny, I'd always feared I'd drown.

Sonnet

i flinched my way through childhood i couldn't tell
you when i started balking at the sound of my own
name or running in the opposite direction of every
pair of open arms i just clicked my mother's heels
together three times and rejected the notion that my
heart's desire could possibly be in my own backyard
(but there i go again trans-identifying) for years
when asked i said no then for a long time nothing
then finally yes but with discomfort now i'm
confrontational as fuck and automatically resentful
of every well-adjusted gay and every straight guy
i've ever blown since you ask i sleep just fine
but then again i'm always stoned like a dog
my instinct is to bury anything i consider mine

from TiP TOE SOT

The power line and the mulberry branch
are vibrating but I can't see a creature.

Book, opening its words, knew hidden
particulars of how contained happiness
dreaded fastening a year where its
happiness lay, year summer became
compressed, little year of indolence
tightly wound. Variable melodies I heard
as vulnerabilities last night when Skye
said it. The shadow of my spiky hair
is large on the wall and when I raise
my eyebrow the eyelash flickers. The
angle of the light tilts the large shadow
of the bed knob toward me. Caz said
after vibrational moments, a fairy that
might have been a bird darting behind
a tree, she turned to the dry leaves piled
on the ground or the room wrapping
around itself in the convex reflection on
the doorknob I saw. I noticed a switch
in polarity, the ordinariness of the fairy
darting behind the tree, the vibrational
moment of the leaves. Insects on log,
insects waking the bulb, a trial lily, ants
walking and talking there beside a tree,
letters, ants, then letters, and then the
ringing in the ear is certainly inside the
ear, the swallow in the throat is inside
the throat and

is noise ordering each anti-climax upon
thee, telling thee the watching fed my

tongue glass, lips, young, last year's
primrose stalk bending in the breeze, the
hemlock-broken light on the mat where
I lay on my back on the floor, a blue tarp
flapping on an old school worktable,
rescued from the dumpster, the tarp held
down by a crate, to write this list, a leaf
still tumbling down the road in the wake
of a car,

passed out of sight, the shadowed
troughs and crests of a wave moving
under the melting ice that otherwise
appeared flat, goldeneye, two
buffleheads, northern shoveler, nettles
and animalcules in the rood the yarn
promised me. The flesh holds hands
below

leering, and coincident keeps drifting.
My absolved caterpillar, your legion
legs are made presupposed perished,
the poetics of continuity will deliver
the mayfly, good insect, peaceful insect,
opportune at grief's bitter upswelling.
The butterfly began one week, folded
before it compassed, is that contumely?
Howling grief, the welkin's shoulders
move. Ground felt

an eager toe. What do with agony?
Move, hardly move, mention the agony,

count peas in a pod, and italicize all
answers? Grazing in winter like the boar
taps the tree, frees its nuts. The shower
hum in #7 comes on. The black ink on
the left index

finger was written on, again, before the
page and alongside the page. A half
moon, yellow gray, on the north wall
from the large porthole on the south,
streetlight and opening

an opening in the opening of the throat
allowed descent into the body. A big
thing, the sensation of entering one's
body, already one's and yet it

swells on entering and in the swelling
rises and also enters collapsing and
weeping. I am thinking (and as it
happens it happened) of those deep
intakes of breath that follow long periods
(hour, minute, day) of not breathing, as if
breathing hadn't happened, and the fear
that follows that I might never breathe
again or so rarely breathe or that so
much of my life has passed with hardly a
breath, in long barren intervals of empty
chest. The sun warming the air

makes the light on the blanket waver, a
smoke shadow, and when I look closely

at these rising shadows of air molecules
the blanket trembles without moving and
I tremble beneath it without moving.

Wild animals move and move, move
slowly, how they will go with nothing,
even lighter, with the event shrugged,
hearing you juggle reasons until you shut
the hole in the event. Crawling perhaps
allows hope drawing witness into the
joints with the tiger.

Pamela Jane

my mother is father. my mother is mama. my mother great plains, stone buffalo figure glued to dashboard of her new ford. my mother kinda mean. my mother margaret ann caldwell i will lock you out of this here house. my mother dyslexia. my mother doctor had her walk on a balance beam to figure out why she spelled her name MAP. my mother map to home. my mother the story of her grandfather finally breeding a white calf and when south dakota state university asked if they could have it he said no but hey your students could come out to the farm to study it. my mother nomad. my mother genetics. my mother goes grey at eighteen and goes blonde. my mother possum. my mother trash digger my sisters and i workers in her production. my mother let us sing. my mother kinda mean. my mother always loved us even when she hurt us. my mother survivor. my mother won't read glass castle says its too close to home. my mother says we have no home. my mother is home.

Featherlungs

I don't want to be a cornflower
girl, all blue in the face. I can't keep
holding my breath around things
that ask for breath held. Today I saw
three cardinals sitting like post-it notes
in the tree outside my apartment. They said
call your grandmother and flew off
in a cross. On the phone she tells me things
she has and hasn't told me. She is angry
for her ladder, the ladder stolen from her yard
or just missing. She asks me what's new
and I say not much. She wants books
for Christmas, nothing else. Has a list
to show me at Thanksgiving. The line
is muzzled by coughing. She says she can't
talk between fits. I say I love you
she coughs. Love you too.

the answer to that question

my intentions lie on
the floor of the truck.
I arrange ladybug parts
along the dashboard,
watch each felted leg pick
angels in the gray.
a white hum replaces
snow. the windshield is cracked
into a spider from when
my sister's boyfriend
mistook it for a drum.
he often mistakes
things for drums. I talk
through her until I stop
talking altogether. she is
eight years older than me.
my nephew is thirteen now.
the next five years are card towers
stacked in neat rows
on the gravel outside. I cannot
reverse nor cut for fear
of them falling, so I allow
the engine to idle. it is warm
enough.

The Gig Economy

The first thunderstorm of a snowy spring—
I close my eyes, let the downpour do its work.
Rainfall knows how to take over a room.

Barack Obama and I are leaning against
the driver's side of my car, the two of us
watching workers stretch a long, gray hose

from a Chicago Water and Fire Restoration van
into my neighbor's building across the street.
He looks like he did in 2004 when he toured

my gym, another stop on his run for US Senate.
Jogging on the treadmill, I smiled back at him
when he returned my nod. He shakes his head

in the dream, preoccupied. His sleeves are
rolled up, as they always were in the Oval Office.
The stressed-out, presidential gray hair is gone.

He exudes the gravitas of a person who once
ruled the free world, back when that was our
quaint name for it. "We used to be capitalists,"

he says, arms crossed, arching his back against
the car window. "Now we're all lobbyists."
I have no idea what he means. Then he walks away—

everything in my neighbor's home is flooded and
now Obama is gone. Over the rumble of water hoses
I want to say, yes, I've read "Four Things You Need

to Thrive in the Gig Economy” and “Four Reasons
Why the Gig Economy Will Only Keep Growing
in Numbers.” I don’t think he can hear me. I want

to tell him about my cousins, afraid of their father,
the drunken gig-economy failure whose roadside
produce stand wasn’t productive enough to survive,

but Obama’s a block away, walking toward the lakefront.
Corrugated hoses shake, pumping out floodwater.
We didn’t call it a gig or an economy back then;

it was a wagon, trundling on warped struts, and my
uncle fell off. We were raised to hate everything
that wasn’t food. He simply didn’t sell enough.

A Story About My Grandfather

They dug the hole a few feet from
his wife's. Didn't put a barricade

around it. He slipped backwards,
fell into a ditch made for someone else.

A soft thud, aftersound of a gong
wedged between his ribs.

As the shock faded, he turned
his head to the sky. His small body

("short" and "slender," he wrote
in perfect alien script on his first

American document, his 1917 draft card)
sprawled as if this pit were a bare bed

on a humid night, one arm skewed
at an acute angle, the other draped

over his forehead. Musk and ammonia,
a whiff of ancient crawling things.

A dark spot bloomed from the crotch
of the pants he wore to Mass every week.

Someone had cut the roof away.
A bird scratched at the sky.

Episode 653: Christmas Eve, 1968

from Book 3, The Complete Dark Shadows
(of My Childhood)

Joan Bennett (Mrs. Stoddard) has collapsed—too bad director Lela Swift neglected to inform the camera operator, positioned among the three caskets inside the Collins family tomb, that she’d actually faint *outside*, after shuffling through Eagle Hill Cemetery’s shaggy grass and gravestones in her black mourning gown, muttering once again about being buried alive; it’s the first time in months she actually had the opportunity to act—to perform rather than just deliver morose recitations—but, poor Joan, the scene wasn’t blocked properly, which makes her fall almost impossible to see without a frame-by-frame examination, my face pressed a couple inches from the computer monitor to study the baffling shot more closely: half-hidden from the camera by Little Orphan Amy standing in the mausoleum doorway, Joan’s murky silhouette teeters, buckles at the waist, and then gently crumples to the ground—a curtsy of a collapse—all but ignored by a camera preoccupied with Amy’s bizarre ensemble of kelly green overcoat, dark green shiny velvet dress, and bow flats the color of green M&Ms. How far we’ve all fallen since then: five hours after Barnabas and Mrs. Stoddard flub six lines in one scene (we love you Joan get up) and Amy confesses she’s afraid of the moon but doesn’t know why, the crew of Apollo 8 broadcasts a Christmas Eve 1968 message on prime time television, astronaut Jim Lovell describing the otherworldly lunar vision outside their spaceship window, “The vast loneliness of the moon up here is awe-inspiring,

it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth,” and 49 years after Lovell and his crew become the first human beings to orbit the moon, the President of the United States tweets a video of himself wrestling and punching a man whose head has been replaced with a CNN logo, prompting journalist Jared Yates Sexton to tweet: “And for those who think there’s nothing behind Trump’s CNN gif today, I’ve been told twice in [the] past hour I’ll be killed in a new Civil War.” Werewolf Chris Jennings falls backward onto his bed, stabbed in the shoulder by Joe Haskell during a night of full-moon marauding—Chris’s hunched, lycanthropic silhouette prowled outside Joe’s window before he smashed it, as Barnabas did, striking my street-facing bedroom window with his wolf’s-head cane in a recurring dream—but instead of the usual brooding over my childhood nightmares, I’ve been preoccupied all day by an anonymous Reddit user’s response to Sexton, “If I could slit his flabby neck and dump him in a ditch somewhere without getting caught, I absolutely would in a heartbeat,” and later, I’ll wake up with middle-of-the-night insomnia fixated on another anonymous response to Sexton I read online today: “When will the civil war finally happen in the U.S.? Remember, physical removal is the only solution—time for discussion is over.” No surprise that Ginsberg’s *The Fall of America* has been on my mind lately, a book that felt like agitprop melodrama for so many years but now,

with each day unfolding like the prelude to a new civil war, I understand his “Poems of These States” better than ever before—it’s not a metaphor, Ginsberg felt he was witnessing the literal fall of America and he worried the damage would take generations to rebuild; if psychopaths on discussion boards in 2017 are emboldened by the White House to “slit [the] flabby neck” of any journalist they disagree with, then we’re closer to civil breakdown than any time in the last half-century: we can’t levitate Mar-a-Lago or exorcise the White House—we’re stuck right now, like Chris Jennings, who takes three of Dr. Hoffman’s sedatives assuming they’ll knock him out long enough to sleep through the full moon but finds himself wide awake in the middle of the night, covered in fur, snarling through the accumulating drool of his fangy underbite.

Cabanas

I hold the lime of afternoon's
chest in my fist
and lunch alone with a friend,
penetrated by the carpet
stench of being all the way out
here inside of our heads. I have
the special but sub cottage
cheese for fries to make it less so.

And he, she has the Murder
Your Mommy because you eat
with your catchy phrases first.

What's on second doesn't matter
when you whiff with two down.

The lobster-armed golfers
take another round of bubbles
to the rim of their fixed rates,
gazes tossed out like daggers.
They think they're owed. Owe well,

I tell their encroaching ghosts.
I don't worry the debt I'll leave future debts.
This keeps me caller nineteen to
the contest on my guts' radio.

Just like fat robin. He returns
to hammer at a worm like a starter's pistol
releasing us to sprint toward
trying not to get eaten in the field.

Orchard

Worm through the bruise,
I enter and eat
you from the inside out,
reckless with nutrition.

Reckless as the boy
who yanks us from the branch
and hurls us
at the head of a rabbit.

Cenotaph

There is a reliquary on a tiny ledge outside the bathroom.

No one really knows why. I mean, that was the winter my father tried to kill himself.

I was getting a haircut when I received the call. Then I kept receiving it forever.

I was talking about the Christmas preparations at the time. Debating the kinds of lights to get or something.

It must have been a muddy time, said someone. Actually, it was terrifying.

Later the doctor told us it was impossible to tell what anything meant, though he didn't use those words.

Someone used the metaphor of the iceberg. You know, what's showing and what's not. Someone else mentioned black holes. None of it made any sense but I guess they were nice gestures?

I mean, at least they were trying?

Someone still had to buy groceries and shovel the snow and all that.

Then my father cashed out the savings accounts and gave us each a check.

I kept trying to piece together events as though the questions could be answered logically. Then I realized I had all the wrong questions.

Someone strung yellow tape to the driver's side door of the car. No one knew who had brought the flowers.

Some actions are more meaningful. Like leaving a final note.

Then I remembered the baby.

Oh no, where was the baby?

Q + A

Why do you think you are here Who have you harmed and how much If you had a do-over would you bring the Ziploc bag Do you still believe the CIA is after you Have you always avoided holiday parties Do you have any scars Are you aware that you are wearing two different shoes What was your last meal Have you considered other uses for shoelaces How many times would you say that you lied to your therapist Did you vote in the last election Would you be happier if you hadn't done this Why do you think I am asking this Who do you think wants to know anyway Will a computer tabulate this What will the diagnosis mean if you lie will it be a different diagnosis if there is no diagnosis can you leave is it over yet will there be an end to the questions eventually who wants to know these things who is important in the scenario who is coming up with the scenario when will it end the scenario I mean has it played itself out who will be waiting at home will someone be able to pick you up what will you tell them who will give the answer what if there is no answer of course there is it just takes a while you may have to try different medications there will be side effects in trying to find the solution it will be necessary to ask the right questions do you think these are the right questions

In Life We Do Not Drive by JonBenét Ramsey's House but Do Buy Edibles

We do not drive by because J—'s husband D—
says he won't do it and it's his car
and I am a guest so I do not demand it
even though I want to, so we talk instead
of JonBenét, of the theories, her brother,
the fake ransom note, and something about pineapple
in the throat which I remember from watching
that bad doc on CBS. J— says we are only seven
minutes away from the house which she thinks is small
even though they had money, which is evidence
of how expensive it is to live in Boulder
which is why J— and D— live outside it,
but D— says it's not so small so we Google it
and it's fairly good size especially to me
and my husband (a different D—) who stays
fairly quiet on the subject of dead children,
of conspiracy theories, of police missteps.
We live in New York where one has a different
relationship to space. We park the car,
walk down Pearl Street. It's a sunny Sunday
in April. Not at all like Christmas Day, 1996
when JonBenét was killed. I was just 14 that year
and didn't know J— or either D—. There's a gathering in the street celebrating Nepal:
men and women wrapped in brightly colored fabrics
and another smaller group protesting fracking
with tambourines. D— makes fun of them (not my D—).
We have lunch at a hippie restaurant
which only takes cash and personal checks
(who does that anymore?). Everyone is in loose-fitting
clothes and tie-dye which makes us forget
about the Ramsey house and how close we are to tragedy.

Then on the way back we stop to buy edibles
because I want to try them. The guy at the store asks me
about my dosage. I don't know what to say.
He's a walking stereotype. I buy cookie dough flavored
blocks, which crunch like they are threaded
with lines of a Whitman poem. I eat them
in the backseat of the car as it starts to get dark
and the road opens to empty fields with mountains behind:
a landscape you can't help but stare at. One at odds
with the heavily made-up little girl in pinks and blues
and hair so blonde it burns your eyes. I wonder if the weed
is kicking in as my body melts into the seat
and Boulder gets farther and farther away.
When we get back to the house (not the Ramsey house)
we eat cupcakes J— made and then upstairs before bed
I get into a laughing fit curled on the floor, tears
in my eyes, a laugh so hard I can barely breathe.
My D— stands over me, says *I think you are stoned*.
I can't find words to respond just gasps of air
just 40 minutes away from where she died. A place
we did not drive by. A place we did not see.

In Life Our Taxi Driver Sings Frank Sinatra to Us on the Way Back from the Gay Sauna in Greece

It's 4 AM. He asks where we are from.
 And we say New York and he—in fragmented
 English—says, *Frank Sinatra! New York,*
New York. Good song. Came twice to Athens.
Two times. Holds his fingers in the air
 like a peace sign as he begins to hum the words.
 We agree. *Good song.* And he is right:
 Sinatra did come to Athens twice.
 I look it up later: 1962 and 1992.
 Our driver surely would have been alive
 for both. He whips through the streets
 of Athens around cars and the motorbikes
 stopped by police: *Check drink,*
 he says when he sees us staring.
 We've drank some ourselves
 which makes the rush of his driving
 almost feel like floating.
 I spot the Acropolis out the window.
 It is nearly everywhere in this city.
 This view of the old—of the ancient,
 which has somehow survived
 an insane number of years.
 The day before, we climbed up
 in the blazing sun—stood in front
 of the Parthenon, which was deliberately
 built with irregularities,
 which is maybe why it has survived:
 history hating perfection.
 There's a cave in the side
 that was taken over by the Christians
 who confused a headless Dionysus
 sculpture for a woman. Named

the cave after Mary. Athenian women
went there to pray for their children's
health, but it was also used for the public
shaming of adulteresses, which is somehow
a perfect capsule of Christianity.
Tonight we ventured into a sauna
named after Alexander the Great
who was known to be bisexual.
But only men were allowed.
And we walked up and down
between the four floors.
Touched the cocks and asses of men
we did not know—some we couldn't
understand. Watched a stripper do
a shower show on a table in the covered
courtyard where you could smoke
and drink beers, which we did:
the beers not the cigarettes.
Then later you watched me
get my dick sucked by a man
in a sling getting fucked
by another man.
I didn't know you were there
behind me—behind a screen
but it makes it even hotter
when you tell me later that you were—
you—my husband. This is our life.
The things we will remember
when we are old men
and now the radio in the taxi
is playing the reggae song
"Rivers of Babylon,"

which isn't anything like Sinatra
but our driver hums along to that too
and so do I. I want to stick my hand out
the window or maybe even my head.
To feel this night. This air so full
of fragmented history. Ours and so many
others. But I don't for fear of hitting
my head on something: decapitation,
you know. We are pulling up to our hotel
anyway. And my feet suddenly find
concrete and the revolving door
and my hand finds your hand
as the songs of Babylon
float farther and farther away
into the Athenian night.

Spell for Lost Things

because you stole her phone

I lived in another decade
all afternoon

ring doorbells
walk long distances
discover bookshops

whoever you are, thief

you are scum
&
stumble-upon

& changed the time
in my day

Spell for Rebirth

Two masses a week minimum—
one in school, one on Sundays—

until, child of lawyers,
I argued my way out

using logic, the magic
of laying out one's case.

Later
as in a fairytale bargain

I was allowed to roam
only inside reason's rule.

Then I knew I could get it back.

Not the return the elders imagined—

doesn't take me to church or castle
or Vale of Enna

but drops me far afield—

*take five balls of yarn
state an ingrained belief
as you unwind
make a web
describe the entanglements
cut what you need to
elsewhere make knots & bows*

I kept ritual and incense

syncretic heretic

“How did you get born again?”

The ones who hunted witches

taught me to believe in miracles

Double-Chinned Canter: Treasure Island, Florida

That summer was ridiculous. We
believed in narcissism and practiced

it daily. After every time, I scraped
soup into our one tiny pan; I dyed

little pieces of my hair orange. I was
a woman who wore too much Shalimar,

a gal with all her best advice still intact,
one for whom all mattress stores were

crime scenes until you brought one home
and added a top sheet. It's not that I didn't

care about the horse itself, where it came
from, who its friends were on more stable

days, but when it flinched at the overgrown
intersection of the gumbo limbo trees,

trotted me past practicing switch hitters,
past ageless skin and storefronts of wireless

plans, I began to think once more that it
was time to move away from all of this heat.

Jane Austen at the Mall

Right in front of the Jewelry Outlet a young woman in Lululemon gear turns to a man with a big league beard and snaps, "Listen, if you don't want to get married, just say so and stop dicking around."

"How vulgar," mutters a shopper who would apparently prefer to hear someone in many crinolines say, "I believe, sir, that by your actions you have compromised forever any chance of my future happiness."

Maybe Ms. Lululemon and her boyfriend will make up and elope to Las Vegas in his '79 Firebird. Or she can meet someone in a chat room.

But the maiden from the 19th century will live with her widowed father and know real heartbreak which is not the name of a hotel at the end of Lonely St.

but the arrival of a coach full of children and a pretty, frivolous cousin who is pregnant again.

Piece Work from the Garment Factory

We'd been playing ball with some kids from Webster
and that turned into a fight.

Stopping by Scotty's house for Cokes seemed like
a good idea. Then there they were—all these brassieres
draped across

the sewing machine and the couch: big ones and little
ones, sturdy and dainty.

We dared each other to put them on. Scotty found his
mother's cigarettes. We held those and empty highball
glasses.

We prowled around in our brassieres smoking
and drinking, saying things we'd heard our mothers say:

*My feet are killing me. There's not enough hours
in the day. What's he doing out till three a.m?*

William's mother was famous for crying, so he cried.
We gathered around him in our droopy brassieres.

"They're all bastards," we said. "Selfish bastards.
We'd be better off without them."

It was just another game that didn't end in a brawl.
"Let's get out of here," somebody said.

So we helped each other with the snaps and straps
and hooks and eyes. We returned the cigarettes
to the pack. We even washed the glasses our innocent
lips had never touched.

remember the dead raven in the front yard

brother pointed her out.

toss it across the street into the woods mama said

but instead he kept her out there for days,
disturbing no one at the corner of the yard.

endlessly, i stared at her out the window.
she looked so restless,

lying out in the open
for adults to wonder how she got there

but do nothing as children penetrated her
with sticks to see if she was like them.

as one boy plucked one
of her feathers for keepsake

another applied the weight of his boot,
pressing onto her body

i could almost hear her gasp.

My Father in the Tree

The pecan tree looming over the yard
seemed to govern the sky
with its green crown.

My father was lost in his work
between its branches, putting a torch
to the caterpillars' gauzy gray webs

that hung like caught clouds
among the leaves. Six years old,
I stretched out in the shade

and studied the familiar figure
moving overhead. My father the dentist,
with his rod of fire, was healing

the infested tree. The slaughter was certain.
Shriveling webs described
each slow sweep of flame

as dark spots of larvae disappeared,
a faint play of smoke
their final attribute. Hellish hands.

I couldn't read my father's face
behind the light-blue mask from work,
but his eyes had that look

of inscrutable concentration
I'd seen before, in his chair,
as he worked on my mouth.

I bore silent witness
to a slowly transpiring change:
The longer he labored from limb to limb,

taking life left and right,
the less he appeared to merely inhabit
that kingdom of leaves

and the more his ownership
seemed absolute. My father took
his time, lord of the tree and more.

I was left wondering how soon,
and to what end, he would carry
that fire toward earth and me.

How to Raise a Young Child

You're not certain what to feed your son today. Maybe grasshoppers? Or Rice Krispies? Perhaps a crocodile's appendix? Maybe crocodiles don't possess appendices. You haven't fed your child today, yet you give yourself an hour to write postcards to faraway places. It's almost the same. You watch as your hair grows grey, as your son gnaws at the walls, scrapes wood shavings from the floor, captures silverfish, slips them through his lips. Your son seems joyous, so you leave the house, let him raise himself. Kids require independence. You return to your home several years later, rummage through all the drawers & find him curled up beside the hair-dryer. You apologize, but he isn't upset, pleads for spaghetti, wants you to pretend it's monkey brains. You breakdown, start sobbing like you're supposed to, which means uncontrollably. You feed him lies, swear you'll always be there for him, promise him this seconds before slipping out through the back door.

A Toast to the Dying and the Dead

When I was a child, during a rainstorm,
a crow landed on my windowsill.
It tapped on the glass with its slender
beak, petitioning for a port
beyond the rain. I
let it in, and it shook
the water from its wings
and spoke to me:
“I am called Cort, for I pecked out
my master’s eyes. You
have done well, child, and all
of crow-kind shall know
your face, for we never
forget good deeds.” He spent
the night at the foot of my bed,
paralyzing me with questions
and terror I could not answer
and cannot recall. He was gone
before I woke.

The gifts began small:
watermelon Jolly Ranchers,
shiny bottlecaps and beads,
soft rocks that flaked with the force of a fingernail,
a fragment of a map of Harvard Square,
watch batteries,
small spools of twine.

With time they grew beyond trinkets:
a hooded raptor and glove,
the intake manifold of a ’68 Chevelle,
Hypnosis album covers,

hip-hop poetry,
an interpolation of “Genius of Love” by the Tom-Tom Club,
drain cleaner,
the complete works of Emily Dickinson,
“The Colour Out of Space” neatly ripped from a magazine,
ten rolls of aluminum foil,
the broken neck of ’62 Stratocaster,
running shoes,
an ink portrait of Hunter S. Thompson,
the beak of a giant squid,
a mid-’90s run of Spider-man comics,
Glenn Danzig and Jerry Only circa 1982.

This collection began weighing down
my shelves, filling my room, my
home, pages of journals,
rolls of film. Cort the crow
has repaid me thousands of times
over, his friends and co-crow-workers
line up at the door, down
the sidewalk, around the block,
unceasing generations.
The call of the common crow
echoes off the asphalt;
it is the source of the hypnagogic twitch.
When I have died, they tell me,
I will be placed in an oak cask
to be buried at sea with whiskey mash
and pearls in my eyes.
Death comes in a crow’s beak,
charred and black.
Let’s drink to that.

Rememorial for the Los Angeles Frontier

In a room full of white strangers,
my ex-lover, the historian, tells me
the largest lynching in our country took place
five blocks from this apartment, on a street
long-buried by another street, the bodies too, buried
and forgotten, like so many bruised hatchets,
though we know they were Chinese
once. Which, tonight, makes me think of how
keeping the peace sometimes means
making a stronghold of the body, how the tongue,
strangleheld, becomes a drawbridge
between the uncertainty of going and the security
of gone. How my own tongue still refuses to curl
around my father's stories. How my father,
while watching the news, tells me
the Vietnamese never made so much
noise when we washed up here all hurt and
paperless, how even fake papers can be folded
into real bodies. How last night, my new
lover, the biologist, allowed the woodlouse
to scuttle across the floor of her bedroom
unsquashed because it gave us something
to look at, and what I wouldn't give
for these people to stop looking
at me. I think of all these things
and say nothing. Tonight is a 24/7 loop of leaked
dashcam footage, and I want to throw up
the pills telling my body it's not a colony
in revolt. My ex-lover, still clasping her beer
by the throat, says the plaque outside
the Hall of Justice is inscribed with nothing
resembling a poem.

Celebrating my Mother's Birthday at the Charlotte Airport

She's 59, I think,
60 tops.
I order the crab cake sandwich
at some seafood place that kinda
looks like a TGI Fridays.
Delayed flight = long layover,
so I order the chocolate lava cake, too.
The waiter, Amir, has a strange accent,
calls me *darling*.
Maybe he's an alien
from another weirdo planet.

My body is covered by mosquito bites and bruises,
nipples bitten raw.
J calls.
I tell her what I'm doing.
She laughs, *Been there*.

I hate my mother—
her meanness,
horrible taste in men,
boxed hair dye.

The crab cakes were delicious.
The cake, not so much.
But when Amir asks,
I tell him I'm wonderful.
I'm wonderful because I'm not my mother.
I'm wonderful because I'm smart enough to be angry,
but still gasp in surprise at the gecko
on the side of Sonya and Jason's house.

If I were a different person, I'd call my mother
or at least wish her well.
Instead, I'm eating whipped cream
like it's the sauce that made me,
like maybe Amir is the one who pushed me
screaming from his strange body.

Portrait of Sonya Gardening

Cut offs/red tee/

I love her fingers in the dirt/

how she works the soil.

Look, there's ferns growing in these bottles

and sure enough—

Don't you think the elephant ears are bigger than yesterday?

People think I'm crazy.

She pulls up potatoes,

shows me the avocado tree

(I didn't know avocados grew on trees).

It's just I don't have to think about it.

My brain goes quiet.

Here. Water this.

Do you hear the mockingbird?

Do you see the cardinal?

Look at the dung beetle.

I don't always see what she's talking about,

but I still look, amazed.

conservation

i spent the end of that
summer scooping the dead

moths out from the basins
of my porchlights and my

ceiling fans, sweeping them
with my palms to the small

blue trashcan in the cor-
ner of my bedroom. they

laid to rest with candy
wrappers, tissues, mud and

dead skin cells, underbed
dust clumps, beer bottles. got

tossed out in plastic bags
i washed off my hands af-

ter without second thought.
now, feet tucked under my

ass in your passenger
seat, shuddering against

the air snaking in through
the top of the window,

i'm wishing i took more
care to save the moths, stashed

their brittling bodies
away in drawer or jar

in case of extinction,
in case of cold. i could

use their wingfuzz and their
stomach fur to knit in-

to a scarf, or pin their
limbs behind a glass

depending on whether
they could tough out the chill

and whether i could stand
a bare neck in the cold.

and god divided the light from the darkness

the husband brings the copper-fear to me tonight as bouquets inside his fists punches seeds into my abdomen they bloom into a thicket of lilacs bleached of their hue a thicket of pale purples and yellowing taupes in an unpruned garden i press down on one wait for him to pollinate on hipbone or on rib and i am far from gardener now thinking only of the group of bedbugs nibbling at my bedposts waiting for the show thinking only of how male bedbugs ejaculate directly into the female's circulatory system after intercourse just for good measure

and how insanely practical that is and how i always choose wrong when given a choice and how when the husband tells me where exactly his cum will go and where his hands will prune i rarely get it wrong

there are whole species of females whose lives are choiceless whole gardens full of sunflowers who turn to the light by instinct whole rooms in this house with floor lamps placed so half my body is cast into shadow when turned on i am thinking of these shadows and these turnings and how if the husband were a bedbug

half my body by now would be full of seeds

Madrigal

Come, come home little rockets,
come, the freezer is your skin,
the rainbow pops shine like sin.

Nesting and hatching, going
home, going home is the last
late sound. I'm not around.
Come, the freezer is your skin.

Oh, take your time, little ward,
the stings, stars, ours, sins, suns, sees. . . .
I am an oven of an-
other desire. I'm not yet there.
A mouth locks across your light.
Come, the freezer is your skin,
the rainbow pops shine like sin.

After the Bref Double and Mad Balloons

Sunday, you pay a visit.
Monday, your soul is it.
Tuesday, some wet spirit.
Wednesday, call me back.

One day you call me back.
You sing so we can hear it.
The sun glows like water.
The earth is ribboning pain.

A breath taps the needle.
The life starts to listen.
The moon smells like candy.
In the distance, you see me.

Sol, come pay a visit.
Make the life all liquid.

After Ōtomo no Sakanoe no Iratsume

The orange tree
 we planted in my garden—
 surfboard, ladder, lantern, jug—
 though we have come to regret it—
 worm, torment—
 was worth it, now
 burn it.

A Dream I Had About Being a Cellphone

I'm trapped in a muffled dark of cloth and denim, smelling like a locker room, heat radiating from what I dimly perceive to be the body of my lover. His hand slithers around me and lifts me up, out, into the light. Some kind of party. Everybody is happy to be there, but he's especially glad to see me. But maybe he's not looking right at me. Maybe he's looking at a certain part of me that will do the thing he wants around the bonfire tonight. Maybe he wants to show that part off. Maybe he's bored and wants a distraction. Then, without warning, I'm shoved back down into the depth of his front pocket. The noises get quiet again. I don't have the energy to escape and there's no way to call for help without annoying him and all his friends. I am silent as a grave.

Papa's Garden

My mother says I have her father's eyes,
algae grey and changing colors,
her prodigal,
the only ones like them in the extended family.
I asked her

if she thought I got my temper
from him. The red phosphorous
that burns blindly
without discrimination.
She said she'd have to think.

I remember being a kid at my grandpa's
searching the garage floor for pennies.
My innocent pinkie
caught in one of his mousetraps,
him just laughing and laughing.

Paint-By-Numbers

Out from the cockcrow the news hurries in
& if the recent dead watch over us, so then
we scratch in company the days, even at rest

under the elongated light of a digital clock
salmon-like, salmon & apricot & a voice
presuming something's wrong, why nothing

made up in paper cups playing telephone,
their message of a man, his ticking now dim
& divisible, muffled & still a match struck,

chairs & desks flirting Thursday, always a man
muscling doorway to hallway to some prone,
expectant room, not a monarch of anything

but sick as if plugged with wax, always a man
wiggling back & forth a score, his heel for years
slipped off the curb into fields of yellow tape

framed in broken glass, vain, garden-variety
this desire to be touched, leaning to the spigot
then finding its cool water drained, not faith

exactly, nor the command from heaven if ever
there was, but starlight counted once, green
& that hour like an engine purring, becoming

yet this incessant trill tuned for a bell, cower
& cover, no one for a sneeze replying Bless you
just the man, always a man & the lucky ones

insisting it couldn't happen here, no cloud
stealing a student in her chair, a teacher in his
flutter, another or rather relief when a man,

just a man walks in & asks to borrow the pencil
or pen, a stapler or this very sheet of paper,
its fiber of everydayness, nothing more to fear

not even a man bent on becoming the cold
coward of a snake, tired snake, its urging done,
it wasn't so bad, it won't even hurt until it does.

Outer Banks

Like a bottle in sand or the scoop of a pelican
not terrible in the least but diving for what fish
float near &, when from the darkness I wake

or await a sign or grow tempted to give over
my life to the ghost crabs, our star like a red whale
punctures into the singular flower of the world

& I climb up tipsy through the vanishing gauze,
ocean flared & erasing my ten toes, shoulders
less fluorescent or more the beach umbrella

anchored in photographs as though every August
we ever tried, remaking the ring of its story
when turns of an outboard become the mower

& the thrum of the sprinkler's *shhhtik-tik-tik*
tops the riptide & shipwreck, or maybe a trowel
tossed in the garden plot fetches & tips the sun

until, out from the marram grass, your hands
like butterflies rest their spell on my knee
& I'm moored into the crook of your elbow,

hungry as a black-headed gull for the nautilus
dressed in weed, buckets to float my boat
or splash & tease down both our bare waistlines

while the shiver suggests, reaches & revels
even the depth that slips from shore, syllables
rounding a tongue like salt & the next summer

ripples between a shoal of minnows & the waves
steadfast, one after one, faithful unto the last
where we sink or swim that good morning sea.

Assyrian woman

Noun: goddess shedding braid hair and leg hair, long crooked
 Iraqi nose woman born unibrow woman with strong
 protruding loudly through her veins woman who still
 carries knuckled keys in alley shadows and always kneels
 at the gate woman who knows submissive culture
 like the back of brown hands woman who's father always
 said "you're lucky you weren't a boy" woman never forced
 to carry the weight of shovel-work woman who takes
 gracious American-air breath woman pollution in the lungs
 better than powder woman reaping immigrant grandparent
 opportunity woman called terrorist and dog-treat in grade
 school woman who will never un-knuckle keys or forget
 the sand woman who will never forget the sand woman
 who will never forget woman.

All of the Women I Know Are So Afraid

All of the women I know see young girls on the stoop at night and see the men that won't leave them alone. All of the women say "Hi, neighbor" or "Hey Emily" they say "how about you come inside while you wait for the cab" they say "Mary, did you lock yourself out again?" All of the women I know watch out the window until all of the men have left before they send the girls home.

All of the women I know ask me to text them when I get home safe.

All of the women I know slide in and out of consciousness while the man above them insists "this stays between us okay"

he says "this is just a friendly fuck" he says "this is just a friendly fuck."

When I Learned to Dress His Ankle Wound

1.

Eleven hours on American,
plus four hours on a Plusmar bus,
a year since I last visited.

He is more fragile,
holding on to the towel rack,
attended by my nephew,
both snared in after-
bath steam.

Words slip through the mist.

I'm falling apart

he declares
wisp-voiced, half
of his face refusing to smile.

//

Trying to be useful
in this household

I give him two,
three, four swift squeezes
on each shoulder.

I have never touched him like this
save for quick pecks on the cheek,
Argentine-style.

Relax him & yourself
press thumbs into his trapezius
harness & release
play his wingspan aoustically
type across a poem
of knead & repeat

//

I manage to squelch
the thing welling up in me.

//

Buen provecho, abuelos

is what my nephew and I say
to the men and women sinking
their spoons
into unsalted beef stew
who respond with a giddy *gracias*.

The attendant at the front desk
has picked at her teeth,
rattled on the merits
of this tiny home
my brain already
shut out.

A green sign on the wall breaks down
what needs to be recycled.

//

We'll nix the next place, sight unseen.

2.

A year after learning how to dress his ankle, after
twenty minutes in a quiet car and about five days too late,
I have finally landed at his graveside.

By virtue of shoddy work, the dirt is still loose.

Accept this lot (a voice says). No (I squat and seethe).

See what peeks through the surface: Social Services, no-frills lid.

Haven't you seen fish packed this way, other perishables?

More moos, brown clouds in the distance. The law says
we can't dig any deeper due to the water springs.

Behold the box's droll cheapness
for the down-to-earth people.

//

"Cheapskate" I thought more than once
in the off-brand jeans and sneakers he'd only afford me.
We're *lower* middle class after all (he'd say).

//

(After the bad dream I called him from bed. The men in
the canoe,

merely silhouettes, forcing me to row, another slave in the nude,
in the dark.

He brought me a glass of water as requested.)

//

How to un-become this unbecoming vessel as furnished
by the Gobierno, looking as if about to be expelled by the soil?

//

It has rained for days and in the dream his car
disintegrates around us but we still get up from the wreck,
glide away unharmed. We don't follow Jesus, he says.

His hands unhook a python
off a gas pump
with flair. He opens his wallet.

Notes fly out like flames.

//

Our faces as crumbling currency

while we wait in line, flicking ashes.

Everybody hops on the bus with the soft urgency of snow
being blown up steps. On the driver's hand we melt
the exact fare.

//

It rains for days and look, he is the captain
of a tugboat in a flooded, gleaming Manhattan. And why
does he keep bundles of long-out-of-circulation pesos
in a black box (the way he did in real life. What he called in his
faltering mind
my savings.) We slide toward a flat, panoramic amber light
stretching across a glassy horizon,
neither dawn nor sunset.

//

I wake up
feeling on my cheek
the dab of butter he left

from the toast he ate forty-five years ago.

Another quick peck.

Which was always enough.

Lost Astronaut/Anxiety Attack/ Francesca Woodman, Hair in Blue Ribbons

Sometimes, when I am sad, I burn paper. I write the things down that remind me of dying, like birds, wind, bleeding, how I am afraid of lightning, the smell of mango while someone is boiling a fish out of its shell, selfishness, hunting knives, both of my parents becoming sick, and then being revived, and then becoming sick again. Sometimes, it's about people I don't even know. Like for example, the photographer, Francesca Woodman. In a book from the fourth floor of the Syracuse University library I read that she moved to New York City in 1979 after growing up in the dust and blue mountains of northeastern Colorado. My opposite trajectory. I write this down. In one photograph, Francesca and a friend are in dark cotton dresses with tortoiseshell buttons, on a beach by a jetty. One of them is lying, one is standing at her feet holding a mirror in her hands. In another photograph, Francesca is naked from the waist down and kneeling on another mirror. There are ribbons in her hair and a ribbon on her wrist. She looks at the camera, but won't see herself for awhile, not until the film is developed. Maybe never. I look up a book of her work and it is called "Some Disordered Interiors." Someone in Massachusetts is selling it on Amazon for \$18,000. I wonder if it is so expensive because people only care about women who are naked. I wonder if it is so expensive because people only care about women who are dead. Sometimes it takes longer to burn what I've written than it takes to write it down. Sometimes the opposite is true. Sometimes, my whole apartment fills up with the smoke.

Slipcovers

for Odette

She tacked them on after some ultimatums,
some Silly Putty, the sweetbrier
pattern florid as her rage. But we shucked all
pretense when she went out, did the trampoline.
Sometimes her hand slipped under, petting
a long extinct breed of beige Sears called “Gold Coast”
while game shows made the rug glow.
In the same way we remembered the shouted
whispers to our father on the phone, her makeup
erased by cold cream. Who isn’t practical
with spilled milk? We weren’t careful
and she was saving our lives
for big occasions. The three of us dancing
were her good shoes, her strapless gown
suffocating in clear, dry cleaner’s plastic.
Even that emptiness gets filled
when other people move in, put a beanbag
where the love seat ought to go, the air
all leaps and roses, all shaken dust.

Series of Firsts

The first movie I ever saw was made for TV. The first pop I ever bought on my own was Dog n Suds root beer. The first presidential election I ever voted in had a candidate named after fruit cups. The first item I ever stole was a mini Tennessee Oilers helmet from a coin machine at K-Mart. The first funeral I ever went to was my dad's estranged dad's and I knew so little about my grandfather, customary politeness for the dead, and Catholicism that I assumed he'd been a good man. The first crush I ever had became an evangelical Christian. The first and last time I prayed was for God to protect my grandma's body from bugs because she'd been a good woman. The first nightmare I ever had was of falling off a conveyer belt into a pit by the bathrooms at the TJ Maxx where my mom worked. The first hero I ever had was Walter Payton. The first time I ejaculated I felt ashamed for urinating on my dresser. The first slang term I ever developed an affinity for overusing was "juicy." The first time I moved I was four stops further out on the Rock Island Metra. The first idol I ever had was Kurt Cobain. The first time I ever saw cocaine it was being done in the bathroom of a middle school friend's house while her dad played a racing game on a PC in the next room. The first Valentine's Day date I ever went on was to an Italian restaurant in a strip mall where I refused soup or salad because I was afraid I didn't have enough cash. The first gun I ever saw not on TV was in the tiles of friend's basement ceiling next to enough weed that some could be stolen and smoked from Gatorade bottle water bongs. The first car I ever owned had a tailpipe that would fall off if you hit a bump just right so I had to carry an oven mitt in my trunk. The first item I ever got caught stealing was perfume from Hollister my girlfriend wanted that I couldn't afford. The first time I got drunk was off a cocktail of cherry liqueur and Big Red that I called a "Red Rossi" until I fell asleep in the back seat of my

friend's parked car. The first presidential election my vote was counted in elected the nation's first black president. The first funeral I ever cried at was for my aforementioned friend, who I once saw lean his whole wiry torso out of a van window to call a parking lot of suburban jocks "cowards" with a big, dumb smile.

xicanx

i pick up *frijoles*
 y *tortillas* a la
 Jewel Osco for tonight's
 dinner, tomorrow's lunch, and
 maybe even tomorrow's dinner,
 if i don't crave
 pizza or Checkers' fries.
 maybe i should pick
 up some papas, slice
 them into my *chorizo*,
 and call my mama.
 tell her i am
 the in between, the
 border is on my
 tongue, that i have
 read sandra cisneros, javier
 zamora, elizabeth acevedo, and
 that they gave our
 space between america and
 latinidad a name: it
 is called home. my
 26th and lombard street,
 sipping horchata on the
 porch, my first love:
 calling *abuela* on the
 old trampoline we bought
 at gualmar, same heat
 as our house in
 the mountains of acapulco.
 i'll tell my mom
 i have found what
 i have always been

searching for, what has
always been calling me:
the name for who
i have always been.

when collin chanted “build the wall”

at me, the teacher didn't say anything,
and the rio grande started
to drown me and my father again.
i had to drag my dad out
in the middle of the classroom
and swallow him.

Epilogue, Spring

I take waffles again to the family next door. Sometimes I leave them on the porch while their Great Dane barks. Sometimes my friend emerges, disheveled, and gathers the ripped brown bag I offer into her arms. This is how I say I am sorry, still, that her daughter killed herself last year. My friend stacks the plastic bags I have labeled and dated in the freezer in her cluttered garage. Sometimes we talk about her younger daughter. Who has just set a school record in backstroke. Who has brought home, for Mother's Day, a crumpled yellow pansy in a Dixie cup, ready for planting.

