The Principle of Flickering

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THE PRINCIPLE OF FLICKERING

by

Laura K. Donnelly

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
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THE PRINCIPLE OF FLICKERING

Laura K. Donnelly, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2011

*The Principle of Flickering* is a collection of poems that map our endeavors to survive and make sense of the flux of the world. The title poem introduces the reader to the ways the collection will approach this survival – through the poem’s movement into and out of the frames of other art forms, its process of filtering a collage of voices, and its attempts to momentarily apprehend and still sources of internal and external chaos. Subsequent poems continue this engagement with survival in a variety of ways, including a lyrical study of the evolution of finches (“Darwin’s Finches”), a meditation on the life and mental illness of Robert Schumann (“Nocturne – Schumann’s Letters”), and narrative poems that explore a family’s dissolution (“Photo From the Bahamas,” “Exchange Rate”). Amidst the chaos in *The Principle of Flickering*, attentiveness to small details brings moments of grace – awe over the particular beaks of Darwin’s finches, the brushstrokes of a Renaissance painting, the paper viewfinder through which the speaker is taught to view a solar eclipse. The collection is influenced by numerous sources, from the crisp lines of Bach and the careful patterns of Brahms to the theories of such disparate figures as Jacques Lacan and John Keats. It is likewise influenced by my creative and scholarly engagement at Western Michigan University, and serves as a culmination of my years here.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Love and gratitude to my family. And to Ben, always.

Laura K. Donnelly
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Knife-grinder: Principle of Flickering (1913)

The title itself, Principle of Flickering, refers to Malevich’s abandonment of the physical object.... About this time the physical theory of waves was developed, which no longer interpreted the world as static.
— Jeannot Simmon, Malevich, Life and Work

It’s as simple as saying we move, we are
constantly moving, and
someone wanted to show that
the oddest of ways, a painting, its taut canvas still

as the building in which this man sits
at his knife-grinder’s wheel,
cylindrical fingers like blunt sticks
of chalk, not hands now but tools, all mathematic,

all tuned to a world’s glancing edge.
In the book at home you show how
Malevich has painted
the man’s wooden mustache on once, twice,

at least four times while his bent elbow jigsaws
consecutive frames
simultaneously,
the man in the painting both stillness

and movement, foot thrumming as if
at an organ’s bellows this music
that makes a stone spin.
Difficult not to freeze this man to a certainty

where we nod at labors gone by.
What you don’t say (what,
perhaps, you don’t know):
Malevich himself is doing away with the object,

on his way towards a looming black square
with which he will frighten
art patrons who stand
at the edge of a war, Great –, World –,

he will pace his room, nights, with that square
in his head, an answer
to a world flickering
on and off again without reason, a country
vibrating its frozen-most corners –
a black square is where this is going.

Today, I am watching Pablo Casals,
or rather looking at this photo –
Casals with his cello,
eyes lowered to half moons – and listening
to a CD of him patched together
from dozens of transfers,
the cello suites
performed in the 1930’s. We’re lucky
for such a near seamless collage of him
moving across Bach’s notes,
which wait always
for someone to touch them again, for that
same, not-quite-same-again flight –
like reviving colors
from a sepia colored photograph,
Suzuki writes in the liner notes, and yet

I have to be critical... even Casals was not free
from the time in which he lived –

At the MoMA, you call me
from where I’ve been standing
before Bonnard’s bathing wife,
titled simply The Bathroom, a nude ever leaning
to dry her dark hair, his Marthe suspended
in pastel. We play this game
throughout the museum,
sharing our favorites –
they do not have the Knife-grinder
but here is Malevich’s
Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement,
whose movement has lost all sign of the figure

until, one hand lifted and inches from canvas
you translate the bell-wide skirt,
arms swaying beneath the broad yoke
like two white birds attempting flight.

We’ve both settled ourselves before women
with water, but what is it
makes me admire but not love
Malevich’s sharp angled geometry?

Bonnard, says the placard, rarely showed
his wife’s face, but how tenderly
we follow the part
in her hair, inverted arrow of her body,

moisture fading from still warm feet
whose lines are blurred, yes,
but singular –
though I may have imagined the evaporation,

the tiles, the window high over a freestanding tub.
And did I imagine that detail?
How he rarely painted her face
because he would leave her that small secrecy?

——

This much I can buy: that every small piece
of us moves, flickers
even in stillness, even
in such solidity as we gather around us.

The young Casals in motion decades
after his death, my first thought
is how quietly he plays it,
how Romantic his touch, and how

anything else would be too much to bear.
He leaves the studio in a felt hat
tugged low, bottle thick glasses
through which the street disappears

long before the horizon –
he is humming, must be

humming, I think,
sotto voce, *Eppur si muove* (*nonetheless the earth moves*)... a tune almost like
but not quite this one
I’ve been listening to
all afternoon.

To move through this world *in waves*, my love –
it’s a wonder we cross paths at all.
Instructions for the Binoculars

Just like the stars are different where you are, the birds are.
- May Swenson to Elizabeth Bishop

I eavesdrop on your instructions for the binoculars, assuming she asked, somewhere deep in Brazil, sending guava and papaya as she did to Miss Moore, and you, perhaps, wooing back with the latest technology, a new pair of eyes through which she might call down the birds. I have wholeheartedly idealized you both, have imagined dinner parties, dewy walks in the arbor, even this word *arbor* where I would normally say garden, and yes, the dictionary calls it *Obsolete*. *a grass plot; lawn; orchard.* You were whole continents away from each other, not linking arms like schoolgirls. Still, I have believed you were writing to me.

15. What is the Principle of Priority?
   *the rule that considers as valid only the oldest available name to a taxon*

16. What is synonymy?
   *the existence of different names applied to the same taxon...*

19. Why do bird names change?
   *science... constantly evolving*

How precise to point out the white dot on the nose-bridge, the exact numbers to see far or farther – or not – A “6x30” for instance gives you *that much less magnification and width.* I know little of birds, and last night stood dumb while hundreds circled the chimney of a church down the block, counterclockwise, and each orbit another one dropped down that throat until the wheel broke and left me
unutterably empty. We are not birds, and neither is this poem, but I want to say nine times out of ten there are worse things than feeling so empty. 

*Life, friends, is exhausting. We must not say so.* Instead — I am thinking of unusual alliances, of you, and Elizabeth’s distance. Or Kumin being warned off the effusive Sexton, quiet sister to put on Anne’s jacket after the garage, the plumes a terrible angel welcoming home.

—

I’ve said nothing about the stars we failed to see, shooting stars, the news said, which we imagined beyond the lights of Lafayette, the smog from the Staley Corn Syrup factory flung across the Wabash. All night the courthouse plays this recording we call *birds of prey* to scare pigeons from nesting and I think *aren’t they smarter than that?* And I think *I too fear.* This darkness *not quite,* this *no one else out* which means only the homeless man waits at the bus stop, a lone student carries his bike up the steps. I fear I have given you the wrong impression. I love this town. I keep leaving this town. My mother takes out a book and says *chimney-swifts, migrating.*

This is what the sky looks like here.
Darwin’s Finches

The Galapagos Islands. Gnarled beaks of the finches’ quick change. Woodpecker, warbler finch, the brightly sharp-beaked. My mother never went there, researched the blunt billed cactus finch a continent away.

Lost years ago from the mainland, they stayed on these islands that made them become something else. Generations of climate change, food change. My mother,

her biologist self, says Just look at those beautiful beaks.

Of course it is something so small.

Lizard feet. Clawed toes. Those black eyes. It’s the beaks though that show it. As hunger has always had a way of taking precedence.

A young woman reading ledger after ledger of field work. Not me but my mother. Her library’s alcoves I imagine, though I’ve seen the books too.
In one photo—hard seeds: the dry season.
In another, just the thickening
of beaks.

The birds unconcerned, or rather
so concerned they no longer have to think it.

---

I dream birds everywhere. In her long hair,
of course, in her eye.

The faulty roof drips in the entry way,
living room, bedroom

and they are everywhere
looking for a foothold.

They lift off the pier. They stalk
through the parking lot

looking for trash. They are everywhere
singing and not singing.

---

Yellow gold, speckled
black, garnet red in winter.
Birds come to my mother’s feeder.
She grows older. Like her grandmother,
ever lets the feeder go empty.

*It can take forever to lure them back.*

When my students complain
about long assignments, I tell them
my mother wrote twenty pages about finches,
*just their beaks.* I want to tell them
something about desire.
Foal

The thing that wants to be born
is turned sideways and stiffening.

You must twist the head,
fingers finding the muzzle,

must thread the flexible
cartilage and pull

till the fore-hoof relaxes its hold.
The mare’s heaves will crush

your shoulder to splinters,
crush the night into intricate slivers

of moon, but once
all is loosed you won’t notice

the kneading pain. Pain, they say,
makes you stronger, but that isn’t it –

You and the mother splayed out
on your sides, watching the new foal

breathe into newly damp hay.
Possum

First, the hanging feeder fell
when the squirrel swung from its grate.

We watched the cardinals light on the mess,
peck seeds from the snow.

Then the sound of a woodpecker
far in the field. We could say

of these *signs of spring*, but here snow stays
late into April. Nothing blossoms,

nothing will shake its lilac jackets to the ground
*like snow*. There is only real snow.

We place bets: when the ice will melt off the lake, when
the possum will come to the sliding glass door

in the night, pressing its nose, showing its teeth
in a monstrous yawn. But we take it

for what it is – not omen.
Watershed

1. (LaGuardia Airport, 2009)

We approach over water, uncertain
   of ground, or only certain of ground
in that way we once learned abstract numbers.
   Trust and awe. Trust and expectation.
So this, where the airport sits, as though
   I know something of place,
of where to place this landing-strip like a dock
   for the sky, suddenness of
concrete that will only become more concrete,
   skyscrapers, nesting dolls we learn
to inhabit. Would that the water were enough,
   that we might wash our faces
directly in the river, wide and salt-licked by the tide.

2. (Riverkeeper)

Finally, the ruling to dredge the Hudson.
   Decades in court because who knew
better? (The defense’s argument, and, I quote:
   “living in a PCB-laden area
is not dangerous.”) The river an open absolution
   for over one million pounds
of PCBs, one hundred tons of poisoned
   sediment, sick to the bedrock.
Someone is very wealthy (someone
   is GE in this case). Country
of 800 channels and cheap cotton socks,
   we can all be so wealthy.

1938 – General Electric (GE) considered dropping the use
   of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) because a study
revealed health and safety problems, but they did not.

April 22, 1998 – shareholder meeting, GE CEO Jack Welch
   claimed: “PCBs do not pose adverse health risks.”

Driving inland – Peekskill, Spackenkill –
   we cross bridges that mark off
each watershed area. Square metal sign.
   Phone number in case of emergency.
2002 – After battling for two decades to avoid the cleanup... GE said it would begin testing for PCB hotspots. 

May, 2009 – Phase 1 dredging begins.

3. (Bard Rock)

Peaceful to lean against
the rock’s broad face,
moss blurring the green-blue water
of a blue-green summer day.

Hot from our hiking, we pause
to contemplate swimming, fish
moving as one in thick schools
that whip back and forth
in flickering jackets, shooting
the summer’s transluence
back again to an aqueous sky.

We lean into each other, small
beside the rock’s glacial shoulders,
its picturesque position
belying a commercial convenience:
1772, John Bard, the first
person to develop the property...a port
easily accessible for people
who might want to ship goods to New York.
And that’s why the site
is named Bard Rock.

Later, the Vanderbilt’s take
to Bard Rock, no railway needed
to deliver a summer’s extravagance,
a series of boats full of women
descending to luncheons of lobster
and mussels, crustaceans blushing
on ice chopped from lakes months ago
by the hands that will come
to make this a town. The crystalline
cubes clink gracefully
against glass.

And we too fan our faces before the river,
cheeks lit like the servants’
switchboard or flush with the beauty
or just hot, so damned hot,
and wishing we might trace this water
to one hidden thread, promise
of iron and cold from the recently frozen
but somehow still moving
I want to say source and mean
this is drinkable. And the ground
(if we climb high enough), not leched?
Pushed far enough inland?
Upland? Irresponsible want.
Irresistible spring that cares
nothing for what we have done,
what it does in return.
The Body Mailer

Anything can become a job:

someone makes the box, someone sets runway flares,
someone drives the van through the polished night

to a field where a plane comes to rest.
What you wanted to retrieve –

a large bird fades to a stop as if on water
and six pairs of hands lift its cargo.

This is when you have to know what to do.

But whole days before –
there’s a man who collates the papers

and drives to the morgue, the same man who checks
the face with the passport, who won’t let your loved one go

lonely forever, or let you go lonely without them.
It is not his job to pass figs at the funeral, but see

how gently he’s woven the hands to keep them
from flapping away?

He cannot explain their emptiness,

their new caverns and shadows,
but see how he sends them up into the dark right on time,

so intent on your hands reaching up
in welcome. So intent on you taking

the shortest distance home.
Wintering (January)

Geese gone from the park,
the black pond frozen
quiet, though not the pivot
of the stream trailing from.
But the milkweed pods, yes,
their threads frozen to pewter,
the thousand trees trundled
to roots. The paths we walked
last November are lost below
three feet of snow, and the dog-
violet, phlox, New England
aster hide away their blue-eyed
rebirth. The animals
we never, or rarely, saw, now
never seen in a new way –
the skunk with her litter
of kits, not true hibernators,
but they do den up, dormant
for extended periods. We too
have turned inward, watching
the neighbor’s car hidden
by drift until only the sheen
of one wheel suggests motion.
Even the sky grows distant.
All month, the days spread
gauze over the sun and come night,
not a sliver to speak of. Soon,
a shiver is all it takes to contract
the entire body, muscle
shuddered to bone,
bone tightening towards
whatever weak flame we tend.
II.
Toccata or Fugue

Two strings of the upright piano
snapped,
their corded wire sprung and dangling.

I learned to expect the dull thunk
that went with low E,
my fourth finger’s reach,
the music, a moment, weightless
until the chord changed.

Sometimes when I sleep, I still hear that piano.
I dream Brahms in waves or Bach
thrumming rain on my window –
toccata or fugue, which mean

*touch and flight* –

*Touch* – I try the rain with cupped hands
but it flies through my fingers.

If my teacher were here now, what would she say?

*The hole in the piano* –
*The wild birds* –
*The rain?*
Mozart, Sleeping

Late apples, half moon, a cart
heavy with coal.

Lullaby this with the carilllon. Lullaby this
with the low shuttered window,

the moleskin smooth sheets, the cool hand
checking his forehead. This piece is played

with the simplest chords. Warm breath,
its slow tempo all night.
Theme

I’m twenty, listening to Glenn Gould again, the college library muffled by these dense industrial earphones. Somewhere along the spinning record, the grooved lines between variations, the theme is only a starting point. Its crisp baroque notes separated by hair’s-width silences that expand and contract, into thirty-one variations. Number irrelevant. What matters is the trill, what matters is counterpoint, four voices deep, and each one its own distinct trail.

Sunday mornings, years later, I’ll play this c.d. on repeat, listen for that phrase at the record’s edge, then the aria where it returns, needle gliding towards some center point. My legs so sore from waiting tables, I won’t want to walk downstairs to the kitchen but will sit in my room with those silences expanding, until going farther and farther has nothing to do with anything.
To Fanny Mendelssohn

In the low egg yolk morning she is trying
   to dissolve the barlines,
   mathematical placements
with which she is told she lives
   too much in her mind. She wants this
to feel like song, possibility become
effortless. A field.
The robin’s chitter.

But each morning the family’s piano-forte
   slides further out of tune
   (she hears it).
Each morning in the picture window the rhythm of
   practice-room, strangle-hold.
(But no — was that me? What she feels,
   how to say?) I imagine
   an opaque window, sunlight
through waxy paper. Someone says these distinctions
dissolve, but I’m not so sure.

—

Her brother visits from Vienna. She paints watercolors.
   Pale spring hills, the lake valley,
   beside her the water jar
clouds over blue, aqua, gold, the brush shaken clean
   between colors. It is not a bad life.
Her brother’s Songs without Words,
   of which many are hers,
are publishable with his name.

Queen Victoria’s favorite, “Italy,” is Fanny’s own.
   She gives concerts at home,
   notes echoing over marble like
neat, heeled footsteps I hear through my college’s corridors.

—
So many writers on hands: *Her small neat hands.*

*Her white hands.*

*Her marble hands. He fell out of love because her hands appeared larger* (no lie).

I’m beginning to think the mechanics mean little. I sit in the heat of August

watching how hands work.

Science of the smallest joints

that do or do not do my bidding by rote. In the end

it only works when you learn to forget.

—

And what if not remembered, not written, not graphed

on the music staff’s bars like those leaps once

charting my own heart’s beat? (Even

as a child I knew something was wrong, lying on the bed

while the EKG jolted off

rhythm, off kilter, what kept me on edge —)

What if in sleep, in first waking,

in those colors of the water jar blurred,

the lake’s depths and murmurs,

its blue eye merging

towards grey still swirling

around the brush bristles I shake? What if, so worried

(then) to get it right,

scale after skeleton scale and so far from the flesh

of the piece – I only begin

(to know) what it was I heard –
Nocturne – Schumann’s Letters

i. In a Quiet House

I will close now. It is growing dark...

At night, down the creaking wood stairs, he’d float one hand over the keys. Orange glow from the porch lantern bending through glass, full octaves of chipped and bowed ivories. He'd press the chord barely halfway, then imagine the sink into sound, his fingers just dusting over those quiet surfaces.
ii. Adagio Cantabile

_Can you tell me why we are sometimes
so blissfully happy in this world?

Once, the tower clock
ringing midnight, the rain-blackened cobbles,
the perfect round weight
of a doorknocker in his hand.
Once he was a young man walking
back to the boarding house, yes
with a song in his head,
everything with a song, a lieder
for Clara who practiced
piano in the room beside his own.
All of it like the first half
of the film that sets you up
to feel worse in the end. The hand
mangled, the brain
addled, which means today
so desperate you’d do
anything. Then: blood letting,
or “breathing a vein,”
the forearm’s red ache in the basin.
Such promise, they say in the books.
iii. November 15, 1830

*Julius is right about the sealing-wax
I did not think of it, Mother*

*You are perfectly right about the cigars
but I think I smoke less than I used to
last I traveled I did not smoke fifty*

*My best thanks for everything –
beds, linen, coffee, etc.*
iv. Clara Weick Schumann

He first met her, no
he first heard her
at a mental hospital,
irony of place where
she performed
and he sat in the audience, not
a patient, not yet,
but a young man studying law
till her father agreed
he could follow them home.
From the cast iron
balcony a pair of mourning doves
watched her practice.
He too stood enrapt over lightness
of touch, fluidity
of fingers nine years his junior.
He wooed his teacher's
only daughter with letters,
handwriting sloped
as the cheek that lay
in her palm.
And what of the cedar drawer
where she hid all?
Of the proud papa scheduling
her tour to Britain?
Her lover's brow smoothed
with a kiss, Saint Clara
eloped a day before her twenty-first.
v. Carnival

I could write a great deal more today, but my hand shakes, and I feel I must walk up and down the room.

Ink well, parchment, morning haze.
I try to break the spending habit
but still burn two candles each night.
I wake before dawn.
When my hands shake (they do,
I fear cholera) ink spools
in strange lines from my pen.
I put away the letter to mother,
walk up and down narrow floorboards.

This is how a piece starts:
not sonata or fugue, but voices
in full carnival, Fashingswank aus Wien. Street lanterns,
masks, painted faces, the dance
in full swing. It will not fit
the old forms. Try to guess
my Papillons, dearest Clara,
each section a different mood.
vi. Intermezzo – Boarding House

Below him, the house wakes to morning
the way people living in groups
wake to morning. Breakfast things
hitting long tables, fists full
of knives and forks, cold metal
on metal on wood. Brush of shoulder
unnoticed, the quick tenor asking
after someone’s health. Low answer,
_not good._ And in counterpoint
the grocer’s accent, thick with an entire city
banging the door.
vii. Clara’s Poem (I)

*Composing gives me great pleasure...there is nothing
that surpasses the joy of creation, if only because through it
one wins hours of self-forgetfulness...one lives in a world of sound.*
– Clara Schumann

The printing press humming,
lemons curled into husks on the sill
while we worked. Forty-two *Romanzen,*
then, to cross Europe in concert silks, watching
his work go unasked for.

The candle shakes, the cold night
a fever he sweats through. He writes
of his pupil *an eagle has*
swooped down, of his mother *your generous*
word of his wife *I pray* –
viii. Incurable

\[ I \text{ began to feel uneasy about my hand, though} \]
\[ I \text{ assiduously avoided consulting a surgeon, for fear} \]
\[ the \text{ dreaded blow should fall in his verdict: ‘incurable.’} \]

It wouldn’t have happened overnight. Again and again
the metal contraption stretching
the web between fingers.

His persistence, the stuff
of legend, two parts certainty
and one desperation. Of course
it’s crazy now,

a pianist who needed both
hands, tearing his tendons,
trying to push past the octave
cordoning the palm. He

watched the muscles blossom
strange.
May, 1840

Dear Clara, today is 'Jubilate' Sunday. I feel jubilant and wretched by turns.

The opera has taken up all my morning. I am nearly overwhelmed by the vastness very tragic though without bloodshed.

Composing so much I wonder at myself.

I could sing myself to death.
x. Personae

_Eusebius’s mildness, Florestan’s ire..._
_My soul by turn two spirits possesses_

Personae: what happens when the shadow of day splits in two.

He knew his so clearly he signed letters one or the other. A game or an illness,

in hindsight they say illness even if it’s not so cut and dried. He knew

the seams between moods, put them on like odd sleeves. And in the cocoon

the I behind both left only the tips of its wings exposed – _and they might so easily be bruised._
Dr. Kruger, you should know
I have had a serious illness the past three months

I am now a little better can see some brightness

During this time I was not able to hear a note it was a knife to my nerves

Work is forbidden we have come to Dresden for the winter
xii. Clara’s Poem (II)

How pleased I was to see your handwriting,
dearest Clara...

For years we shared a diary,
trading his wrecked scrawl
for my trim looped letters, always
reading what the other had written.
One week: the thudding of my piano
in the next room frustrates his composing.
I felt it like layers of wool
on wet skin as we swam.
Was it all a dream, Clara, our tour in Holland
You played
the E flat concerto  Beethoven’s sonatas
Do you remember how I once heard
in the night  a theme in E flat
composed variations? Will you
send them  and a few of your own

8 p.m. I paid my customary visit to Beethoven’s statue
I was standing before it
the organ in the cathedral  began
I am  stronger again
xiv. Near Bonn

_Schumann was speaking today of a curious illusion, of which he has been conscious for several days past...._

– Rubert Becker

At the river, he pressed linen handkerchiefs against each ear; but then, when he blocked out that sound, he saw the trees mouthing frantically to one another. Or it was wind. Or the trees were mouthing just to him – a whole scream of branches. He knew it was real in the night when the tuning A woke him. He knew Schubert’s voice, back from the dead. Or his mother back from the dead. Or his unborn children, their lips unbuttoned, their thin arms swelling around him. Too beautiful. His own skin rang shrill and metallic. The water cold as the hollow before any sound.
There is an exquisite coherence about the whole work the theme at odd moments mysteriously and again it disappears completely

Thank you too for your kindness to my Clara

The winter mild You know the neighborhood Bonn

It was Hanover that we last met

Write soon
Coda – Asylum at Endenich, 1856

Once he walked to the front garden
where he saw his young son
gather daisies, nasturtium, diligent
liesel to weave into green
chains for Clara. He saw the boy
crawl on her lap, say momma
I’d play the sky for you. The sky was
blue that day, and butterflies
they were, all of them, even the nurse
with her white, winged cap
and broad, inscrutable brow.
III.
Driving Home to Sirens

I learn anger like a stone thrown into a tree
when all I had wanted was to bind

the tree up with thick string –
the broken bird beak, the torn nest,

the finest tangle of twigs. At heart,
I'm still sick of things cracking but

these stones are pressing, heavy
to fly. This cut glass is no

sugarspoon, no kaleidoscope,
these ambulances real, almost every night

and the police cars close behind.
My father explains it's hard to prosecute

when the women always retract. This time,
three counts, hands bound to the chair,

gun brushing the pillow-cased head. Later,
a drunken man ass-over-teakettle in the yard

calling for forgiveness. Call it a Band Aid, but oh –
this nest is a hive, and I'd crash my car

just to join that siren's wail.
Three Poems

1. In the Uffizi

Drape of smooth stone,
white stare of eyeballs
never painted, or painted
and long since rubbed back
to this blankness. And all
the skylights overhead.
Tourists come, yet it feels
as if someone forgot
this room, cast the statues
haphazardly here. Mostly
they don’t face each other
or us. They retain their poses
from before: Diana intent
on the stag we don’t see,
Apollo mourning Hyacinth,
down on both knees, we imagine
the archer before him.
Then so many unnamed – this one
bent over her missing jug.
Sharp chin, shoulders tensed, again
she lowers to lift.
2. Botticelli’s *Allegory of Spring*

They dance, the Graces, feet overlapping, soft line of callus on heel.
Such attention to toenail and arch, gowns sheer as wind grazing ankles.
So many long-haired women caught in Spring’s movement –
Zephyr, the west wind, hovers scowling and blue near the frame, though only the nearest one turns back in fear. Naked and stumbling,
garland flows from her mouth like fish line. Her twin, her other, stands nearby in rich brocade, smiles forgetfully, his hands already on her, his blue touch that’s going to change her into someone else.
3. Botticelli’s *Annunciation*, fresco, Hospital of San Martino della Scalla

All we saw
was a wash of pastel –
pale pink blur
of Gabriel’s robes
then the scaffolding
softened by painters’
drop-cloths.
Behind these, the quiet arc
of the Virgin’s forehead.
Dust everywhere. We followed
the cordoned path
through barely lit vaults,
emptied, brick surgeries –
a shelf where a basin for blood-
letting rested, a forceps.
And what of the doctors?
What did they see,
being told, every day,
of the miracle?
Between her and Gabriel
a column of paint’s
rubbed away, cracked walls
where typhoid once lingered
below the good angel.
Bridal

The flowers are cut
and gathered
in blue and white bunches –
delphinium stalk, lemon grass,
wax flowers’ pepper scent.
In the chapel, the piano plays “Sinfonia,”
just “Sinfonia,” the first bars
she has memorized
without thinking, so she’ll know
when to step through the door
to the aisle.

And we turn,
the way people turn when they hear
a noise at their back,
something from outside,
wind or tree branches against
the window. Or something more
unexpected – the crash
from a chair collapsing ten rows back,
quick noise coming from a direction
we are not facing, which is
where she enters from, and in this way,
though without a sound.
Exchange Rate

*After reading Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women”*

I will give you last August’s yams
and the cracked shells of robins if you
will give me the whales’ teeth
(I particularly desire the whales’ teeth) –
and the ties that bind will be papier-mâché,
or old skin that scuffs to rough white
on the shore. Though, more likely, my father
will give you the yams with a book
of canceled checks to emphasize both his gift
and your debt – and you will give him
the shiniest coin, no value beyond the cool weight
it might press in a palm, on a tongue, and perhaps
we will still do the arrow-shot-into-the-thigh bit
to keep me from running away; though I’m supposed
to try so we might symbolize my return.

*Exchange ceremonies are key to relations,* which I understand,
really I do, though I still want to know
when exactly the arrow’s torn out,
and whether I run before or after, and how
and how long it might fester. It’s hard
learning the rules, harder still when the church
I don’t even attend has more than one aisle, and my father
who art in Northern Michigan already
gave me up years ago. Problem is, I’m a sucker
for ceremony, still sitting here
singing *blest be, blest be* in my mother’s best alto to the whole
history dance, Uncle John and Aunt Rose recorded,
the trestle tables to feed two whole families
recorded. And when my father is ready
to give me away, again (exchange rate
variable), it’s hard to say *wait,* or to carry
my own fish and mats, when no one knows
how long this will take, and my own father sings
so convincingly, *What’s love got to do, got to do with it?*
If only we knew...

Great-Grandmother Alice didn’t speak
to her sister for a decade before her death.
I remember this now, a flinty fact,
without recalling the reason.

My mother’s generation enacts
a similar pact.
Not full silence, but near, as they pass
with a few polite words at a wedding
or discover themselves locally
in the same check-out lane.

Three sisters, their one brother passed away.
Cruel gap in a Russian play.
If only we knew... I keep sighing.
My mother, the eldest, passes me the line.

Great-Grandmother’s brooch tangles thick
with a fist of chains in her daughter’s drawer.
Powder puffed, sneezing talc, as a child
I spent hours loosening gold knots
on a breezeless summer day.
The woman’s head on the cameo
is faceless in reverse shadow.

You could suffocate in Grandmother’s
nursing home closet as she cries
“I have nothing to wear!”

The family garments hang thick and near.
Womanish, with a subtly despising cheer.
Saint Reparata

Open mouth and the dove emerging from lips, 
her head thrown back in the strange birth – 
then her body packed into a shallow skiff and wind 
pushing towards sanctity. Child martyr, 
her vaults have been buried by that greater virgin, 
holy mother ascendant, Maria del Fiore.

Still the hills of Fiesole recall her 
lily-white, palms waving for the girl 

forgotten, girl-Daniel, entering the fire 
and not a burn, her flesh cool among the embers. 

So why did it work when they chopped off her head? 
The wonder of the miracle gone fickle.

(I imagine a city, doves 
in every mouth and flight overtaking the sky.) 

And what of the body that floats? Brushing the edges 
of the Arno or endlessly circling a sun-blanced sea?

Easy to accept the dissolve of assumption, Mary 
gazing heavenward, glistening light – 

but this boat-swollen body concerns me. 
World no longer flat, I’ve seen 

how the wind blowing one direction 
comes back to haunt from the other.
The Broken-Down Houses

Up Ninth Street, a row of Victorian mansions. One with a cupola
my friend says is really
a widow’s watch. Sad phrase
so far from an ocean, the bay windows blanking
towards a busy road, years
of casting shuttered eyes towards –
what? A railroad’s coming and going?
A clay colored river that swelled past flood line, but never the sleepy boat?
And then, who would sit up there
day after day, scanning for the old loss
to surface again on nonexistent waves?

The broken down houses
have shingles flapping, nails rusted
and pried up by wind. Across
their facades, long faded paint jobs
remain the wrong colors, burgundies
and purples with green and gold trim.
Too dramatic, too grand, even after
these years of weathering.

The bird bath is tipped, the garden
half kept – new plants, but without the dead
raked and hauled – it’s as though the widow still
lives there, behind the blueprint of her sadness,

watching us all as the houses fade,
straining for some piece of ocean.
Mirror Stage

*After reading Lacan*

Sometimes I wish I’d never seen the mirror, had stayed zero stage, stage before one

which was already splintering headlong
towards two, towards a thousand. The world

separates so quickly, egg yoke in one bowl,
white in the other. Hours after my birth,

my mother asked that I be brought back to her
and there we lay all night, exhausted (she tells me
each year on my birthday). I pretend to remember
us falling asleep in a far, dark wing of the hospital.

I don’t know what it’s like not to want
to be whole. The child throws the teddy bear away

then retrieves it, practicing: *here, away, here, away,*
while the I that is not I keeps pressing itself

against the hard lake of the mirror,
finding only the press back, flat metal, no give.

*Here,* let me step away from you to watch you
stepping back from me.
The Bathers

*Owls Head, Maine*

Two women billow
in the blue-green water,
sunlight and morning,
a rock face
obscurring however
they got here –
middle-aged debutantes
of the waves,
keepers of this
hidden cove’s calm
and cool begging
to let the swells
swim both arms up –
wings described
in the water’s embrace.
First, we saw
just the one, floating
on her back
before hinging
at the hips
like a jewel box
clicking shut,
then the other –
kicking her feet
down to right herself –
and neither are trim,
neither lovely
as you’d have them –
coarse hair
loosely tied, waists slack

over rippling thighs
as they laugh and bob,

bob and laugh,
in this movement

so free I envy
the one’s careless treading,

the other’s soft kick
from the shallows.
Notes on the Appositive

Example: I want to go back to that place, that small fishing village in Mexico
Yours: I want to go to back that place, ______________________________

That small fishing village is a basket of tomatoes.

Yours is Lake Michigan, carburetor, tandem bicycle.

That small fishing village is south of the Yucatan.

Yours is the pier, the red lighthouse, the rocks.

That small fishing village lost its license in the fifties.

Yours is fresh water, weeds, a jar of furred moths.

That small fishing village? No one lives there.

The dune grass, plowed, means the whole dune dissolves.

Can't you see the deep fibers of roots?

Someone says "this was once a beach."
Someone says "the natives, the natives," oh bring me a camera.
Photo from the Bahamas

It isn’t nice, this honeymoon place.
My mother coming from the water
in a lurid purple bikini, tropical

orange petals blossoming over her.
Nearby, debris in the surf. A plastic bag,
a muddied shirt. All of it

in the heat she hates. What brought them
here, eighteen years before she’ll leave him
on a humid, ninety degree day?

Her hair to the tip of her hipbones,
her tall fluid frame not posed, walking
towards a camera my father must hold.

They never appear together. Always one
or the other, as if prescience bade them take turns.
She tells me it wasn’t paradise,

tourists clogging the beaches,
the poverty struck boulevard. Inflated jellyfish
draped like limp sacks on the shore.

She tells me she knew even then
it wouldn’t work out. Whatever bade them,
single-framed, towards me, wasn’t nice –

word I like, word that’s safe, word
that wouldn’t find anyone stuck
in a cement walled hotel with nothing to say,

frames colliding that shouldn’t,
nor the eighteen years hence,
nor the family photos kept in drawers

where my niceness strives against this
not-paradise, not accepted, not acceptable
lens where everything that should have been lush

was already straggling up to shore. Photo like
nothing they’d hang on their walls, tell me
your dirty secrets, your terrible young mistakes.
After the Divorce

In a town of platitudes
and tulips and a wooden shoe festival,
we started our family again,
more concerned with a summer
pool-pass and lack of new tennis shoes
than our father’s sudden absence.

An ex-boyfriend said,
“It’s not a bad town
to be from,” with all the snobbery
he could muster. His mother
once told our own
she ought to raise funds
for the high-school orchestra.
I think it was worse for you,
being older, and male –
by which I mean, “See
how generous I’ve grown?”
We battled each other, lacking
better options, or, I did –
you blackened the eyes
of your classmates
from junior high through
your college prize fights.

When I last visited, we drove
to the lake where we both feel
most at home. Your new Jeep’s
big enough for five kids
and a dog, but I know
how you don’t want either.
What are we proving, big brother?
(Each time, I stay away longer.)

We hike dunes of shattered sand
to a beach the tourists don’t know
and the yacht-club ignores,
though I used to prefer to sneak into
their parties, shy in a bright
new swim-suit I couldn’t afford.

I’m ashamed of it, now.
I pretended my family away
then bawled like a baby when I moved to another state. You stayed and pounded your fists against asphalt until it answered your will.
Reading Thomas Hardy

The coming together of two people is nothing this world makes easy. It’s all sorrow paid by the word in this story. Outside, red leaves in rain paste themselves to my window, a symphony finishes, my house so quiet I’ve forgotten how to sleep.

Why not finish Jude, who reminds me the first time I said I love you to my love was when I was angry with him. Still, I keep going back to one scene, Sue laughing before Jude’s hearth, run away through river and rain and dressed in his second best suit by the fire, ensconced in rugs and deep chairs while her layered skirts dry on a wooden rack. Sure, they argue, but we’re still whole chapters away from the end, that horrid last scene in the school – which I keep wanting to go differently, keep wanting to believe could go – it doesn’t matter knowing better. Who wouldn’t do it again? The little left in our hands given up to the stone gods knocking our hearts.
Unlatching

A small white bird
leaving my hand, or
the sky unhinged
from the earth
and the whole horizon
flooding with birds.
This is not a song
but a piece, the teacher says,
and I see it measured
across the black bars or torn
like damp newspaper
captured in a storm,
a piece and a piece
and a piece that I
would have called song
had I not known better.
Gilder Boathouse

Sculls of six or eight
   on the Housatonic,
river that shadows this street
   where I live, or that
the street shadows, I can’t make it
   out clearly, make them
out clearly, these rowers all bound
to the steady pull, pull,
slow metronome flying its hulls
   across water, its
perfect water beetles, perfect
   many armed with their strokes
all morning just practicing
   while the leaves keep dying
into fall, rust red against the grey river,
   the shiny blue wind-breakers flapping on thin
college shoulders.
I’m too much inside of this story,
   how the green cottage
leans towards the road
   because no one warned
this traffic will grow
   until you can’t sleep, will
haunt banks of patchwork chimneys
   long out of use, radio
towers and paper factories
   abandoned, a river pixilated
all day by my window screen’s mesh.
   At night, we wake to the low,
mournful tones of the dam
   about to open, the river
flooding towards the Sound.
Once, in the door of

summer on a midland bank,
for no good reason in England, Chilham,
the end of the twentieth century
suddenly looking so like the beginning –
a manor house, the guidebook said,
a quarter mile down the path.
For no good reason, and yet
it has to be here because here is
in memory and I want this
accurate, an opening
in the stone wall – see? – light dazzling
my camera from the other side
so it cannot make out the gravel,
hedgerow, exposure with crystalline spots
like the time when I stared too long at the sun
though they warned us not to,
huge they of adulthood who guided us
through our first solar eclipse,
pinpricks in thick paper viewfinders,

enough just to let that much through, to see –
what were we supposed to see? Today,
or not today but much closer to it, sunlight
hit leaves turned up like the surprised
underbelly of seaweed, a secret raised, and me only
sixteen, no, because this wants accuracy,
eighteen, but still so young and in love with
everything. Someone says you were
too much alone. Someone says old world
anachronisms, but in my mind
I’m still standing before this once,
rosebush, wonder – words to tuck
like slate stones in my pockets. It will shatter
if you walk through someone warns.
It would shatter if I didn’t.
The Piano

*I can hear the music better where I sit than at the keyboard.*
– Donald Justice

Thought like a black lacquer box where I place

maple leaves, for instance, red
seeping towards green

on the young tree that tap taps my window,

and the tri-folded pages from the mailman’s bag,

and the last sand I shake from the dunes.

Add this one low plane overhead, *flying the pattern,*

a student explains, how they *take turns practicing,*

*mostly landings.*
Then leave the box’s lid up –

for the plane’s wide orbit, for the crack of leaves as a car

passes by, for the day to become some music less voice

than collage. The way each finger finds a different place

on the keyboard and *all at once,*

somehow making counterpoint, somehow, birdsong
and the neighbor’s screen door clapping shut. Sky separating
down through the leaves the way
a river might split
across low, pebbled places,
the fallen branches fanning it
into stream and stream and stream.
NOTES ON THE POEMS

“Knife-grinder: Principle of Flickering (1913)” – The epigraph is from Malevich, Life and Work, by Jeannot Simmon (Konemann, 2000). The CD liner notes are found in the newest release (EMI Japan, 2009) of Casals playing Bach’s Cello Suites.

“Instructions for the Binoculars” – The epigraph is from Dear Elizabeth, a collection of letters and poems from May Swenson to Elizabeth Bishop (Utah State University Press, 2000). The first italicized line in the poem’s third section comes from the same letter as the epigraph. The later quotation in this section is a misreading of John Berryman’s “Dream Song 14.” The second section of “Instructions” quotes the “FAQ” website for the Comité Brasileiro de Registros Ornitológicos: http://www.cbro.org.br/CBRO/faq.htm.

“Watershed” – The italicized lines in section two are from the Riverkeeper: NY’s clean water advocate website, which includes in-depth analysis of GE’s history of pollution in the Hudson River. The quoted timeline on “The Battle Over Dredging” can be found here: http://www.riverkeeper.org/campaigns/stop-polluters/pbds/dredging-battle/. The third section of this poem quotes EPA Administrator Carol Browner (also from the above website). Finally, the long quotation in the last section of the poem is from a podcast entitled “Bard Rock and the Mooring Hook,” part of the Vanderbilt Riverfront Trail Tour Podcast compiled by the National Park Service. It is available at http://www.nps.gov/vama/photosmultimedia/vanderbilt-riverfront-trails.htm.

“To Fanny Mendelssohn” – Section three quotes a variety of late Victorian texts peculiarly interested in small-handed women. See A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890’s, Carolyn Nelson ed. (Broadview Press, 2000), for several instances.

“Nocturne – Schumann’s Letter” – All epigraphs and italicized sections of this poem are from The Letters of Robert Schumann, selected and edited by Dr. Karl Storck, translated by Hannah Bryant (John Murray, 1907). Unless otherwise noted, the epigraphs and italicized sections quote Robert Schumann.

“Notes on the Appositive” – The epigraph comes from a writing exercise given in a creative writing workshop. I regret not knowing its original source.