

ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL OF HAUNTED WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

According to the Gospel of Haunted Women is a collection of seventy-five poems divided into four sections. The voices speaking within, are, indeed haunted by varying definitions. They bespeak complex, troubled emotions such as guilt, shame, and anxiety, yet work towards expressions of courage. The dead and the living are cajoled and accused, while others are provided a format through which they may be heard long after their mouths have closed. The poems are arranged in four sections. Section I, “We Begin,” consists of memoir pieces from the poet’s early life. Section II, “We Speak,” is a dedicated space for the voices of both the famous and the obscure. The third section, “We Migrate,” gathers an eclectic assortment of female speakers expressing geographical and mental transference, interweaving personal migratory poems of the author. The final section, “We Hunger,” returns to personal pieces that speak from a more settled, albeit still haunted, vantage point.

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A Narrow Fellow: “At St. James,” “Taboo.”

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Bones III Anthology, JWK Publications: “Dancing with the Bones of My Father”

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Steam Ticket: A Third Coast Review: “Domestic Disturbance”

Third Wednesday: “Cypress Woman” (Re-titled “Mary”)

The Cypress Dome: “Displacement,” “The Way of the Witchetty-Grub,” “Woman Waiting for the Bus”

Zaum: “The Admonition of Eve”

Haunt·ed (1) Inhabited or frequented by ghosts. Also: an instance of this; a feeling of unfinished emotional exchanges with the dead as in guilt or shame. (2) Preoccupied, as with an emotion, memory, or idea; obsessed: *Her haunted imagination gave her no peace.* (3) Disturbed; distressed; worried: *Haunted by doubt she looked to the sun, the moon, and the ancestors for explanations.*

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I. WE BEGIN

Late Summer

Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it—Sharon Olds

She waits for him at the Legion Hall
in Ottawa, Illinois. It's September, the air
is heavy with late summer storms. She waits
for him at a table in back, where it's dark. She is thirty-seven
and still intact; no man has entered her private
mind, her strangeness. This almost-spinster
woman will be my mother. She waits like a nun
in disguise: Red painted nails, a dress of gold fabric
she sewed from a pattern, necklace at her throat. She waits
with legs crossed, fingers fidgeting at something in her handbag.
She orders a Tom Collins, though she will rarely drink
when she is my mother. She looks small in the high ceilinged lounge
of the hall. The fans above whirl in endless cycles; she looks as alone
as she is. Wetness creeps in through the open windows, it is 1960.
There is no air conditioning here, no birth control pill, no divorce
for Catholics. I want to tell her it's okay, I can wait
for a better time, she can go back to the Chicago,
but she is stubborn and strange, this virgin mother-to-be. She waits
for him and thinks of the letters he's sent her. He calls her his *virgin*
lamb and *wild rose*. She likes the attention. She doesn't know his wife
will drag him back to his small son, that his wife will deliver
another child before dying at forty-five, so she waits
in the humid hall with windows open and closes her mind
to consequence. I want to crawl onto her lap and touch
her still-black hair, to know her before I'll think she resents
me because I will look more like him. She doesn't think
about how hard it will be for me to be fatherless in 1961,
how giving me his last name will confuse me.
I could say October is coming, go back to the city,
watch leaves color to russet and yellow before they fade
and turn brittle. I want to stop her
before she does what she'll never talk
about, before she drives the hard wedge
between us, before she becomes a martyr—
but he walks through the doorway,
a lean black silhouette. He moves
like a shadow to the table
where she's waited
all this time.

The Truth of the Body

She takes me to the museum
when I am four. Baby chicks warm under hot lamps,
clicks at the shell starts from the *inside* out,
matted feathers the color of straw glisten slick,
closed gray swellings for eyes, they wobble
on unsteady legs.

I think of egg sandwiches my grandmother makes:
the blood-like ketchup on runny
baby chicks slipped between two slices of bread.

Mother walks me past rows of glass-bound babies,
the small ones look like frogs.
They sleep weightless in cradle-jars of clear liquid,
like pickled infants. Some suck their thumbs.

My ear to the thick glass, I listen for sound
in the watery cribs. These are the *stages* she says
of development. The last baby, gray and wrinkled,
is the size of a doll. Some have dumpling cheeks
while others wince old-man faces in silent hurt.
I whisper *wake up baby*.

She leads me up open metal stairs to a round room, a dark door
like a black hole in its side. When we pass through my eyes adjust.
I can see seats and we sit. She says it's like a theater and
we'll watch a movie about our bodies. She says we are *human*.
It's loud—a transparent man filled with squiggles of veins moves,
Jell-o-green and purple globs push through and pulse a wiggling

and rushing of *blood*.
Mother says this is inside me, under my dress, my skin. In my arm
warm veins filled with wiggling floating fibrous threads,
shapes like black fleas and small brown spiders,
weightless in my brain and lung. They fly through slick wet tubes
behind my eyes. I feel sick so we leave.

I wake in the night to a panic,
to the sound of the thum-thump of my heart
the throb of blood's pressure in my ear against my pillow.

In the morning my grandmother cracks eggs
into a pan and the rush
of the true world begins.

Paper Father

You fell from her unmarried words
without explanation
so I gathered what I could of you:
Your name on the certificate that linked us,
a funeral card with your mother's name,
(a grandmother I never knew),
along with crude love letters
to my mother: *I was painting walls today,*
the color was 'wild rose' with a virgin lamb's wool roller,
dated August and September of 1960.

I made you into what I needed: tertiary folds
and creases like the furrows of my young girl's brow
until you became an origami father, a sort of paper doll papa

who could be a musician that traveled
(I roller-skated in the basement to Percy Faith thinking
with his dark hair he could be you) or I'd re-fold you into a soldier,
(dead, or missing-in-action), or Batman or Zorro
because you were hush-hush and I had no portrait framed.

In church I made the sign of the cross, said *In the name of the Father,*
the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen and wondered if you
were He and she was like Mary and you were enthroned in the sky
with my half-brother Jesus, only I would get mixed up—

you could have been the devil like in "Rosemary's Baby"
or "The Omen" because clearly you could be no ordinary father.

When I found out you'd died (and had lived only fifty miles
away) I sent for your army records. A letter arrived:
Requester is: Next of kin of Deceased Veteran, Relationship: Daughter
but it said all was lost in a fire,
that for twenty dollars I could get a copy
of your final pay voucher.

Hyde Park, Chicago 1964

Harper Court—all big red brick. A hand covers mine. She is *Mama*. We walk past mailboxes, and swings in the park. The pebbled fountain is there, under the red leafed tree. *You are learning* she says. On Saturdays I play here. The fountain has lake water, cool and clear. She presses the silver button, water comes out. People are tall and I am small and she says *be a good girl today*. Mama pushes the glass door in to the shoe store where I sit in the back room under the pretty colored boxes on white shelves. I put my foot into a silver sizer and slide the bars to my red shoe. Mama tells Mrs. Johnson *she has the sniffles*. She says *see you later alligator*—then it's my turn—*after while crocodile*.

She leaves me with the shoes and Mrs. Johnson because Mama goes to work. Mrs. Johnson takes shoes to people all day long. Sometimes she brings them back. The customers sit in chairs. Mrs. Johnson kneels like in church: takes a shoe from their foot, puts a new shoe on. They walk around and look in the mirror.

She touches feet all day. She touches the skin of my forehead, puts a tissue to my nose. *Blow* she says. She smiles and calls me baby-girl. At closing time she carries me down 55th Street to Kimbark where we live, her smooth dark cheek against mine. She points to the street sign *remember the names in case you get lost*. In the apartment Charles and Selma are waiting—they go to school while we sell shoes. They play teacher with me while she cooks and sings at the stove:

*Hey little black sheep where's your lamb—way down yonder in the alley
Buzards and the butterflies pickin' out its eyes, and the poor little thing cried Mammy*

We sing too, and clap our hands—but dark time comes and Mama's at the door—then Mrs. Johnson's soft-talk, steady black eyes smile, white teeth shine when she says *bye sweet child*.

We walk to Harper Court. It's cold. A hand covers mine. She says *your grandmother is coming from far away*. I wait on the step while Mama turns the key. I look down at small black and white tiles while she gets mail from the little brass box. *You won't have to sit in the shoe store any more, isn't that nice?* We say the *now I lay me down to sleep* but after she shuts the door I go to the window. Orange streetlights color sliding raindrops. I run my finger along the dirt on the window sill, *soot of the city*, Mama calls it.

Riverdale House

Maplewood floors had dust in corners,
cold plastered walls kept things quiet.

Little bird orange and yellow, squeezed dead;
silence loomed on desperate mornings.

Walls painted shades of Elusive White,
the cobwebbed basement deep and cold fingered,

gangways narrow and empty in steamy summer heat; afternoons
growled, fed on iridescent flies.

Second-floor sun flooded the stairwell through a bare
window, gilding unwashed linoleum.

The attic bedroom's slanted ceiling sloped over hard-blossoms,
bees died, trapped behind faded venetian blinds.

Closet's clear-glass knobs shut on pale white mothball
pouches, outdated hats, coats, and hand-sewn smocks.

Words like footprints turned backward, turned away; an empty bed
a hushed mouth under a celluloid cross—

its little figure dangled by red-tipped pins. Big blue fiberglass awning
rippled over front windows, one for the door. Nails long

rusty dotted white metal railings. A cracked, uneven sidewalk
made small ponds after it rained.

.

Taboo

She is the darling of the room,
this little one in red—

hands reach for her,
fingers, a mouth presses

and puckers. Instinctively
she resigns.

Her smooth flesh
so young
it is grievous.

It's said this taboo's
universal,

but desire
can be so compelling.

Proportion Not the Cause of Beauty

If my skin was not pebbled, not raspberry-blotched,
If my lineage was documented as pure-bred—

If my irides were watchet blue and clotted locks
Corn-yellow—would I be an object

Of measurable delight? If I flourished as an orange tree—
Would the glossed-green leaf, blossoms, and heavy
Fruit have pleased your saint-like organs?

In vain I looked to the city of your heart
For access of approval, an A+ rating
Like Early Girls
Not yet ripe on the vine.

If I were a petite child, a thing you could pet,
Would you have been moved to some degree

Of love, as ice or a well-lit fire instills
An idea of cold or welcome heat?

Decades after your death I still hear you say
You won't kiss my offensive cheek
But that I may carefully kiss yours.

Beauty, I think, moves beyond reason, unmeasured—
A tremor only, on the edge of your velvet lip.

At the Piano

—and what wouldn't you give to see the old woman's hands
once more at the keys? The middle C with the tell-vein blemish
of blue-black on the rectangle of ivory under your fingers?
The long polished ebony of the black sharps and the flats; notes
played in the afternoon when rain kept you indoors, the music echoed
with her voice, somewhere not wholly lost. You wouldn't notice gnarled
knuckles, the waddle neck that quivered when she sang
in German. Your grandmother's hands worked at the keys, the knots
in your hair, and the stitches of mending.

When you gave the piano away
you almost forgot—
the years spent in a convent after her father died, how the piano
was hauled by boxcar to the farm in Michigan where a stepfather
planted and failed, where she broke her wrist riding a horse—the wrist
that would ache as she showed you the music.

Inheritance

On a closet shelf sits the old sewing chest, small
and black lacquered, made of cigar box lids. Nails hammered
atop for spools of thread, one small drawer of buttons,
thimbles silver, hooks & their eyes. A pin-cushion bulges
from its side, a hub for large-eyed needles for darning, thin ones
for lace. Pearled hatpins and Grandmother's wooden tools
for mending. Nothing wasted. Patched and re-sewn,
hand-me-downs altered. Taken up and let down.

This comes with a legacy of dead folk's clothes—
the robe of a ghost-grandfather dead ten years,
of sashed red wool. *You can wear it* Grandmother said. An armful
of nightgowns brought back from her sister's funeral—the one with polio,
a small wheel-chaired woman with thick, black glasses
and shoes.

I was small, and she'd been small, and I knew the cotton
had once warmed now-dead skin. *You can wear them* Grandmother said.
Nothing wasted. I am patched and re-sewn.

Dancing with Bones of My Father

Fifteen hundred miles away
is a bronze marker
over a stranger's body—
I want to go there—
dig up the casket, the wood of the worm,
and cup the smooth posterior
of the skull with my palm, to say *daddy*
into the canal where the ear
once heard the words *I'm going to have a baby*,
to view the source of the bone
of my bone, trace the fissures
and grooves of *Daddy-O*.

Van Gennepe says at the liminal
stage we have nothing. The peculiar
unity, he says, is I have neither this
nor that, and yet both—groovy,
then I'm in the margin, a transitional state
to meet the papa Mama didn't think I'd need but
I'm defined by a name, his name that *she* gave me.
Van Gennepe says undoing, dissolution,
and decomposition are ripe for processes
of growth—there may be transformation,
a chance

for a long overdue father and daughter dance—
this Daddy's girl swings
for the Orphic Mystery, the cyclical circle
and multiple second chances. Maybe a trip
down below with a lyre
could save me the trouble,
bring Pops back, get his boots back on,
shine those dancing shoes so

we'll frisk the whiskers,
dust off your mold, transform
into daddy and daughter,
and this go 'round, the riff
of the ride will be copasetic,
Daddy, oh Daddy-O.

At St. James

He looks not too harmless now, on the adjustable bed,
white sheets tucked, railed in like an infant—
or like someone in jail but there's no escaping this:
jaundiced, hands and fingers limped and stilled, the liver

has fallen asleep, the heart weakens, the Parkinson tremors
have stilled, the booming voice silenced. Aunt Fay
says just this morning he was talking of cats
and dogs running amok in his room—

last small words in a world that won't remember.
The nurse says hallucinations are common near
the end, on death's stage as we watch. This is mother's
brother, my grandmother's darling, the first-born.
He was a dreamer, Fay says, a kind man,

but he followed me once to the cabinet
in the basement
where mother sent me
for candles. It was Thanksgiving.

I remember hearing a story, that as a boy he ran
away to join the circus—before he married,
before the war, before malaria,
before foster daughters
came and went quickly, before
his old diesel Mercedes loomed
as a presage.

Now I look at the sharp angle of bone
beneath rice paper cheeks. Someone's removed
his thick black glasses and the blue patterned
hospital gown rises and falls, rises and falls
an afterthought—
he's an object now, a horizontal obelisk,

a mouse-trap sprung. I want to fuse
some measure of pain to those bones,
but I don't move I'm still nine,
still captured by this bruised yellow fruit
ripe for the ground.

Nothing ever felt like this.

Tracks

Mother bought the small house
when I was five: Side-stroked
brown brick, I heard it howl
at night. Wood front door exposed
the escutcheon's blotch, a low-ceilinged
basement a mousetrap—baited and ready—
sounds of southbound trains always in the dark.

900 square feet squeezed *hard* below my attic
bedroom, where freight train whistles entered
all night long. In the blue plastic tiled bathroom
Mother permed her graying hair, and Grandmother
disappeared for hours with her red rubber bag.

Mother left each morning for work.
Grandmother cooked and cleaned, laundered
white sheets in the bowels of the house. Her hard-
worked fingers of translucent skin over flesh
were like segments of orange. She ironed
and folded her life away.

She grew strange with a cancer inside. Her voice
weakened but the house voice grew—*Schäm dich!*

Soda mint tablets pressed against my tongue
when the house made her put down my dog
Because he's a nuisance and that train whistle blew
all night long.

The house ate at my back, gnawed the spine,
made my mother's brother a giant, a hot stone,
a wolf in the hall. But I grew tall—arms stretched
out past windows and doors. The house chewed,
took Grandma's crucifix between its teeth.

From my attic window I imagined train
tracks leading away from the groan
of the house. I was a face
behind glass.

Snow Suit

There was an hour I felt you protected me
and that must have been

when I let my guard down
and was gullible enough to believe

you had my best interest at heart.
The 25° below-with-the-wind-chill

temperature that night should have warned
me: particularly good things

should not be expected as we,
no, as I and you

walked along Avenue L
to a repeated restaurant

scene where no one knew us,
and we, no I and you,

ate breaded mushrooms (which I'd never had)
and linguini with clam sauce (which I'd never had).

You had given me your snow-suit to wear
for the walk over because even cars would

not start it was-so-cold—that black-zip up snow suit
(with the thin red stripe, funny how I remember that detail)

a pseudo-declaration of what?
I thought it must be love, what else would a girl

of nineteen think? But it was only a snow-suit
on a cold Chicago night.

Christmas Eve, 1982

You, son,
are the yellow bird

on the windy prairie
I will wish to follow

But I, a quiet pebble,
hold

what will be lost
between us two

not unlike the love letter
slipped to the back

of a chest of drawers

Rampant at the White Hen Pantry

It was lean times back then, when I worked
at the store. My son was young,
his father fired from a good railroad job—
but we got by best we could. Meat ends
snatched from the deli made for cheap stew
and I'd pluck cheese and tomatoes
from expired salads and subs. Regulars strolled
in for coffee and smokes—lottery junkies stood
at the door scratching.

One unsettled night I indulged
in an orgy of stealing:
packs of Velveeta and Ballparks, 64 oz. of Downy,
Gain, and Mr. Clean with Febreze.
I forgot myself and moved beyond morals—
aroused like an insect swarm in unfettered heat.

Domestic Disturbance

Storm door slams shut, tree shivers slant-eyed,
pins and needles, count 'em in your head, fifteen beers,

Two packs Kools, spaghetti's ready for the man, no-talk,
small talk, house-frau mouse talk, heat's on

in the kitchen, no room to swing a cat, look out
Betty-next-door here it comes: sauce over-bubbles,

bread rolls burn, refrigerator rocks, spit-talk, back-talk,
shout out loud talk, *hey you keep it down*, more please don'ts,

red hot pan hits the wall, ashtray glass breaks, splinter in the foot,
thunder on the roof, baby wakes, and then he cries, ashes ashes

all, dinner fork sticks in the back-of-the-thigh,
step back, keep calm, TV pastor shouts pray out the devil,

run to the back-porch, hide the paring knife, put it in the whiskey crock,
don't look him in the eye, rummage in a drawer, bird-on-a-wire,

mouse-trapped, chicken-on-a-spit, walk on eggshells, big-fists rise,
neck veins bulge, pressure's rising, doorknob in the thigh,

yellow teeth hiss under thin flea-lips, snakeskin brown eyes,
knock-down, round one, hands-up, old wood chair flies right by,

shirt sleeve rips, here's a tip: *take it like a man*, hi-fi's up for *Hollywood Nights*,
hide in the bathroom, hide in the closet, make yourself disappear,

come-out, come-out wherever, maybe say the rosary,
say you're sorry across the swollen lip, hell in a hand basket,

policeman pulls up out on the street, doorbell ding-dongs, evening ma'am,
someone called, fill out a form, close the door, olly-olly-oxen-free,

all is clear—two houses down lives an old gray man,
time, he thinks, to turn the volume on his show way back down.

The Porch, at night

It's late. A weekday's last hour. Small street called Eggleston lined with tedious brick houses, tight clipped shrubs—neighbors hear the flush of toilets between gang-ways and quarrels between husbands and wives

who grew up in identical homes. Their parents expect grandchildren and visits on Sundays. She sits on the edge of the second porch step with knees pulled close for small comfort. A jug of red wine sits

at her side. Her conversation with herself is half-spoken, interrupted only by drags at a cigarette. A husband snores inside next to beer cans, on the couch, beyond the screened door, beyond kindness and reason.

A boy sleeps in a crib further back in a bedroom. She doesn't know she won't see his eighteenth birthday, that better doesn't come, or the inability of sadness. The dark paved road under the orange glow

of the streetlight tempts her; she knows it leads somewhere other than this. The keys to the old Buick shine in the light, there's a half-tank of gas and enough cash—but the wine isn't gone, and out comes the moon.

Where Addiction Begins

On the endless mile of childhood, over potholes,
and the skid-marked road.

Between the miniscule grit of the windowsill
and a pale-blue room.

Against unlocked doors (hollow core) in a hardwood jamb
detached from the wall.

In ladled-on shame heavy as goose-grease in a blackened
WearEver pan.

Behind the congealed love of a single mother; a niche
carved in the skin

until you begin to crave something sweetly addicting,
when you can't see

past the windowpane and you'd do anything to get out
of the house.

Before the numb of a January burial in a city that freezes
so blue it comes

straight for you. After a long overwinter; it blossoms seductive
like new-found love

over the promise of shelter (like a bombed-out ballroom),
red sequins stitched

to the lips keep you mute. In a Romeo roaring full-throttle,
a juddering engine

beneath you blasts like a smack-stoked furnace—
love, a death till you part.

After 48 Years of Working Bingo

Tables in the church hall, littered
with 5x5 cards, numbers neatly spaced
within grids, she wants a confirmation of Heaven
from me—the daughter-in-law who ranted
for pro-choice in catechism (who needed
it at eighteen), the bad girl who smoked, tripped out,
stayed out, laid out, and made out—
the one who married her oldest son, divorced
him, and tried it again. 98 pounds of bone
on the bed asks, *What will it
be like? What's going to happen?*

Evelyn never missed mass,
asked the parish priest to bless my son's crib,
his blankets, forehead, and the pantry he slept
in his first year. She, the grand-maven: maker of pizzelles,
sour cream-topped cheese cake, and
woman-who-could-get-anything-white-again.

The lymphoma was kept secret—
a well-packed fib—*I'm okay, just a touch of flu.*
If not named it might go away; she wants to wash
her windows come spring, vinegar-soaked
newspaper crumpled in her circling palm on the glass,
but it gets her, takes her fast—
by December a lifetime of faith
dilutes to the watery mess cleaned daily away.

The hot, close, two-flat across from the railroad
becomes a chamber of chipped ice, a flush of the feeding
tube, and bedside sponge baths; thighs lean and yellow
like an undressed hen with translucent wings. The priest made
his visit weeks ago but she frets and hangs on
in weird suspense. A macabre puppet with wild eyes

gone yellow and gray, she asks, *What will happen?*
She thinks I know something certain: I taught
Sunday school last year, and read the Bible once.
A single Pearl, I tell her, *will be the gate that opens to a road
of gold where your mother is waiting—*
she nods—Christmas morning the undertaker
comes and the house falls apart.

At St. George's the organist plays Evelyn's favorites—*Ave Maria* and *How Great Thou Art*—music meant to console, but bingo isn't cancelled, and the rail cars still screech hauling slag from the mill.

When the Sun Shifts

Humidity gives way to blue skies over sienna
fields under cloudless October, surrenders

to endless dust and the drone of corn dryers
laboring on Indiana farms. The farmer sweeps

his field clean of husks. From the house
on Belshaw Road I hear the incessant roar

of farm machinery. Winter is coming: Barren fields
stripped of their green and gold, late flocks of birds

headed south, and a hard deep frost. It's a season
of leaving. Aluminum silos packed with cobs

are rural obelisks against clear, cold evening skies. Acrid
smoke floats on a dimmed horizon; there's nothing pretty

here. Late November's gray and wind arrive.
The yellow kernels leave by the bushel and ton,

thrust into diesel trucks that will take grain by semis,
rail, and barge. How long until I am home?

II. WE SPEAK

The Admonition of Eve

I hadn't thought the tale would spread like sand
in a frenzious storm, but then in the desert
words wet men's lips and keep the tongue doused.

In tents of woven black goat hair men sat
on their side of the wall concocting a story
to help our nomadic tribe brabbling with farmers

for land rights. They should have consulted the women,
we *Chavah* would've set them straight. I'd died
by then, but we would have put the word *truth*

onto parchment and placed it into their mouths.
Moses, often a *luftmensch* and egged on by Aaron,
agreed to scribe their nonsense to scroll—

exaggerations based loosely on me, Adam,
and two of my sons. I wasn't the first woman,
and Adam certainly wasn't my first man, but he had a huge

herd, a way with words, and charmed my father
for fifty goat, me and my cookpots. And a garden?
This is the desert! But I hear the headwaters

at the Tigris are lovely in springtime; and what a fat one:
Aaron told Moses to write we were kneaded and shaped
into loose formed husks like a golem. I'll tell you,

I've slaughtered and dressed many a goat, set men's bones
back into place, and oiled the dead. Who doesn't know
male and female *each* have twenty-four ribs?

The apple must have been Moses' idea—he was still peeved
at Miriam for being a prophetess (he wasn't one to share holy
limelight, especially with women), and scapegoats are useful.

A shepherding family, there wasn't time to name every
animal, we had enough with a herd of two hundred.
And the only reptile I ever saw was a false-tooth snake

I didn't speak with, and Lilith was only a myth added by Rav Ashi
and Ravina centuries later to keep women beneath them
in bed. We had many children, my Adam and I, to help

tend flocks and milk all those goats. And *after* eating an *apple*
we'd have pain during childbirth? Let me tell you, women
have always had pain since we stepped out of the trees

and hip bones narrowed so we could walk on two feet
and pick up men's tunics tossed on the rugs
of the tent. Cain, to his father's chagrin, became a tiller

of soil, a land-holder, while Abel stayed with his sheep.
Boys will be boys and they debated farm
versus pasture at meals. No son of mine killed

his own brother, but Moses made him a schtunk.
I never thought such a tale would stick! What kind of people
would believe a God would care if lamb or wheat were his gift?

Since then I see I've grown flaxen hair and my eyes
have turned blue in Renaissance paintings. But look, I'm dark
like the tents of Kedar, the curtains of Solomon,

I am Hebrew, of sand and the dust. I walked the Sinai
with my children and herds, the door
of my tent listens to the wind of the desert,

and I carry a parchment with *truth* in my hand.

The Irascible Wife of Noah

Oy vey iz mir—it's called (in the book) the age of the patriarchs but it's been more like the endless-season-of-longwinded-men for us women. Yes, it does seem like he's lived six-hundred years stuck with him on this damned gopher-wood box of a boat he pieced together in the backyard. The shoddy pitch timbering leaks (men never read the instructions) and creaks with each wave.

When the deluge first came he had me chasing rabbits and cats, sows and sheep, the ibex and ibis, I shooed them to hay-strewn stalls—a below deck labyrinth of hot dank stink. It was as wet inside as out,

tears fell fast as the rain. Fetid cakes of dung and urine-soaked floorboards I had for a floating home. If only my mother could see me now, *marry him* she'd said, *he's a go-getter*. Rough seas ahead, I try to lull myself to sleep, each wave a wild cradle above the deep hours—woe to us women who endure the woodworking-whims of our men.

I hope God exists—I do.

I pray we come to land soon, that these roaring, neighing, scratching, animals leave my watch, so I say let it flow, let it float, just get me off this damned

floating zoo. It's hard to carry on, to carry feed, carry water, and hay when you feel so alone on this man's ship, when you're homesick, seasick, and tired. So I tell you, there's a secret I cannot keep—it was me who snuck up from the belly of the hull to the small window, one cubit from the roof while he snored,

and saw the land first. Out over the glut of wreckage and water was a bird in a tree looking down at me, at this bobbing boat of salvation.

My Name Is Pia Farrenkoph

—in early March of 2014 a woman's body was discovered in the backseat of a Jeep Liberty in a garage in Pontiac, Michigan. The woman died sometime in 2009 and is currently presumed to be the homeowner.

I sat for six years in the back seat of my SUV
in the garage, dressed a winter jacket and jeans, my vantage
point increasingly infinite. I don't remember that I died,
only that shapes of sounds faded to a softly addictive harmonic hum.
Neighbors still swear on occasion they saw the twitch of a curtain
or a lamp-lit shadow move through the house past the sheers,
but I was content as I was in my jeep. I traveled extensively when I was alive,
and now in my erudite sleep I cross borders freely. Oh, there will be talk:
water-cooler talk, over-the-fence talk, grocery-line gossip talk. The tabloid
drivelets will have fun for a week or two. They'll create a crop of crude catch-phrases:

*Mummified in Michigan, Her bank account dried up just like her body
Hermit boled up in her house found dead*

But I won't feel a thing: sticks, stones, bones, and all that.
And what great shapes of black mould bloomed up the walls!
Too bad the money ran out, the bank foreclosed. Their hired repair man
disrupted a mighty dream I was having: a raucous swim with blue whales
back home in Manchester Bay.

Seated here for these years I've become an exotic fruit in the garden
of my own garage (there's not a thing that I've needed,
why, whole worlds are born and die and go quite unnoticed)
What a large pitted sorrow it is to become so busy
at another's dissevered life, this random event of a death
that just happens. Like time, in space our bodies expand and contract
(this will happen to you), but what difference can it make in the end?

The world-at-large seems so ill-at-ease with itself, pinned hapless
by an absence of solitude. But me (who you will soon forget),
I think I did well on this floating sphere of rocks,
with its metals and water. Under the ozone's patina
I learned I had the best company after all: my reflection
stayed steady, gazed back with well-tended love in the Liberty's
rear-view mirror, content that my garden stayed small.

Sylvia Plath on facebook

—adapted from “Love Letter,” 1960

This is my first post of the week:
It’s not easy to state the changes I’ve made; private message
me if you wish to discuss.

To my last post no one responded—if I’m alive now
then I was dead, but I’m unbothered by the lack
of response, though I hope

someone will poke me, toe me just an inch.

Last night I slept poorly, lay awake bothered
by thoughts of snakes, the long and the short,
and angels weeping over lost mail.

Slept better: slept on like a little bent finger,
limpid, like liquid rocks against clouds—
does anyone else dream this way?

I’ve poured myself out here like a fluid
without even one *like*—maybe this format isn’t for me—

This is my last post, I’m de-activating my account, deleting
my timeline, growing lucent as glass. I feel I’ve started to bud
and ascend.

And now if you search for me I’ll resemble
some sort of god.

Woman at the Well

In the heat of the twelfth hour I park at Wal-Mart, grab a cart and toss seven empty water-jugs from the trunk. They wobble-dance when wheeled across blacktop, acrid in summer heat. Automatic double doors part to a cool heaven. I find something grounding (a reminder it's not always this easy) in pulling the lever, watching the water flow into the plastic.

But I'm no Samaritan. I don't need strangers counting out husbands. I married the first one twice and am married again.

Later, in the cool dark of the house I fold his underwear into the dresser, in doubt of most stories I've ever been told.

Josephine in Hopper's *Morning Sun*, 1952, Oil

Certainly you sit, not at the edge
of the bed, close to the window,
but at its center (his center)
where Hopper's placed you,
told you to *stay* and to *sit still*
like any good wife should do.

Do you regret it, Josephine?

How willingly you traded
revelry for solitude; vivaciousness
for silent-slants-of-the-sun
on houses, invading sparse
rooms and empty streets.

Looking out that window, do you see
what he paints? Is the long length
of the red brick building with windows
like glass-eyed spies watching
color fade from your skin
as charm from a marriage?

Maybe those barren buildings
remind you of red ochre
stained walls, shed unfertilized
with each passing moon yet

your salmon-pink slip
clings to heaving
bosoms, falls from shoulders
in his shadows and light.
Was it hard to put your brush
down and pick up your Eddie?

We all gaze at your sharp-cornered
cheeks, feel the flesh of chapped
hands you rest on your calves.

So, After All, Why Not God

as a dapper vision, a *fashionisto*, the epitome of contemporary dandiness in delightful brocades and color? An eccentric parade of glory in a patchwork *passim*?

—when I was a child He was the old man floating on a cloud like Santa Claus in summer whites with fine leather

sandals. But the nuns spoke of omniscience, the trinity, and their Biblical proportions morphed Him into a giant with a big red mouth like the neon Magikist lips of the Edens Expressway. Couldn't He be a divine rage,

an amorphous orange techno-popped God of all gods? A gallimaufry of Liberace and a blue-eyed Big Boy hoisting stacked burgers on an aluminum tray? And why wouldn't God pound the piano (harps are for sissies)

like Jerry Lee, creating compositions in His own image? I'd like my Supreme Being coiffed in a David Beckham pompadour, a pomaded moustache above His big lips. But lately He's a pair of giant orange pants,

a Hawaiian shirt with an oversized head boasting huge, scary, mismatched eyes: one red and one green glaring down. Someone said He hangs out with washed-up actors in the hills just outside of Hollywood, that old, lonely town

past its heyday—that He had a bad case of eczema with nothing much to do but dream up faces and body parts floating off into vibrantly colored abstraction—that He wild dances like David in a Dior linen *ephod* in continuous motion

as He has through plagues, invasions, and catastrophic natural disasters. Medieval Europe painted Him as a paternal figure looking down on us all, an illusion of consummate control. God can stop you in your tracks with His confrontational gaze if you let Him,

but you can appoint Him Grand Marshal at any carnival dressed in ruffles and red satin slippers, or infinitely interesting as this year's Best Dressed. Scads of people have claimed clothes make the man; claimed *Darling you look divine!*

Little Boy's Shadow

—*On August 6th, 1945, the first atomic bomb was used in warfare*

It's not actually a shadow is it?

Attaboy, good boy, little boy, gone boy—
The carbon imprint seared into concrete,
human organic residue and carbonized
flesh, now part of the sidewalk, the steps.

Little Boy threw a town-sized tantrum,
where a body absorbed a fireball's heat
that bleached surrounding stone;

would anything [at all] remain of the body,
or would it vaporize, leave nothing left to embrace
or to bury?

No one counted bodies that day.

Too often too much is not enough
so at Frenchman Flat sat high-ranking
folks sat on rows of wood benches squinting
at blasts. Little Boy wasn't alone: Priscilla,
Smoky, and Able tested the limits
of Doom Town, its mock-houses stocked
with canned goods, and dummies lay dying
in basements, kitchens, and bedrooms—
a mannequin tot blown out of bed
and showered with needle-sharp bits
of glass fragments from windows.

But dummies aside, let's not forget
what they've told us: *Many lives were saved*
thanks to Little Boy and his famished pal Fat Man—

so a divine kind of tension settles
between countries, shadow, and sun
when a body becomes flickering light,
a fizzball of stardust squeezed
and unsettled.

I read that you could think
of atomic shadows like tan-lines,
like a day of too much sun
at the beach.

Little Boy killed instantly,
so *abh that makes it all better*,
but God that's so metal. Some argue
bodies don't just vaporize but they do
when you detonate a Little Boy nearby—

Someone asked someone
who's been to the museum
to describe the tone as if it were an opera,
or a short-listed novel.
Serene? Somber? Hopeful?

They said it wasn't as intense as Auschwitz
But along the same vein—
a don't miss thing if you're near,
you'll absolutely cry, but it won't leave you
feeling dead inside—

Woman Waiting for the Bus

She's impossible not to notice:
coffee-washed skin
and hair all attention
to the slant
of early morning
light—breezes
and humidity fluff
it further than she expects—

she sits with urgency,
on the edge of the bench,
road dust at open toes
as she waits
for the southbound
bus to Cocoa.

She braces herself,
leaning forward
with forearms resting
on gathered knees.

Her hands grip a bouquet
of apricot-colored roses
nestled in green
tissue paper
like apologies,
little fervent kisses,
small sleeping babies,
exigent misplaced thoughts,
or each a *please get well*
enveloped
in their delicate,
wordless,
wrapping.

Working Girls

—with lines borrowed from John Dryden's *Imitation of Horace, Book III*

Call us Angels of Heaven, Lilith, or Eve—
Hammurabi coded our rights. In Rome we registered
as doctors of flesh. They called us *Meretrix*
and we turned tricks, and our bare
cheeks, like the moon quakes over
the quiver-rich fields in spring.

We've always received gifts for our favors:
silks and ambergris, raw meat, aged casks
of valley wine, charms of amber, and tusks
carved with our image and name.

They came and they came
like babes to their mothers, suckled
and wept—monstrous men robust
from the hunt, the pleasure of war, or
the sensual lure of political lust.

We tend to the throbs and the ego, caress
smooth-skinned orbs, push back skin
and swallow the milks
of men, salute their sorrows
with breasts. Softly, we shelter

their dark shadow. O Men, you lend ears
to Augustine's counsel; if our trade
becomes banned capricious desire unleashed
might flow through the streets
and no daughter left unbroken. I tell you:

*When we dance in the wind, shake
Our wings and moneymakers,
We will not stay for free past the hour, take care
If you puff the prostitute away—*

O Men, poor men, what hot friction
you let us knit in your brows.

Jane Doe

You could look at her and not see

she walked the road like a savior,
flowing in lengths of white
cotton in August,
or January,

feet sandaled in leather,

bummed cigarettes
at the bank, the drugstore,
and bus stop.

She traveled on foot
like a pilgrim called to her Mecca,

a paper cup always in hand.

Objects (and the inability of sadness)

Hung-over on a Saturday at the Cocoa Flea Market
I pass plastic pinwheels, two-for-ten sunglasses, and fruit
vendors for distraction in public places,
wonder if the sadness I'm wearing shows—

I pause over a cardboard box of crocheted
Napkins and doilies of aged cottons and silks,
the handiwork of women. Violets stitched into linen,
strawberries and coreopsis too, ruffles and lace. The wingtips
of mourning doves feather overhead. I purchase a pineapple
patterned doily: Irish lace with brown hair woven
throughout. The tag reads:
“Muireann O’ Connor Estate”

Back home I spread it across the heart
pine dresser, the scent of lemon-oil is strong.
Googled, I find her: Ninety years
earlier Muireann lived on Merritt Island
tending pineapple groves. Her fingers wove
palm baskets for settlers. She and her Thomas planted
one hundred acres of rows circling the southern
end of the island. Thomas died early. Witnesses
said she went often to the brackish river edge
for mollusks and mullet. I like to think
it was for the feel of her feet in the sand
with a chorus of seabirds above her,
and the look of her footprints
as they filled with each wave.

Mary

We were locker partners
high-school because she
was a Seliga and I was a Sell,
two ghosts in the hallway.

Her mother bought us vodka
and orange juice on school
nights and gave us keys
to her car. Mary drove
the old stick-shift Dodge
to the cemetery where we drank
Mad Dog atop tombstones, Gretchen,
her shepherd, always along.

She fought fists, words,
and intrusions into her body,
in a ramshackle two-flat
in Harvey.

When I lost her for decades
she became a cypress tree,
evergreen needles for arms,
cypressene collecting for decades
in her small woody-bones, resistant,
impervious.

It's rumored in sloughs
age leaves the trees vulnerable
to an attack of heartwood,
leaves them useless and hollow.

But those trees have
purpose: Bromeliads,
black squirrel, and owl
make a niche in what's pitted
and furrowed.

Hard-knuckled roots hold
fast to the soil under brackish swamp
water; exposed knees anchor
and buttress their gray conical beauty.

When I found her again, she was north
of the city. In her rented space she forgave
sins, but her small freckled arms
still needled and ended with fists.

III. WE MIGRATE

Laetoli

It is newborn warm; the sky heaves and readies itself
 To rain soft on three small traveling bodies.
The female is aware of the impending wet
 But has no Word for cloud, gray, or water.

The small child at her hip wiggles,
 Is let down to put small feet
Within her mother's own earth-pressed prints,
 A game she makes on a day

Without hours or name, but
 The male knows where the water
Hole is so they move, follow tracks of gazelle,
 Giraffe and the water buffalo.

They know them by scent
 And the scat fresh on the path.
By this *their* footprints we'll come
 To know *them*, these antediluvian

Ancestors. She carries the bunched and sightless
 Hive of us in her ova, her
Pelvic-held pearls. The mother
 Cathedral walks in tandem

Out of the valley, out of their quiet
 Clock-less world, out of ochre,
Into the musky scent of our own skin.

Cities of God

Powdered with stars, in the age of stone and patriarchs, an old moon
tells time, governs tides, and plants seeds of apples

and faith under date palms. A yearning for wives, children, and a god
take root in an Arabian desert, a geography intrigued

by starkness. Steppic and desertic landscape under scintillating skies
encourage tribal rife, and their god is amused.

A desert milieu breeds seers, martyrs, and fanatic's mouths
within caves of mouths where oracles divine meteor showers

and comets in an overshadowing sky. The men look for a map,
but the women ask *where's this all leading?* Sand shifts

under the weight of the caravan. Women grit teeth for the mettle—
they know what trouble a city can bring.

When Women First Consider Death

Words began to form in mollusk-like mouths
as the tongue explored the edges of teeth, lips puckered
out a *whooob* and we made voiceless *kub* sounds
at the rear of the tongue. We rose
to the unpracticed velum but didn't know
about full, long Freudian phrases
like "lacking self identity" or
 "a lifetime of dreams."

We knew stars moved across
the night sky in patterns, that small pearls of millet
dropped to earth would make grow
after rain, but what did we know
of sowing and reaping?

One of us started to put our dead in the ground
in the hope they'd swell, arch toward the sun
like sprouted green shoots, so we placed
them in bogs and near streams.

It was our world without time—a continuous season
of savannahs and afternoon stillness. We longed for the dead
ones, unsettled by where they could be. A fresh guttural
sense of mortality, of flotsam, of transience
came fast like floodwater. We hid the truth
behind ritual,

but once a mental river is crossed
it's an irreversible journey. We buried: Bent
stiff knees to chest, heads to the west, and placed
sharp edged stones, a gourd of water, and dried
meat at their sides.

I dropped yellow petals and wild onion
as dirt covered their faces, and the men
came to sing with us. We danced
until stars returned overhead.

How Boats Are Born

—it's never what we think
when we pass away:

the surprise inside bursts
when starfoam bubbles
teem with pre-birth
down in a red turbid sea

and we float into folds of flesh
fish-formed
like tadpoles within heart's shape

a head in the apex blooms
with scales
with feathers and a hoistable spine
begins its unfurl

till a crack through the shell
of a mermaid's egg expands

and a young boat spreads
the curve of a smooth Latin wing
and a Bermuda rig is born

feathers unfold to a triangular jib
the clew gray near its gunwale
the telltales flutter

in colors of starwax and marrow—
the direction more clear—

the bitter end never loosens
nothing recedes

The Mind at the End of Its Tether

—now it is as if that cord had vanished

Let loose from the grip
little girl slip
off—you're a ghost
child in the blue cold
deep, an arm stretched out
high above you, thin gloved hand
holds a butterfly net for the fishes,
(the silvered small fishes
awakened in dreams—
where do they go
when the moonlight sinks,
when the bone
leaves the ocean,
when the mind
blinks them away
in the sun?)
Your black sash
at your waist
cinches
the billowy folds
of your gown,
white in the water,
your hair in pigtails,
a garland of poppies
and rue atop
your mink-brown hair
(What did you think
when you sank with the ship,
when the man playing the fiddle
bubbled good-bye?)
O little one of the blue-white night,
how you skip on the deck,
caught up in the upwelling,
chasing your mackerel
and herring—
your smile floats
in saline silence,
the wet grave of the sea,
but you call something soundless,
a high-note swallowed, engulfed
(I'll remember you in the morning)
your almond shaped eyes, hazel,
older though, in the looking glass.

According to the Gospel of Haunted Women

We see ourselves undefeated in fire,
in hot brew or man-talk, yet
we lurk, huddled, hope to find
each other before whip-stitched
rain stings our cheeks. The choleric goody,
the spinster, the young suckled mother:
Women who feed the dead by spoon
charred bits pulled from the ash pile. Women
who beseech and deliver, who take bread
risen, and suffer perversion at the foot
of the soldier. We see ourselves as methods
of divination, as oracles untapped. We see
ourselves as water, floods, waves of heat,
long lived, endowed, but overlooked as oxen,
as mule packs for ministers and lords.

We see ourselves wash and burn
out, like the waxing light of the dark red gloom
of the womb, as blues of bruises
bloomed bright yellow. We have entered the fire
and lived; divined by water, and gasping
for air.

We are lonely for everyone
in the world.

The Way of the Witchetty-Grub

1. How it is in the end

We house hunt near the beach with the realtor
Sunday afternoon. It's a laborious task
to choose a space to parallel your dimensions—
a cocoon for maturation, a coffer for dressers and linen.
The realtor parades us through houses; few are tidy,
most are dated, while others are beaten, sapric
and declining in shame. The last house
to view reads like this: *Lovely waterfront home
with an exceptional view down the canal. Huge fireplace,
upgraded kitchen in last several years, nice screened porch,
two car garage, estate sale.* A wheel chair ramp at the entry;
I feel the slip begin in the foyer—to the hum of the dead—
a discernable flutter like that of the ghost moth. Realtor mentions
the woman died as if it's luck; but breath is held in here—
sanguine nature holds fast to familiar vibrations—
here she hovers like moth wing to candlewick. I wander
rooms filled with her proofs: piano and glassware,
cabinets of fine-china dolls, her fingerprints still on the kettle
and the oven mitt's shaped to her hand—exigent artifacts.
In the bathroom her hairbrush lies under a note taped to the mirror
Did you take your medicine?
Shadows hold still in their shape; wait to exhale requiems
to her crucifix in suspense on the wall. The fluttering follows, hovers near doilies
like snowflakes on shelves with ceramics and curios;
of death she murmurs, *it's simple and quick, a diffusion of bone.*

2. How it is in the beginning

The witchetty grub—plumped and wrinkled—burrows underground
to the root of the Red River Gum, digesting its sap, leaving
sawdust trails in her arboreal home. Her existence terminal,
she slips into her chrysalis—this is her magic, her pantomime
of the living, until later, her adapted inertia, like diffusion of bone,
emerges the ghost moth; wings beat evanescent circles
over the desert wijuti bush in search of a mate.

An Aquifer of Self (with a Blessing from the Bog People)

—In 1982 a backhoe operator near Titusville, FL discovered an ancient burial site of 168 unknown people

It can happen like this: thick skinned
you drive south, slope it low to ten feet
above sea level, a return to eldritch land
where eighty centuries ago the people
pinned down their dead in the bog with wooden
stakes. In death's cradle you seek what remains—

At the peat bog's edge slip into the muck
with them and let out your breath, let bones
turn from what binds, take in gifts
which they offer: mineral and marrow like honeycomb
where you place thumb and forefinger
into hollows of spine bone
and fossa. Take care to caress the dark plum
of brain preserved as they slumbered
under the sapric peat.

You begin a swim with them, sense
the filtering of sediment and sentiment, what's foreign
and unnecessary. Buoyant, arms move like wings of red-capped
cranes—a child shows you her speckled turtle's carapace
and wooden toy pestle. Her discolored shroud still hangs from her bones,
she invites you to play in her shallow grave.

Her mother, close by, shares prickly pear, elderberry seeds
And a drink from her bottle gourd. *Sbbbb* they say with silt-filled
mouths—their bodies encircle your waist, lift and push at the curved arch
of your feet—*this is how we learn to breathe.*

One-hundred-sixty-eight sing of palmetto and manatee, of the ibis
and alligator. They hum stories of big winds and movable stars
as they birth you back to the bog-pond's edge.

The naissance begins with rain-song and hummingbird,
the jacaranda and slash pine. You are strong-boned and sinuous—you hum
for them, for the weavers of fibrous cloth, palm baskets, for the bodies
buried with care.

It can happen like this: you walk the edge of the beach,
hold a shell to your ear and listen.

Sixth Floor, BWMC

Death has its own sort of symphony,
its own source of Bel Canto
in this antiseptic white
(like the heaven they hope
for) under fluorescent lights.

There is often an interlude
where the veil is thin but intact—
for the beauty of death
is deceiving:
skin is like phyllo, bruises
to colors of plum and deep green,
breath squeezes for the lung,
for the aria
of the muscular heart.

Ventilators hum a libretto
while morphine drips
its opiate to solace
nerves, to loosen
the mind to childhood
or a blue-feathered sky.

The flirrip of rubber gloves removed
accompany the enteral feeding
tube's deep slursh and release. Exits
are quietly made as slippage
toward eternal dormition occurs.

Feather-light, they slip
down the hall escaping
the drudgery
of morgues and chapels.

The final vibrato enters—
inadvertent—
bravos or bravas—
the cue to begin
again.

On the Estero River in a Kayak

I linger over the sight: my five fingers
still on the seawall; a terminus clutch
of connection to land. It's easy to let go,

I think, to push off and leave divided plots
of houses, a sloped yard's landscape
heavy with shifting alluvium, itchy

to escape grass-bound roots at the margins
between soil and sea. I push off and dip
the oar to dark water edging along mangrove,

under pined flatwoods of the old Koreshan's
camp where Cyrus Teed sermoned his followers
on his hollow earth theory in a concave sphere.

I slip past shoals, hear the swash and the splash
against a coquina outcrop along the canal
as a gray wet cloak folds vertical blurring

the breach between water and sky. Boat riggings
clangor like fog-wet funeral bells. Catamarans
and sailboats strain against ties and cleat hitches.

Moorings of the body lighten—it might be good
to let go. Paddle raised up, I drift in the river.
A manatee passes close by. Its scarred body nudges
the kayak. His primitive breath is familiar,
and the toll of a bell, the tow of the tide
to the river, the soft towers of fog thicken

and trick to form into words, a voice: *Don't stray far
from the land, the waters have ways you won't understand.*
In this lagoon it may be a habitat of faith
within fog.

Cyrus Teed could be right—am I inside a sphere,
weightless on water?

With gravity gone my will must hold me in place,
my bones back away from the center of life, autumnal
furies circle until ululation rises to acceptance,
a furious release, like Teed's coffin washed
out from its tomb, in the hurricane of 1910.

Eye of the Wisent

Pressing soul of foot to shell strewn
sand south of the Cape, I approach his shifting
sand haven, a salt licked edge of a wound,
a tattered tent, backpack, and bicycle—

his makeshift clothesline hangs
with sea-washed laundry like lung ta
prayer flags flickering in a wild horse
wind. He kneels, this old leathered bull,
on the edge of his earth, tries to hang
on to pebbles of words the beach patrol

toss his way. Closer, I tip
into the hazeled eye of the wisent.
My lungs slow to slip in to his breath
of transient rasps. Slowed lower I feel
his wavering pulse, the hollow
tin of belly, and blisters
of the sin of not having enough
rub my own heels, rattle
my logic. With care he removes

papers, threadbare,
from an old leather wallet—
tries to confirm his existence
to the wind of this world—
The beach patrol stands, casts shadows
and hunts: *why are you here?*
what are your plans?

Behind his eyes I feel what he sees:
the dominant bulls, aggressive self- glory,
pressing the wisent to shame. Vulnerable,
without land or herd, he gathers
clothing, water jugs, canned goods
and shoes, places skin-thin papers
back into his wallet. I slip back

from his leathered arms and face with
shagged gray mane and see the wind
pass through him like prayer
through god's ear. The sun sinks
behind empty beach homes, shuttered
and safe, while vultures pick
at the loggerhead dead on the dune.

Death at Hellabrun

Silhouettes play
at water's edge.
Plastic buckets
and small yellow
shovels lay abandoned
near washed-out
sandcastles.

Simian-like,
the human animal
gives muffled calls
over noise-of-the-surf
at the shore
in the water
into the air
in the early morning light.

We are tailless,
all dangling arms
and flopping sex,
vulnerable flesh

tectering,

approaching
a behavioral cusp,
tiny fraction of time-line,
our fork-in-the-road,
the unplanned event.

At the zoo, just south of Munich,
during the war,
when the keeper reported
the bonobos all died
of fright from the noise
of the bombings,
the chimpanzees
remained unaffected—
how marvelous it is,
that we, like chimpanzees
are so arrogantly
evolved to avoid
such fear.

At the Tarot Reading

They sit next to each other as cards are laid out
in a cross. Incense wafts in twirling ghost shapes
across the table, around the reader's ringed fingers.

The girl is young and eager, with slender hands
that flutter-speak like bird wings. He is dark, and smiling,
wears a uniform and is essentially good. Firm in his chair

he is grounded like any good soldier.
Slowly cards are turned. The reader lingers
over brilliant colored cups, moons, and swords.

She wants to tell them this: That he should give the girl
his name, that they will have children without adversity,
that he will never strike her like a match for his fire,

or shout bulldogged; that the girl will never speak ill of him
or let her body drift to a more sympathetic shoulder. She will clip
coupons faithfully, mend socks, and bake in cold weather. Saturday

mornings he will cut the grass of their moderate home, rewire lamps,
and build a bench for the yard. He will buy tools at yard sales;
she will learn to cut his hair with clippers and trim his brows.

Together they will can summer's tomatoes and learn to pray out loud.
She will teach Sunday school, find lost buttons and make ends
meet on his salary. Their children will love them and obey without question.

She wants to tell them only good moonlight will shine
through their window onto their sleeping bodies, that neighbors
will rely on their kindness and that no harm will be done.

She knows the cards are only paper and ink, that readings
are tricky. She opens her mouth to speak to their wide-open eyes,
to the gathering hope of a misguided universe. She will tell them.

At the End of the Earth

Gathered at an intersection a red light holds us: a painter's
red work truck littered with buckets and poles, a blue Chevy's
silver-starred toolbox glints under blinding white sun—
tourists, salesman, fathers, bumper-stickered vans with children,
and widows all commune in a ubiquitous scene—caught in a current
of time unraveling like rope washed up in the wrack.
Waiting our turn we text, pick at scabs and wonder
if spouses still love us. This is to be human: to wait for the signal,
to continue in the onward motion of traffic, of the slick road
ahead where signs mock even us.

No Room for an Exodus

—but man I tell you we sat in a dark house
the night before we left: no lights,
no alert for authorities. With blood on our doorpost
we ate roast meat, flatbread, and collards, slept
in our belted jeans, sandals fastened to feet.

We were passed over in the night, an evening
of divine disregard. Before sunrise
the house was empty;
no one was dead.

We were bound for the interstate
with our dogs and the cat, the silverware
and socks stuffed with cash
in the trunk. One quick curse
and we were gone.

O Lord you had us on the run,
driving through a desert of asphalt
and toll roads,

but we were children, oh yes,
I tell you we were babes on the road
seeking salvation from the dust
of lawyers and leaches.

We moved from Hebron to Athens,
Sarasota to Naples, until we wearied
of rest stops, two frightened children
in an un-promised land.

Displacement

It was the Saturday after Thanksgiving
that I became homeless.
The day before I sold everything:
saucepots and mattresses,
lawnmower and books.
Collected antiques toddled out
in the arms of strangers.
The sewing machine left with the potted palm,
the dressers with the shower curtain.
By evening I sat on a bare wood floor
making games with echoes
and it was already not my house.

Before another Indiana sunrise,
Kentucky knew my name.
Never a rear-view thought,
roads south pulled hard—
folks in Georgia called me *ma'am*
and the Fuller Warren Bridge
led me across the St. John's.
Six hours later, under big sky
and scrub palm, I crossed
Charlotte Harbor, and slipped
into a county named
after Robert E. Lee.

The long road south
swallowed what I'd spit out,
like the tag sale
where I'd sold
pillow and quilt;
but the roads here
were gentler,
and the street signs
easy to read.

41°48'N 87°35.4'W to 28°21'28"N 80° 41'5"W (Coordinates for a Human)

A starting point fixes itself, arbitrary,
but wait long enough and it carves words
to the bone
to the memory
to the boxes you'll carry

Move east to the nearest meridian:
(but you might be stalling)
an unrewarded effort,
smoky, waterless
farmland—wasted

Create spherical tracks:
lampblack, soot-filled prints, soles
of the calloused foot pressed,
indentation of the skittery shadow,
a passage of the first, weary anniversary

We who eat myths
take time to locate a gravity to hold us:
a south-moon fish-
camp, an island apart,
a beach-line road where a dark horse feeds
under approaching celestial globes

An unnamed event approaches:
the foot stops shaking
the story unfolds:
The gods have left their mountain

War

An hour after the cat was run over
(I stayed with him until he was still, his old-cat body twisted,
internal hemorrhage flooding the lungs)
I thought of the epic cost of winning—

that there could never be reason
enough to pierce the skin, to lose limbs
 like poker chips, or drown lungs in the waters
of any border-land—
and that the body was not negotiable.

Vesicant mustard gas killed my grandfather's brother
in 1916 (its original name, *LOST*, more fitting),
 his bubbled skin burst, lungs bled a sulfurous hue
 before death,
before confession, or surrender—
 and the flash burns of Hiroshima
 and Nagasaki seared flesh
of teachers, widows and shopkeepers.

In the Congo, rape
is the indelicate weapon of choice:
 The Mayi-Mayi believe
 it lends strength for battle—
the act, no more than poking a game bird

on a spit—gives incontinence,
infection, and shame for remembrance
 in a landscape of orphaned children
 and drought.

On the road to Damascus a conversion
of opinion occurs:
Bodies without wounds
 neatly wrapped in linen white
 like rolled cigarettes, ready to burn
but not as brilliant as Willie Pete alight.

Someone somewhere always presumes a success.

In my own bloodless front
I understand mythic proportion:
 I haven't seen my son
 in thirteen years
and I buried the cat under bamboo.

Recession (Pulling Muscle Closer to the Bone)

That December at the Ragged Edge when we fell,
when market values plummeted, when your job
was swept away, when you cocooned on the couch like
a cloistered monk in your black hoodie, if we hadn't packed

the U-haul and pulled like tinkers onto the road south, again,
that sodden Christmas, passing *South of the Border* billboards,
(their colors obscene in the wet of the gray), descending
the interstate like the slacked muscles of our mouths,

colors flat like slate, the road that pressed up against our pupils
gone wide, gone mad, reflections in truck-stop bathroom mirrors,
chipped sinks, where all the soiled water ran down pipes to drain
into the sewer's wastewater spilling into the coastal tide marsh

of the unconfined Biscayne Aquifer off Florida's coast—
If you remember, I spoke of a professor who told me the state
was an old slice off of Africa after continents collided and rifted,
that it fell below the sea seven times and rose eight to sit firm

on solid crusts of limestone from across the sea, that if shallow
waters never receded, if water hadn't slipped back,
if land wasn't a risen mass, we wouldn't have parked
in the lot of a foreclosed Ft. Myers condo, our nerves rifted

and split to red-hued fissures as we heaved-hoed the couch,
tables, and mattress, to a second floor unit, where we counted
out canned goods measuring the number of days we could eat
(if only we'd packed the red cooler with more ice the blue-crab

caught back in Black Hole Creek might have survived), strangers
we were, moving in and out, colliding with walls, fragmented
to a thinner mass, mass of confusion, that we found we made a mistake,
hailed it all back north within three days because even the car-wash
wasn't hiring.

Distraction

It's midday on the pier and he takes a call—
talks, talks, and he talks trying to make
things work
to make work
to make something happen.

Endurance, weightless-drift
as a floating being, a woman
angry right now for my femality
for words like *submission* and *yielding*.

I would prefer *recalcitrant*
and *autonomy* as they roll off the tongue in a bold
stride with their strong t's and definitive logos.

He leans on the rail as pigeon wings
straddle the ocean-wet air and my own mortality
comes up like the augury flocks
in waves of dark shapes—

this could be all there is, this waiting
in the wings, the sidelines of us
this mute argument, this fallacy
of Adam, ribs, and of females as helpmates.

Could falling out of love be that easy?
Wading through the wreck

of failure and bad luck,
I know he tries his best but

I feel uneasy at this tocsin; a starveling
immobile near the edge of the steps
in this random hour.

Beyond his tense shoulders,
past his furtive nodding head,
the twitching tic of stress in his cheek,
is the august rush of the surf below

where I could fall in with seawater,
dress in salted foam and gilded
garlands of algae.

But the wingspan of his voice
calls me *Love*.

Refugee

A hard night
again. I shift in the bed
and pull limbs close and curl
my forearm under my cheek as legions
roil and shift along the path of my spine
to make camp at the stem of the brain.
Heavy footsteps and wagons with wheels
wobbling clatter between sternum and rib.
Inside the wagons are bones of the family: jaws
fixed rigid against me, knuckles gnarled from work
against my version of truth. This is the hour of night
that they visit—when dead relatives sit
at the end of my bed like lumps hard to swallow—
they drag me across open deserts
and swamps, tangle my limbs in the mangrove—
prick me with poles of pine fixed with their prayer flags,
pierce the underside of my skin

and I turn restless again
from frayed cloth imprinted with *mother*,
father, and *doubt*. They finger
snail shells, sprinkle salt at my feet
and poke at white birds in cages,
twigs twist into signs, and my grandmother's mother
spits curses in German, shows me her blistered
palm filled with the color of blood. Bits
of marble and amber rattle my lungs
as ancestral hands prick my wrist
with Tyrian purple and orpiment.

I begin to dissolve from the stain
and the salt like a common mollusk
shriveled—exposed and afraid—they migrate
through hollows, ride though capillaries
and veins to settle behind eyelids
where all the kin of my kin gather
and ask, *my God, what have you done?*

I wake to brush off the pigment and dust
of their bones and am mute. The words
it's all that you gave me hang like a flag
on the border of my hushed mouth. I walk
to the outside, to the black sky and its stars,
breathe the soothe of a velvet night
and its star jasmine scent of silence.

Hunting & Gathering in the 21st Century

It still occurs, only the modus
of operendi has changed—

we navigate malls, gather
shoes and cell phones, fast-food,
paper and photos—
evidence for existence.

We move through grocery aisles:
vertical fields of whole-grain, sweetened,
granola or rice-puffs, linger
over chicken fingers and fake crab.

I followed you as we moved camp
fourteen times in thirteen years: selling furniture,
losing children, migrating
state to state, never settled. We were tinkers,
itinerant masters at covering
our trail.

I tell you I'm tired,
and just when I think I've lifted
my last cup, you say *one more for the road,*
one more, then we gotta go.

Zero

Is nothing left to say, or the shape

of where you used to be—I worry
if I have left you until last—in a sense

you were never really here at all, or a passing
shadow, the small cloud crossing the sun, or
an un-rumored continent unfound, a body
of land, of flesh. Maybe I missed what you tried
to tell me, what you really were.

This strong absence of your voice and your lack
of movement has strangely taken your place—
an opaque marker in space.

Is this the emptiness that disturbed
theologians? Had them counting fingers
and stars, taking stones away
to tally what could be left?

Nothing, after all, takes such a long time
to emerge as what's worth remembering.
No number in a column—a row
of zeros—it's the same in every end.

Is it all a circle then, a static chain of nothing?
An indentation left by the sole of your foot,
like the gone-shape of your head on the pillow?

Like when a pebble used for counting is removed
from the sand? What begins as a visible trace
is no longer there—this is what I have of you.

Zero probes the borderline between absence and presence,
a *sunya*, a void in the center of thought
where we are still bound, touchable and troubled,

where we count the pregnant ground of matter,
of what matters, of what matters not. In our own gematria,
what we spoke, what we will speak, what is acknowledged,

what contains the seed will count for nothing,
and the symbols for zero and one will remain
until you let someone take them away.

IV. WE HUNGER

Cure of Souls

—*It's said St. Augustine used words to order emotions before death*

—did she think much, I wonder,
of me, as she lay in the hall?
Did she think of her daughter at all?

When we're dying it's easy to be selfish,
to think of our own seven steps for the cure:

The *rejection* of sin (and the child who needs)
A last *confession* (of what we failed to do)
Ask a *forgiveness* (of no one, why increase the pain?)
Claim a *faith* that will save you (but not now)
Love everyone (but not too much, it's safer that way)
Say a *prayer* that would last forever (it might take that long to be answered)
Holiness: a desire that we might have been pious (enough)

Coincidences can create their own magic:
Seven visible planets and days of the week,
lucky number seven
(comes between six and eight),
and there are seven possible mathematical catastrophes—
a bifurcation—
a mother and daughter caught on a cusp
where sudden shifts in behavior
arise from small changes, a fold
in circumstance

like a mother dying
like the unknown cure
like the closing of the Tethys Ocean
like a swallowtail caught in a web,

or a mother who fell to the floor
in the hall where she counted out
what was left of her hours.

I hope her prayers were enough,
a vehiculum for her road out—

for the transmigration of whatever it is,
this independent thing we call soul,
which she kept so well to herself.

Instagram Photo

You posted a shot of the backyard and garage of my mother's house, the one she left to you, the one she disinherited me from. It's nighttime in winter. We haven't spoken since the week she died.

Your caption reads: *I have not been at peace for some time—but looking at this scene I feel somewhat at peace.*

It looks emptier than white space—
the back-porch light must be on: Dim but illuminated snow
carpets the mite-sized yard. It appears deep, no footprints,
pristine white. Almost buried in drifts, I see the old wood fence still erect;
the small gate to the old patio left half-open.

The flower boxes under the windows of the garage
are gone. I've been away so long.

The junipers I planted (your father did the digging)
are gone too. Did the cold kill them?

I remember when the big maple was cut down
so you would have room to play, where I put up a pool
kit. I measured, dug the circle, but the stump was not removed.
Suckers poked through the liner.

Your second comment says how you miss your husky,
McKeag. You misspelled his name, but mistakes
don't matter. This dark night I feel you missing him.

I see the familiar flat brown paint, peeling now, on the boards
under the eave, the scalloped trim like waves in the cold.
I want to ask why things can't change, but then you might stop posting
Pictures, or block me, and I'd lose you again.

When your heart breaks (yes, son, it can break)
like those juniper branches
used to do under heavy snowfall,
maybe you'll sense this fragility.
Maybe you'll see this is all there is.

I read your third comment: *It is only the snow that calms
my soul—and my hopes and dreams.*

My nails scratch the skin of my cheek,
I put my fist to my mouth
to keep screams
a tolerable wheeze,
like a mute, yes, I am mute.

In a Dime-Store Window

I see a stranger's reflection, a face half-known.

Maybe it's Grandmother I see—the long face and circles

like puddles over high cheekbones. She died before my birth. It's a funny
when you have to search for your family like misplaced books

or lost keys as if you could find them in closets, or left in a pocket.

I found my younger half-brother Paul like that, before his liver exploded.

We spoke on the phone and through letters. It was unsettlingly sweet when *sis*
twanged from his mouth, when he said our father knew my name.

Our father—how odd to say the words without prayer. Paul sent photos
of his grandmother, our grandmother, himself, the father,

and Michael. The grandmother is black and white and holds a fat baby.

The photo is stamped "1956." She is already old. Paul told me the baby

is Michael, our older brother. He said he's somewhere in Texas

but no one is sure. Paul looks just like me, we look like the father

and I see my face in the lines of the grandmother Anna, in her arched brows
above almond-shaped eyes. I don't know these people.

They're all dead now. Except for the Texan. But they are my people,
aren't they? I want to find them, to put them into a box

with a tight lid. I stand on the sidewalk looking at me in the glass pasted
with signs. Matched saucers and plates are on sale.

I've been a child for decades. In this window

I still don't know who I see.

Sign Dancer

First you see the quivering sign (this one says: *We Buy Gold*),
then the handgrip and the degage of the legs as he gyrates,
hot-fire-coal hops, moon walks and spins to the pulse plugged
into his ears; he frees a hand, lets it move snake-like to lure
you in to the strip mall off the intersection;
but when he sips water from a plastic gallon-sized jug
(it's 90° in the shade) you see he's a boy
who could be your boy, and know the figure
of this hip-hop hyped-up human ad
dances in every town.

Once, when I was a girl
I felt there was a sign
across my face, a celestial script that worked a message
to commune with angelic beings—
not unlike this boy—whose feathered shadow could be my son's.

Melancholy Blue Note to Self

I wonder where the end of us begins
and where does it linger
in-between?

I try to explain to him I need to leave,
to move beyond chaos to Milktongue,
but it comes out all wrong.

This aggregation of movements
spins itself, weaves for prophetic
patterns outlining collapse—

and I'm left looking into his face
slipping from view. In the end
I look away from what was beloved,
my casualty.

I No Longer Dream of Men

First there were small-bit crushes
like Michael Phelan and his golden cowlick
I coveted as I waited behind him in line
for pencil sharpening. Then came television
fantasies: Peter of the Monkees in his bathtub,
David Cassidy (I wrote him a letter once), and Randolph
Mantooth, but I called him Randy. We'd ride
around Topanga Canyon, his hot red
firetruck a smoky scene in my head.
But in my teens more saturnine males
were my taste. Oliver Reed as barbaric
Bill Sikes piqued the dark colors tumid
between soft folds of flesh
and cotton. Green-eyed
Timothy Dalton as Mr. Rochester
was black fruit, an erotic petulant plum.
And if they were dead that was okay too—
Gary Cooper was quick to come
one night while I slept. We tussled
till dawn till he crept back to the dark velvet box
of lost men.

Dream lovers fade to botched
real-life crushes and one-night stands. When I married
it became a black choler creeping,
a long season circling in a carnivorous desert.

—there's no need now for a Brad or a fireman,
most evenings I lie like water. A sea-gown has grown
over my shoulders, a cool rush of fish float over my skin
in a swell of solitude—in the day I am mine,
in the dark I swim on my own.

Vulture

I hold my breath while walking: the unmistakable
dead-flesh scent hangs where the black birds circle,
land, and inspect whatever's dead in the ditch. Agitated
rotation reveals a pecking order to their wake. Dark
undertakers, sometimes they'll take down a new-born
calf in the field. Right of the path one eyes me
sideways, a predator like me—

I've practiced at killing
and understand the requirement of death—so well
I've grown black feathers and molt every April. The night
my mother was dying I saw the repeated calls on my phone—
but I wiped down the cabinets and sorted CD's,
anything to forget I'd killed her a little each day
for ten years, from 1500 miles away.

Lost Years

—*The early life of loggerheads used to be called “the lost years,” because no one knew where they went.*

Eight miles offshore
 a loggerhead rides a sea-swell
east of the boat.

A half-submerged reddish-brown form
 navigating sagaciously;
the reptilian mariner plods
on, following
 a primitive, uncoerced course.

Dubbed *Caretta carretta*, apt
 hatchlings flow out
with the under-
 tow until ten miles from shore
where they begin to swim with slick
 vernal flippers seeking shelter
and food in the Sargasso Sea.

Internal bits of cephalic
 magnetite tunes their bodies to
an old song in the brine;
ocean dwellers for long cached years
 they’ll return one summer to nest.

People get lost for decades on
end, like sea-beans caught in the gyre—
 without brain-lodged gemstones to steer
by, pelagic wayfarers float
until they wash up with the sargassum.

But sometimes there’s no coming
in from the sea; lump of a memory
 migrates deeper than black night’s rain—
 a love gone so long,
that all forms of faith are in vain.

After Fourteen Years Apart

Whenever it rains, water collects

In my back yard: pools

Of woodland earth & sodden grass

Like flecks I remember

Of your solemn eyes. The long night boils

On. A ponding hollow until

I see you again. Then, then only

Will I tell you everything:

Of the blue ruin of orchids drowned

in their wood-slatted beds.

Because the Human Heart Hasn't Changed

The first time rain failed, thin-fleshed fingers picked
the fat roots of the ground: tuberous, celeriac,

of starch—for the ground provides while the rain comes,
as the migrant worker's hands (like gearshifts, turbines oiled)

tug against the stalk. Strawberries too delicate
to be picked by machine (and such a provocative fruit)
need tending. Swollen gourds strengthen, develop a shell.

For five years when I thought the cupboard empty,
that my body was failing, I found love an endless

feast. And a rustic truth: Roots plump from rainwater
rise up from the ground without help from my hand.

I had nothing to be afraid of, anymore.

Aporia

There are thin
afternoons
when I need to realize
where I am,
to know everything
is shatter-proof, and
breathable for ten miles
up.

Imagine swimming
to the moon or the Baltic Sea,
away from the land-
locked yards
of back-
home.

There are stars
above trees,
above poverty—
and I can count
them out
one by one.

endings

are what you find past a boundary, a cessation of friendship, an arrest of the heart, the exhausting closures of love, like the year parents cease to exist, extremes, terminal cancers, or a last part lengthwise

as in the terminal unit of something spatial, the reached end of the road, the end of rope, or the dead end of an alley, an avenue of faith—or you can let verbal units mark a finale such as *this is the end of the story*,

or a cut-off, a shutdown, a roadblock, the expiration-date of milk, of your love, or it can be a player stationed at the extremity of a line (as in football)—but this is no game—it's real life—

they are the cessation of a course of action, a pursuit, or fruitless requests for forgiveness, the marbled death of a neighbor, destruction of statehoods, the ultimate state, nirvana, results without findings,

that which is incomplete, fragmentary, or undersized like a remnant of cloth, the moth-eaten, the frayed, and the faded like an outcome—writing with purpose, *the end of poetry is to be poetry*, says R. P. Warren, or it can be

an event which takes place like a divorce, a murder, a bruising, a share in an undertaking as in *keep your end up* or a particular operation or aspect of an unexpected conclusion, the end of being a mother, a period of action

in any of various sports events like a fourth quarter, a wife-beating, or child abuse—in the end, after all, we'll surely succeed in the end, yes, a world without end, amen, it will be exceedingly good in the end, it will please to no end

without a stop or letup, he cried, she cried for days on end, and in case you haven't got it by now: the child support is due at the end of the month, she drank for months at the end of the marriage, the house that's no longer

yours is at the end of the road, they live at opposite ends, the deep end of a lake is where you might find me, he drove the end of the stake into my—the rear end was kicked and one end of the rope is around my neck

like a catastrophe, like tornados, earthquakes, a son who emancipates his mother, terminations, or worse—a daughter whose mother is dying but doesn't answer the phone, she doesn't know where to begin

The Shibboleth

If you have come to me, or I have come to you, to press
our bodies close in the papered hall, in the night, in the fallen wood,
Then I may know you—
I may know the history on your breath, your Falklands,
your Palestine. Speak to me before the binding of man

occurs—speak to me so that I may know you
prior to the binding of the love of an artficed woman,
to a hatred of small things, to the green hue of sickness
with its odor of metal and chalk—before you are bound
to the responsibility of health and tied incorrigibly
to thieves of time and robbers of space
within which we both move.

Also, love, say your words in advance of the binding of armies,
the binding of wooden ships and of winds which may carry you
out of this haven; the binding of a watermill
so that it cannot by force be turned whatsoever
around, the binding of a cistern or fountain, that you, like water,
could be drawn up, evaporate, gather darkly in masses—
become mist, then return again to slip sullen
to a downwards spill on my windowsill.

Let your words form ahead of the binding of fallow ground
so that nothing is built upon it; the binding of fire,
of lightening and tempests; speak before the binding of dogs
so that they cannot bark, the binding of migrating birds,
the stampede of beasts of the wide dark plains.

Hasten the lettered shapes of your tongue and your lips,
let them slip forth before they are bound by sorcery,
before your eyes are covered with pungent
collieries, before your lids shut to darkness, before lungs exhale
the warm soot of the colliery, before a love potion
makes you pale in comparison to the sun.

Tell me sooner—before you are bound to a hanging
up of things: of gnarled charms, rings and potted yellow unguents,
strong imagination, bleak images and raucous sacrifice,
invocations to saints and the dead, coin-bought devotions, and by divers
into a superstitious world—

tell me that word, the one by which I will know you; swear by it,
consecrate this skin, touch this hand of glory,
cross this river without fear.

Letter for My Siblings

Boys, my God, you barely had flesh—
fated birds,
destroyed birds,
oil-winged things
of the unknown province.

We've wandered
as figments
lost in a field
under snow,
wisps of seed
carried by wind.

Two mothers,
one father—siblings split
like arrows pulled
from the body
of man.

Now comes the season
of lead: Burnt leaves,
un-marked graves,
and frost-heave,
for no homeland
confined us.

Boys wait for me—
I'll be the wraith
at the door,
calling your names.

Sanctuary

—With lines from *A Prayer Book for the Use of Catholics, 1946*

We sit on hardwood pews
to kneel and pray
to Joseph and Mary
who've tired of their own outstretched arms
and endless prayers for intercession murmured
to chalkware ears:

*O blessed Virgin, Mother of my Redeemer, mirror
of innocence and sanctity, and refuge
of penitent sinners! Intercede with thy Son,
that I may obtain the grace to make a good confession—*

The nuns put words to the mouth: Immaculate Conception,
intercedence and *non sum dingus*.
O man of plaster—rigid, suspended
slack-necked and thin—
you lift no finger of hand

Witness: old-painted blood, dust-clotted;
rust flakes at the nail hole, see them fall:

*Hail! Holy Queen, Mother of our mercy,
To thee we do cry, poor banished children of Eve*

I feel time so well in this place—
sunlit specks float down slow like tiny angels
and the ash of liturgical years—
in ordinary time the incense lingers: onycha, burnt
dung, and wood blackened like dark water:

*I desire, like the prodigal child,
to enter seriously into myself*

A child swims inside a woman of twisted hair
black as dark water, there, a yoke broken,
no peccadillo to share.

Then I remember something
and twist around in the deep-lacquered pew

and see the green-curtained confessionals
have all been removed.

On My Way Home

I'll remember the best days
like the cast of grace on her cheeks—

her walk and voice like Saturdays
as lawn mowers crisscross

over front-lawns—while other mothers
drive the family car to the supermarket

for a few hours of domestic liberation. Weekends
she'll be home too, my mother, and I'm thirsty

for her slow-coming words between train-rides
to the city, or our pedestrian march

to the store. She'll let me pull the shopping
cart while she tells me her grandmother, on hot days,

gave her shots of whiskey to keep adolescent fancies
at an even keel. We'll pass under arms of maples

and elms until we reach the walkway of the brick
house with blue awnings arched above wooden

double-hung windows. Junipers will hold nesting
birds again, and seasons will drift at random

like a robin's feather floating in some egg-blue
morning breeze. Upstairs alone, I'll lie across

the bed, on the coverlet Aunt Jo embroidered,
with all the state flowers stitched onto squares,

and read until called for supper. *There will be lightning
bugs tonight* my mother will say—and we'll punch holes

in the lid of a jelly-jar. She'll sit on the porch
in the fragile world she's made for us, watching.

In the tangled vein of suburbs and churches,
no echoing whistle of a train will haunt the evening.

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