Whatever Shines: Poems

Kathleen McGookey

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The poems in my manuscript can be divided into two groups: poems in verse and prose poems. The majority are prose poems. Though I did not set out to write in the prose poem form, I've become more and more attracted to it, eventually seeking what Baudelaire sought when he wrote the poems in *Le Spleen de Paris*, a poetic prose "musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and shocking enough to adapt itself to lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of the reverie, sudden leaps of conscience." Charles Simic believes prose poems contain a tension between the lyric impulse and the narrative impulse. I've experienced this tension in writing the poems in this manuscript: the idea of telling a story through images (and leaving parts out) fascinates me. Often I bring together disparate images cut out of their contexts to overlap each other in poems; the images both tell and compress the story.
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For Rhys VanDemark
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Black Warrior Review: "Lilies"
Acknowledgments—Continued

Boston Review: "Brave Faces"

Cimarron Review: "Snow"


Faultline: "Tulip"

Field: "Last Night, An Owl," "Honeymoon"

Gulf Coast: "First Month, New House," "Bird in the Pines"

Hawaii Pacific Review: "Meteor"

Indiana Review: "Logansport River Story," "One Night I Will Invent the Night"

The Journal: "Migration"

The Laurel Review: "Elegy for Stan Hudley"

Luna: "The Wrong Kind of Grace"

Madison Review: "At the Piano, June"

The Missouri Review: "Leda," "Simple Arithmetic," "Class Picture, My Grandmother As Teacher, 1922"

Mystic River Review: "One of Many Photographs of My Mother as a Child"

New Poems from the Third Coast: "Block Party," "Line from a Journal," "Poem for My Mother"

Notre Dame Review: "Another Drowning, Miner Lake"
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Phoebe: "Hands and Cameras," "Gladys and Her Kindergarten"

Press: "Three Weddings in October"

The Prose Poem: "September, Miner Lake"

The Prose Poem: An International Journal: "One Possible Story"

Puerto del Sol: "Christmas, 1960"

Salt Hill: "Tale"

Sun Dog: The Southeast Review: "Another Question of Travel"

Verse: "English 105"

Kathleen McGookey
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INTRODUCTION

It would be convenient if poetry were always verse—either accented, alliterative, or quantitative; but that is not true.

—T.S. Eliot

What name one gives or doesn’t give to his or her writing is far less important than the work itself.

—Russell Edson

I did not set out to write prose poems. I do not mean to mystify the reader of my manuscript, who upon opening it will see mostly prose poems. I did not set out to write prose poems, though that I write prose poems is often the first thing a reader will notice about my work. So in this introduction I’d like to discuss how I came to write prose poems and my influences.

In my first undergraduate writing workshop, my poetry teacher Jack Ridl loaned me his copy of Russell Edson’s poems. A jaw in my brain dropped open: apes drinking coffee, sheep in a test tube! This was poetry? I was just beginning to read poetry, so what did I know? Edson’s wacky universe was strangely unsettling and unforgettable. I wrote an Edson-influenced prose poem about an ape that puts on a boy’s skin in the morning and goes to school. But that was the end of it: I must have locked Edson’s poems in a box, which occasionally bounced and rumbled and smoked, in my brain. I didn’t consciously decide not to write prose poems after that, it just never occurred to me to try to write

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them.

But several years later I held a demanding full-time job which left me little time or energy to write. I was also completing my MFA. I was glad to be a productive citizen earning a regular paycheck, but I worried that my job would be the death of my writing. So I forced myself to write: I got up at 6 a.m. and wrote for at least three notebook pages as fast as I could, which usually took half an hour. Then I closed the notebook, showered, ate breakfast, and went to my job. I wrote like this for several days and then looked back through the pages for interesting images, word combinations, sentences, or pockets of narrative. Often the narrative thread was quite thin. I'd copy these over onto a clean page, writing from margin to margin. I squashed those bits of text, whether they fit together or not, into a block. I don't know why I didn't use line breaks. Maybe it was because I took fragments from a page that had margins. But really, I didn't have time to think about it. I carried my drafts in my briefcase and edited them more during lunch. If my poems from that period sound breathless, it's because I was. But there was something satisfying about producing a solid block of text, and above all, I was writing something. *I'm writing*, I said to myself grimly, *at least I'm writing*. Questions of genre, questions of subversion, questions of form didn't occur to me. I kept writing.

I brought my blocks of text to the poetry workshop I was enrolled in. And I was surprised to hear one poet say she couldn't comment on my poems because she didn't know how to talk about prose poems; another unfailingly
suggested, over the course of a semester, that I rewrite every poem in verse; still another observed my poem looked like a coffin (I think he really meant to say "Bury this poem!"). Quite often, my poem on the worksheet would lead someone to ask, sooner or later, "Just what is a prose poem?"

I was astonished that my fellow writers didn’t begin their discussion with the poem’s imagery or language, but with questions of genre. (No one ever said she couldn’t talk about a sestina.) Now I realize the issue of genre is not going to go away, but I would rather concentrate on the pleasures the prose poem offers: imagery, narrative, musicality, and prose rhythms, to name a few. Were these elements pleasurable only to me because I had labored over them? I didn’t see how this could be true. I couldn’t help but notice how prose poems tended to inspire questions and comments that poems in verse usually didn’t. I wondered why my peers, fellow poets all, were reluctant to address the inner workings of this form, why they got stuck, initially, on the prose poem’s exterior form.

Many writers see the prose poem as "formless" or "anti-form." Many writers talk about the freedom they feel when they write prose poems, as if all constraints have slipped away. Morton Marcus says, "The prose poem has released me to a place where I’ve felt more at home in writing than ever before." David Ignatow says, "The prose poem gives me so much more imaginative latitude" (qtd in Mills 141). Stuart Merrill says the prose poem is "freer than lyric verse, less enslaved than logical discourse . . . wavering ceaselessly between
order and freedom" (qtd in Murphy 51). Some writers of prose poems say they write in prose because they didn’t know where to break their lines, but it seems to me this reasoning is flawed: eliminating line breaks only side-steps the issue, which I think involves rhythms and stresses and emphasis rather than writing in verse or prose. What if, as Robert Frost said, writing free verse were like playing tennis with the net down—then is writing prose poems like throwing away the net, the rackets and the balls and moving the whole operation off the court? I don’t think so. Just as traditional poetic forms such as sonnets, villanelles, and sestinas provide writers with a structure to resist, formal elements in contemporary prose poems provide tension and a subtle framework. The prose poem is governed by more formal elements than its margins.

With this in mind, I read Louis Jenkins’ introduction to his book Nice Fish: New and Selected Prose Poems, with high hopes. Here is what he says:

in some ways the prose poem seems to me to be a very formal poem. The form of the prose poem is the rectangle, one of our most useful geometric shapes. Think of the prose poem as a box . . . . The prose poem is a formal poem because of its limits. The box is made for travel, quick and light. Think of the prose rectangle as a small suitcase. One must pack carefully, only the essentials, too much and the reader won’t get off the ground. Too much and the poem becomes a story, a novel, an essay or worse. We know that a sonnet has fourteen lines but the prose poem is a formal poem with unspecified limits . . . .

While I was thrilled to find someone who talks about the prose poem as a formal poem, Jenkins in his comments reminds me a little of the guy who compared my poem to a coffin. Jenkins concentrates on describing the shape and size of the prose poem—that is, the more obvious outer structures. I am
most interested in the prose poem's inner workings, in particular its prose rhythms, which emerge out of sentence composition, the stresses and musical units within sentences, and the relationship between sentences and paragraphs.

I hadn't written prose poems for long before I realized that without line breaks, the sentence was my main tool for creating rhythms. When I revised my prose poems, I began to concentrate on the way I structured sentences and how a sentence played off those before and after it. I wanted to take full advantage of a variety of sentence structures, as well as questions, exclamations, and fragments. I made sure my sentences varied in length and structure throughout the poem. I think anyone who writes prose poems must, sooner or later, pay special attention to the sentence because that is the prosodic unit in a prose poem.

Eventually I was free of my job (the organization folded) but I kept my method of writing and producing prose poems. The more I wrote prose poems, the more I read them and read about them. It occurred to me that when I shaped my seemingly unrelated sentences, images, and scraps of narrative into a prose poem, I sought what Baudelaire sought, a poetic prose musical sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurteee pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'ame, aux onduulations de la reverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience (7).

musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and shocking enough to adapt itself to lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of the reverie, sudden leaps of conscience.

At the time, however, I couldn't have articulated this. I sought to make what I
wrote vivid, lively, rhythmic, and emotionally resonant, between the margins.

Aside from the fact that I have worked this way for several years, I am
drawn to the prose poem for reasons other than force of habit. I like to tell a
story and leave parts out, and so use images to compress a narrative. Russell
Edson says the prose poem is ideal for this, because

whatever story-telling is necessary to the piece must depend on images
rather than bridges of description. The very compaction of the prose
poem causes psychological condensations, which are the permanent things
of poetry (323).

I like to play with sounds and repetition and toy with sentence structures, and
tell the story through a string of images. But the language in a prose poem must
have a tension, something must stretch the prose poem taut so it doesn’t collapse
inward on itself, a pile of words to slog through.

Charles Simic talks about the tension in a prose poem in terms of the
lyric versus the narrative. Simic says prose poems contain
two contradictory impulses. On one hand, there’s the impulse to tell a
story, to proceed in a linear, narrative fashion; and on the other hand,
there’s the lyrical impulse to circle around one or two images or
metaphors. In other words, one part of you wants to draw a straight
line, and the other to make a circle. It became very interesting to me to
experience that contradiction, that impossibility (192).

Experiencing that contradiction is interesting to me as well. But I often found,
when I finished, I couldn’t find any narrative thread in my poems. I worried
that the narrative wasn’t clear, that nothing happened, that my poems were
nothing but disjointed images strung together.

Reading Killarney Clary helped me stop worrying about narrative. Early
on, my creative writing teacher Nancy Eimers recommended that I read Clary's book *Who Whispered Near Me*. When I finished it, I felt an overwhelming sense of hopefulness. It might have been that Clary's poems seemed even more disjointed than mine; they were all untitled, and many of the poems created stark emotional landscapes that seemed to float, disconnected, on the page. Here is a part of a poem from that book:

> Because the ones I work for do not love me, because I have said too much and I haven't been sure of what is right and I've hated the people I've trusted, because I work in an office and we are lost and when I come home I say their lives are theirs (6)

The voice in Clary's poem seems perfectly vulnerable, a bit unhinged, small but capable of recklessness. When, much later, I read Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, I immediately thought of Clary, because Rimbaud's poems also resonate with highly charged emotions and contain language which evokes emotional landscapes. Rimbaud's poems seemed to vibrate at a similar emotional pitch, hint at a similar recklessness, and contain (restrain?) similar urgency. Reading Clary also helped me with what now seems like an astonishingly small technical matter in writing prose poems: breaking the prose poem into paragraphs to pace it, much as stanzas pace a poem in verse. Without having read Clary's work, I don't know how long it would have taken me to realize I could do this.

I think anyone writing prose poems cannot help but write in the shadow of Russell Edson, who has been called the foremost writer of prose poems today. That's certainly the case for me—I do believe his influence lurked in my brain.
from my first reading. Edson's universe is strange, dark, and disturbing: in his poems, a man marries an automobile and a father has mice for sons. Edson's poems, on the surface, seem almost cartoonish, but an undercurrent of pain is present: one has only to peel back the thin top layer. For example, Edson's poem "The Damaged Ape" begins light-heartedly enough with a group of people buying what sounds like a decorative ape. The ape turns out to be alive, but also dangerously flawed:

a large hole develops in the ape's stomach from what had seemed earlier only a tiny tear. And all evening we watched the ape's insides slowly coming out all over the rug . . . (179)

I may not see the world exactly as Edson sees it, but I think from Edson I learned to be true to my vision of seeing the world, no matter how tilted it might appear. My vision of the world and what it contains—relationships, houses, lakes, birds, and other people's children, to name a few elements—is fragmented, is layered, and involves what people say and don't say to each other, the partially recounted stories and especially the parts left out through the tricks of memory or the speaker's motives or manners. My vision of the world also includes surreal and magical elements, which are present in the everyday, but often go unnoticed because they are sometimes barely visible.

A prose poet who has been important to me recently is the French writer Georges Godeau, whose work I have been translating. Many of his prose poems capture ordinary moments in the lives of people he knows and observes in the village where he lives. Here is one, titled "She Clings to Herself":

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Her husband is dead, her married children live far away. In her big house, she is afraid of noises, she takes refuge in town at other people’s houses, she travels. Coming home in the evening is anguish. In winter, she knits in front of the tv, she takes sleeping pills. At dawn, she runs to the mailbox. The paper is there. The world is still there.

Translating his work has affected my work: I now write prose poems that are much more narrative than my earlier poems. So now I no longer worry that I’m not telling a story, I worry instead that my prose poems are too plain, that they only tell a story. I find it nearly impossible to translate some of Godeau’s sentences accurately because they are a series of clauses connected by commas. Godeau sometimes avoids plainness by using sentence structures that, reproduced in English, seem choppy and poorly constructed. He also avoids repetitive sentence structures within a poem, and just often enough, a surreal or magical image or twist of narrative appears.

My influences have not been exclusively prose poets. I have read widely—poetry, fiction, and short stories—while working on my Ph.D. Two poets who have been indispensable to me are Elizabeth Bishop and Brigit Pegeen Kelly. Elizabeth Bishop I admire for precise diction and imagery. Bishop said Marianne Moore’s poems rebuked her for not being precise enough; I feel that way about Bishop. Bishop’s fish scales form "creamy iridescent coats of mail" on wheelbarrows (64); she describes ammunition as "piled-up balls / with the star-splintered hearts of ice" (26); and her fire balloons "flush and fill with light / that comes and goes, like hearts" (103). Upon encountering such crystal clear, precise images as these, how could I not feel as Bishop says she felt upon leaving
Marianne Moore's apartment, "inspired, determined to be good, to work harder, not to worry about what other people thought" (137). But beyond Bishop's beautifully constructed images, I have looked to her as an example of a writer who lived a life with writing at its center, who worked long and hard on her poems, who edited them relentlessly, who searched for the perfect word and would not settle for a lesser word in order to finish a poem. (There is a story that Bishop left a poem, finished except for one word, pinned to her wall for a number of years while she sought the perfect word to fill in the blank.) Is there such a thing as poetic work ethic? If so, Elizabeth Bishop is one of my models.

Kelly, on the other hand, uses language that is lush and dense, an overgrown garden full of fragrant blooms. While her images are nearly as crystalline as Bishop's, Kelly's images offer glimpses of a darker undercurrent. Here is an excerpt from her poem "Song":

What they didn't know
Was that the goat's head would go on singing, just for them,
Long after the ropes were down, and that they would learn to listen,
Pail after pail, stroke after patient stroke. They would
Wake in the night thinking they heard the wind in the trees
Or a night bird, but their hearts beating harder. There
Would be a whistle, a hum, a high murmur, and, at last, a song,
The low song a lost boy sings remembering his mother's call.
Not a cruel song, no, no, not cruel at all. This song
Is sweet. It is sweet. The heart dies of this sweetness (16).

I admire Kelly's poetry for its rhythms, its sentences which wind around and double back, repeating and varying their patterns like densely woven tapestries. Kelly's language has an ornate, highly charged feel. I feel a kinship with Kelly's
subject matter as well—in addition to her opulent and musical language and striking imagery, often domestic subjects take a magical turn, as in her poem "The Leaving" from her book To the Place of Trumpets, where a young girl harvests an entire orchard of peaches in one night as an act of rebellion, a sort of rite of passage; this poem ends with an image of a pond that is both haunting and surreal, a "pond full of fish and eyes" (42). Some of her poems are so vivid I feel I would immediately recognize them if they were paintings.

I wrote my one and only fan letter to a poet to Killarney Clary. I couldn’t resist asking her why she wrote prose poems. She replied that it was a matter of voice:

I can only say that line breaks were artificial for me in a way that kept me from telling in a complete way. I believe writing is an art and has an artificial dressing, but breaking lines felt like a limitation that held my voice back.

I was surprised, because at the time, I hadn’t thought of form as connected to the voice of the poet. I have since come to think of prose poems that way; now I do not pause when beginning a new poem to wonder whether it will be in prose or verse. I hear the poem, I see the poem, as prose. As the reader will probably guess, the poems in this manuscript in verse are my earlier poems. But I do think the voice in the poems is consistent throughout—that is, the poems in verse and the prose poems sound as though they originate from the same place—which I realized through an unexpected exercise. The fiction editor of Hawaii Pacific Review recently asked me to revise a poem in verse (which I wrote years
ago, before I wrote prose poems) into a prose poem. I was surprised to find that
the prose version sounded at home next to my most recent prose poems, and I
changed little about it, only a bit of punctuation that was confusing without line
breaks.

During the time I held my horrible job, someone from my office,
someone who wasn't a writer, asked me to describe my prose poems. What are
they like? she asked. This question usually leaves me tongue-tied, but this time I
had a kind of answer. I said I had been thinking of my poems as physical
objects, small glittery objects like a fancy beaded evening bag or a mirrored ball
hung over a dance floor. Something small and solid, something bright,
something in motion that comes alive when touched or held under a light.
Something slightly exotic but familiar. Something that may contain something
else. Something made up of intricate, jagged fragments which form a deliberate
pattern. Depending on where the light falls, that part will shine.
I.

"When I’m married, I expect to be thoroughly happy, making beds and washing dishes." From my grandmother’s journal, 1935.
Tale

I will not begin, once there was a man who loved me. Anyhow there were several and only one persisted. We didn’t speak of clothes, the self demanding all attention, all emotion: that was the bad part, and forward motion doesn’t stop it, doesn’t stop the wonderful moon. Still, I’ve nothing to say about him, his one tender gesture of laying his cheek against mine. The small house grows hot in the sun. I was like no one he’d ever known, he said. I knew better. By now, he has burned all my letters. He has buried the flicker that flew into his dining room window, and stunned, lived forty-eight hours. He laid it on a grassy hill, near ants. So it could have eaten. It could have lived. Though the weeks continue to turn and turn, he treats me as if I were small and young. I didn’t ask him to drive by my window, to walk beneath. Though he later did in anger, small thrill. And then the moon washed us clean with its gossamer, attaching us lightly, lightly, to this world.
Lilies

She wants to lie down and drink in the dark,
the humid dark not far from a lake
where she watched a man she knew she couldn’t love
swim back and forth among the lilies.

Two days later, his mouth’s still all over her.
The lake makes it easier to breathe.
Too many times: a green park bench,
his lap, the fish restaurant, and him saying

anything you want. The fish like silver coins.
Then six flights of stairs, no elevator,
an armload of lilies. The taxi home after the trains
stopped running. And even the cabbie wanted
to meet the following day. In the morning,
her second floor window, the teapot on the radiator,
her tapestry chair, the boys in short pants
under her window, on their way to school.

The boys pass her window every day
with their mothers, who wear skirts and red lips.
Her neighbor watches, leans out his window
and speaks to each of them, every day.

The street is the street of shoemakers.
A crystal chandelier in the dining room,
a portrait of great grandmother. None of this
belongs to her, but she likes its quiet,

its museum quiet in a street of white lights, of shoemakers,
after a motorcycle ride, the country house, money in the air
and him close, offering a lily that opens
wet and huge.
Leda

Still alone, holding her breath and watching night fall
as in a Magritte painting: trees outlined in black
and a thumbnail moon carved in inky-blue sky.
Underwater, fish see this gold moon, each wave

with its own piece of sky, and six swans: two white, four grey.
All the plums fallen from her trees, the fire dead
and weather very nearly out of control. Her arms clean
and white and beginning to be strong. The six swans

not her obsession, yet appeared daily. Her face grew pale:
she would not wish another swan into a man. To begin with, she said,
hands weren't worth waiting for. Then the problem of too much light;
afterswards, the lake began to freeze, hundreds of black

Canada geese honked on ice, and the swans circled
in smaller and smaller patterns. She let go
of their silhouettes, of the silhouette of desire,
of falling into the perfect temporary quiet of a mouth.

the swans like angels, like god, like bodies
on the sidewalk not quite covered by sheets. No comfort in wings:
even a tulip's slight curve is obscene in wrong hands, even
roads curving, trees leaning in strong winds, even that

is wrong. Her hands smelled of garlic. Bonfires glowed
and smoke hung in the trees. She waited to be lifted
out of her body as she stood at the sink, dishes steaming.
Already she saw broken ice, the lake swallowing a man.
Vernal Equinox

The sweetness of the kiss cannot erase what came before, green words and potato’s eyes sprouting, a clear plastic film over all the furniture. She almost goes with the wrong man, and we feel as dejected as the hero, losing her, but look! She is not lost in the weather. Time and time and time, words perfectly still, the gray cat sleepy on the kitchen table. She thinks of the many men she knows, undressing, how their skin from this distance seems papery—she could rip it with a touch. But she stops. She wears the moon on a silver chain; the moon, the untouched moon wouldn’t sully itself if she was bad like that. She is alone, and birds fly breathless and stupid into her windows. At night, she hears the geese and the low lonely moan of the lake freezing, then ice breaking up. The birds sing for the fog to lift—it isn’t spring, but soon these words will green and sprout. She is trying to be careful. She is used to being alone. She would rather be in fields anywhere, muddy, the pink and white farmhouse intact as a doll house with a light in the corner bedroom. Any empty sky, the clouds like fish scales pushed by the wind. Today she thought there was something magical about white geese waddling in the fenced-in yard, the charred house silent. The geese the opposite of loss, fat pillows, slow. Shut doors. Just attraction, the possibility that takes its shape as a man wringing his hands. And she goes wingless.
Swans

Swans in my front yard, my lake-yard again, dipping their heads to the bottom, to whatever they find under glittering water, under water shiny from sun. But what do swans have to do with loss? The end of summer? A third one now, a fourth, all over the yard and I'm better just looking at them. They seem reasonably happy, bright white in dazzling sun. Inside, the sun connects shadows to my pen, connects me to my sleepy dog. This cannot be the last good day of the year, four swans in a line, signalling. Soon I will have to write everything to remember it; I do not dream in detail. Light lifts itself from the ground. The sunrise stained the whole sky pink yesterday, so spectacular I didn't mind driving under it for so long. There aren't words left out here, just a few leaves in the trees, too many in the yard. Soon I will join the swans clean in the sun, in the lake's middle, glistening waves. I know the lake has lost its warmth, I've seen it mornings giving up summer, giving up steam. I can't think of any substance I'd like transformed, straw into gold. But maybe that. Maybe myself slowly and secretly into a swan, for leaving.
Leaving Logansport

Esther walks along the tracks toward Bloomington, an idea in mind, mostly hope and being smiled upon, and can she pay it back? The snow hard and delicate and sparkly. Someone wrote his heart to her: we should be smoke, we should be sky. She could hear the neighbor disciplining his son in the back garage. She smelled of vanilla. The idea that one was wanted: Matt, then Arthur, then Ross, only carefully alluded to in her album. Here the tennis pro gazes so intently down her shoulder there's no mistaking the emotion. I love to see her laugh and hold the banjo. How then does she refuse herself and the hard slick stars shining above, the moon wearing its hazy cloak of goodness? The departure, having been conceived, is a way of carrying herself through the days. She had promised her mother. But could she pay it all back? A uniform made of yards and yards of white cloth. The sky stained pink like a gift in the east, fog spilled from snow covered fields to the road. Once the idea takes hold, the heart isn't satisfied. The heart that owns her is a swan's heart, happily lording its white pieces over her in the sun, but the frozen world won't yield. It is hard to be related to royalty in one's blood. But she is, and she is visited on a regular basis by a ghost of a white dog, the white dog that owns the crying neighbor boy in the shed. The sun bursts inside her. I can't see her face for the hat.
Meteor

What it looked like I can imagine: lightning
over sumac, a long tail and loud thud in the dark
and the neighbors came out of their root cellars
to see the sky opened in a frenzy of wings.
Not one leaf on the large oak was torn.
No animals behaved strangely, no signs of
inclement weather, the night a meteor
fell to the family farm, 1920, Union City.
We've always expected what's predictable, silence
from the stars and my grandmother Esther
who thought the swift light a vision,
herself changed, there, in her summer nightgown
watching her father calm the neighbors
as the moths flew to her, to the inside light
and she was the vision, as I've always wanted to be.

A day can split any number of ways,
the night too, and thereafter wildflowers
sprouted near the meteor, itself quite solid, thigh-high.
The neighbors kept coming through the violet-scented night
and into the following day. A priest was called.
The children kept in from school. Did she feel chosen,
my grandmother who hadn't driven a car, who admired
the neighbor boy's goats and new corn? Being near such power
was reason enough; neighbors looked for her hidden wings.
No knowing what she knows, no small, sad smile,
just a steady gaze, her hands carefully placed
on the arms of the wicker chair. Absolutely still
for minutes the photographer clicked and muttered

and fuss. She gazes out of the chair.
She sees the first snow falling, dizzy patterns,
and the big eighth grade boys—she’s afraid of them—running past.
This day of expectation, a carriage ride, a white rabbit muff,

and a certain dignity lost, a word, once said,
that cannot be called back. Each time smoke rises
from the black stove, she claps the lid down,
then returns to the front of the classroom, something like fear

in the back of her throat. Her hair smoothed back
with a big navy bow. Some children
she loves less than herself, and the boys
would be better off in the fields, far from her, better caught

in moonlight in hay, not half-tamed
in class, bodies spilling off their chairs.
Her hair is smoke, the smoke that rose
as her father’s barn burned, and eight men on horseback

formed a half circle around the blaze and simply watched.
Slow music and tall buildings rise in her mind.
She’d rather the photographer gone, the children too,
and the books expectant in the empty room.

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English 105

I wear a suit the first day because I can't say what the suit says. The suit says something else entirely. When I ask my students to list the places they've slept, one asks, What exactly do you mean by that? Taste of onion in someone else's mouth, sweat drips like tears, the busty lady at the beach changes under her towel. I mean only and exactly that, I reply, though it is too late, the innuendo has already escaped into the room. It is a cold spring, so the classroom is usually pleasantly cool. And quiet, after the beginning Japanese class next door leaves off its low monotone of "good morning, how are you?" The trouble is we are all too aware of our own bodies. The trouble is I have lost my double, who wanders off to the shade and picks up a watering can. But the lush green lawn is not for us; you'd see that if you'd only read the signs. Can you read? Can you swim? Well, someone's got to jump in the lake to rescue the canoe and the lost boy who's fallen out. He planned this accident to escape his father, and look at his hard luck! Here we come to put him back into his father's arms again.
Gladys and Her Kindergarten
–Pentwater, Michigan, 1915

No one said you mustn’t do this: so many little Indians with bows and arrows drawn. So many little Indians, all in one sharp line. Feathers blurred, fingers blurred, and one is turning his head. An unhappy animal hides itself in the woods nearby and cries and cries, among the ferns and dogs, the children’s breath, the birds. My great aunt Gladys in the middle, sitting slightly behind. No one’s smiling; here are their best, serious faces, and no one’s feathers have come undone. Gladys smiles and strikes a pose, brief and gracious: a glance, something on paper. Everything can be a lesson, a way to live, though there are consequences: the single note of a bird, two notes really, and the answering bark of a dog. Some smile afterwards, price of the photo worth this alone. This one with long blonde hair; if a child can be like a daisy, this, surely, this is the one. It isn’t so bad to imitate what one loves, to transform oneself, occasionally, with flowers and wings. They can amuse themselves for hours, they have wings! No sense repeating: feathers, feathers. And winged children, somehow, drift safely in planes overhead. One can wait with a fixed expression though it doesn’t feel like waiting, though friends will whisper, then later write: she never married anyone. White teacup, clean kitchen, cooking for one. Disguise the daily: walk to school, if possible, in new shoes. Understand the bounds of money and weather, restrictions to live within. Empty snakeskin to show the children, delicate and crackly pocket of skin.
A hawk landed on asphalt
I drove by

The sun washed down a white house
I remember feeling done with envy

Then glitter and pink tulips
Grandfather still in his thin house

Children danced in evening clothes
Giggles rising quick

No rising sun
No white piano

No one had a knife
But the bride's father had a microphone

Under our plates we had lottery tickets
No one said if you win, give them half
Simple Arithmetic

I am glad and not glad for my life; there are so many charming voices. I am still imagining the men lined up, the ones I imagine who want me. I'll tell you everything I know: there was a boy, a girl, and a boat. Palm trees, but the mosquitos on the island chased them back to the boat. There was a boy, a girl, and a dog: I still can't get the story straight—magic fruit? straw into gold?—and night's black velvet has arrived. I am glad for my life and the high clear voices of four-year-olds in the Allegan Public Library. I am not the girl in the story—I am the girl whose mouth is mainly shut but who imagines it open, then closed fast. But where are the other boy and girl? Holding hands and walking into the library while a baby falls out of a pile of money with astonishing grace. She's afraid to go beyond the normal bounds of conversation, simple arithmetic of the heart. An electric blue butterfly darts in front of the car, just beyond reach and the camera's focus. The clocks tick, their small greedy faces shine. The money will always fall out of our hands. We will always be slightly out of place, standing behind ourselves, not getting anywhere, no island, no boat, and no one to save us.
Logansport River Story

The wrong girl was saved; the wrong girl drowned, though brother rode the horse into the river for her, for her sorrowful hair. The picnic basket overturned on shore, the red pickled eggs forgotten. The other family began to hate the Heddes, stole jewelry and potatoes from the live girl’s home. Didn’t they deserve something, anything small? The Heddes prayed the ghost away, prayed away the stilled swan in their hearts. But they had the saved girl, Hedwig, without wings by the river, thinking it easier to die than follow red roads back, mother’s emerald ring lost, her own wedding a dream of bad satin dyed black, black because it covered stains, black because how could she love a man more than the river? Altars and doves and a dumb hope carved on the lost ring, dumb hope in her chest rising when Hedwig looked at the trees in the yard, the cut wheat stacked in the field and she in a white dress and hat, happy, the river that loved her running behind, offering its sorrow to the same sky.
Another Drowning, Miner Lake

A woman drowned last night in our lake, she was drowning but we didn't know: we saw flashing lights, a police car drove by our house. Was drowning: the helicopter landed and all the cars backed out of the driveway. We heard on the police scanner it was a woman or a girl. Though her chance was slim, the sun set as usual, gorgeous and temporary, despite the rain, a small sweet promise to our skin from the world. Promise of green and a gray dawn, a day that stretches long and without kisses or appointments. As much as we'd like to think we're elevated, we're not. We thought she was a little girl but in the end she was older. We hadn't known her and still we swam, knew this about her, swam to the white diving raft and someone's yard light shone white over us. No one can blame the lake; concentrate instead on saving yourself, myself, the self I have covered with wings, because today the lake is simple and gray and going through the motions, calm, flat as a plate, polite as any gilded mirror.
Line From a Journal

"When I'm married, I expect to be thoroughly happy, making beds and washing dishes," from my grandmother’s journal, 1935.

I don’t believe you meant that, but maybe you are, maybe, that newly married moment in 1935 as you sit writing while your husband visits the men in his Benton Harbor office. Maybe then, happy, so different from when you came home to dishes after school (were you always doing dishes?), the water cold and greasy, the fire dying, the black saucepan you could barely lift.

You sit writing, half in and half out of the light, making sense of your latest good fortune. Are you always a little afraid it is a dream? Not only a dream of being warm, finally, but of having enough: money, coal, new furniture and books, no rain. A cool moon shines on your last night as nurse’s supervisor. Will you miss your job? Your name? But still, this is no dream, you thought the ceremony real, then the tall grass bows down as you drive to Traverse City. Your silver ring etched with orange blossoms. Your brown suit with lace at the throat. Fallen gold leaves so thick you can’t see the ground. Stray dogs run behind the car, happy in their wild eyes. Rain, and then your car next on the terrible scene: you place your husband’s clean handkerchief over the man’s face, apply pressure to the chest. It is terrible, the only crash you’ve seen right after. You bite your own cheek raw.

At home, your dogs in their cages sniff and groan. You watch the jays and the lake and the flames. You bend over your cookbook, determined to poach an egg and set a table correctly. You write, and watch the moths fly to the light.
One Night I Will Invent the Night

One night I will invent the night,
full of cats with green eyes and golden dogs, night
of longest nights, where schoolboys walk past purple houses
and look over their shoulders at me.

I don’t accuse them of anything. Before night fell,
in Pennsylvania, three Mennonite girls stood under a waterfall,
fully clothed. So it’s summer. And no one thought sex,
but of water’s

form and weight and how girls and water fit together
neatly. Someone else draws in details:
an old blue man plays guitar, skinny dogs wrestle in town.
Still, we are frightened by the horses and don’t know

about the pilgrimage, all the cowboy finery.
And one horse lies down. Is it dead?
A motorcycle does wheelies for several hundred feet.
I’d be lonely in places I’ve loved, how I was different:

no one looks sadly off bridges, leaves fall, the water accepts.
The night I want: not completely dark, moonlight
on the dog, on the bed; no dogs bleed on the floor;
dragonflies whir, believing every person could save them.

Holds last week’s moon: low, red, and large,
so large I could have driven into it. Holds all the minnows
that jump in sync at the slightest sound: minor waterfall.
No loss, no pale heartbreak of day.
A Small, Other Way of Living

The baby turns himself in the high chair and screams, I rush to free him, I rush and don't know what to do. A gray feather is stuck to my bumper with dew. Turn the day, turn the problem to milk, a sheet, a blank page. The light isn't blue. It is a clear blessing I may take advantage of, all explanations for sun and water used up.

Seen from the corner of the eye, the back of the room: a young woman or girl at the water's edge, writing. Though I imagined the scene, I left parts out. The house is only rented and no one can own the lake. I hesitate to mention passion, though the boats and ropes and cloudless sky have fueled themselves from it.

After so many times, what I say sounds worn and tired. Easier to say, I clean and fish and watch the sunlight travel across the yard. My mother lived this way. Easier to begin with ripe apples and sun, heavy bags of apples, half-eaten apples scattered below the trees. The smell of burning leaves. Really, no one is interested but me, so asking questions will not help. The reflection of sun on water moves across the ceiling. Why is it admirable to show restraint? Voices carry across water so I hear a little of what I'd rather not.
Reticence

I've no business knowing your beloved's pattern of love cries, or what your friend's child died of. Or just how deeply your sister was cut and how the edges of her wound resembled a sliced-open, vigorous plant. Please, close the door. How does your child like showing up for all the world? They might all be lies, you say. They might be literature. The world is sad without them. Maybe. But there is more to what I'm saying than complaint. Why can't you just change the names or the situation? Such as, a yellow bird flew into my window yesterday, then hopped away, dazed, and sat on the deck a long time. How did air turn to glass with no warning? Bird against glass upsets me. I'd rather have the pure and distilled emotion, if possible, like when I asked my family if they'd ever seen anyone left at the altar. That's what I mean. My father had, but couldn't make himself understood. And see, I'm not going to say why. The little tea shop is closed; I've pulled the green-striped awning in. Why not be satisfied with the raspberry jam and tarts, the door banging softly in the wind, and even though he couldn't speak, how my father noticed the flock of small white birds dipping over the lake at sunset before the rest of us, how his face followed the flock that moved as a single body, climbing, flashing blue, then turning away?
At Big Star Lake, my grandparents gathered lilacs heavy with the perfume the wind brings. And what it takes away—the expected child’s room cold, door shut.

Last night a raccoon ate the sparrow’s eggs, shinnied the greased pole, emptied the nest. And today, only a slow, absolute rain, tree frogs and their happy chatter,

their backs gleaming like jewels, not diamond, but soft-edged and green, then gone. More than anything, my grandparents wanted to move forward: they drove through water up to the runningboard,

they sold the pup with the most white in its face. When the mist rose, they could see across the lake. Fish glittered like coins, like silver platters.

Five swans in a line, paddling, and my grandmother heard piano music rise from under the water. The picnic basket in the backseat, under a white cloth. Almost every nurse, herself included,

had been amazed she didn’t die. Even her sister came from Logansport for one last talk while my grandfather planted gladioluses at the funeral home and wrote about the pups and eggs to be sold,

and the rambling rose in the backyard; he said it would be lovely, lovely by the end of July.
II.

"Jim gave me a diamond ring for Christmas and I'm wearing it now. I gave him shaving lotion - not a very equal exchange." From a letter my mother Mary wrote to her parents on December 25, 1960.
Advice

If you change yourself for every person you meet, how do you recognize your own true self? I have advice if you’d listen. Say the words rise off the page. Say the bird that lives in the eave suddenly dies or leaves. Or the tulips bloom. You get the idea. It is awkward not knowing your own soul or the gold, the gold of longing in it. Your gift is here now, a shiny red apple, no phones. A storm is coming over the lake today, over my still and small unrecognizable soul. I try to do what is right, which must count for something, though the waves ripple and fall, though they go on beginning. What would a new shirt, a bright shirt of water do for me in the midst of this weather? It happens too quickly to call the birds home, to gather oneself in an outward appearance of pride. I said appearance. I said I’d like to go for a bike ride if it isn’t too much trouble. Don’t confuse affection with kindness or pride. The timid heart exhausts itself, folds inside itself and sleeps. Even that thought has disrupted the day, an implosion of grief. I am simply waiting for the birds to dive under the water. I can explain myself in ways that would astound you. Isn’t it too bad to live this way, in such a state of anticipation?
Three Weddings in October

How do you give up your names so easily, like old coats, like bright shells?
Gone like Saturdays near Lake Michigan, heat and jumping dogs, collapsing tents and pines.
Lost just this year: Wilkins, Winslow, Burris, while the deejay spins and calls, "Ladies and gents, for their very first dance, Mr. and Mrs...."
And when the light hits your shiny cheeks, when you gather your uncontrollable dress, why should I blame you? The hall table is piled with gifts; all we can do is raise rented champagne flutes and wish you well.
But your satin and daisy bouquet stains me; it bounces near me, it lands near my name.
A Fine Evening

It was a fine evening, we'd say later, a fine evening followed by an even finer morning: a misty sunrise stained the sky pinker by degrees. Light fell on the blue thistle and did not change its nature. A mole followed his star-shaped nose underground, in his private inky sky. Time has never stopped just for me. When the fog lifted, we saw the dew like jewels all over the lawn. Then multiple veils, multiple jewels, and grandmother's ribbon of thought was privately unlaced. We had planned a romp in the park, but she kept saying, "You're on a long vacation; you're certainly far from home," when really she was far from home. Her daughter kept trying to straighten things out. Well, why not try to improve things, even a little? She said she had nothing to wear to the picnic, even after we said her suitcase was in the car. In the park, high winds had blown the sunflowers' pale petals away: the bare centers were stark on the stalks, and the stalks had fallen over. The crows in the trees would not stop their rustling, their raucous whispers. When grandmother sat on the blanket, she said, "Do not help me, I am full of tears." We had argued about what kind of candy she'd like. I'd let my morning glories die because I didn't think the weather, such good weather, would last into October.
Labor Day

Raleigh and Esther close the cottage because of the war.
If we can’t all be happy, we will be a country
large in its sorrow. An exaggerated sense of responsibility.
This is what they wished for: how the sun
makes leaving bearable, how the amber light breaks their hearts
because it won’t last. The lake stretches large before them.
Their daughter wakes to the martins’ rising song. The key turns,
the heart turns inside its own wrong weather.

What makes return impossible? A shortage of gas,
a shortage of oil. But they have a little light:
Esther rides her blue bicycle around the lake,
and their daughter smiles behind her stringer of eight trout,
behind a certain slant of light, the lake’s calm eye.
They will remember the light, how they bathe in it,
always the light and the lake. Never mind the soul’s weight in water,
what water does to the soul. A slow and sure exit,

a great calm space. Loving only the martins,
Raleigh, behind the shed, begins
the last day drowning sparrows, English sparrows,
quickly and with so much care.
Purple Martins, 1970

Even if pictures tell the truth,
whose hand cradles that month-old purple martin,
like the new moon cradles the old? Hers?
I can see the wrinkles. One pert black eye,
a seed, dull light, and feathers sharpened to points.
And after, did my blue-eyed grandfather drop the bird
to its nest? Did their hands brush?
My grandparents kissed and laughed across the table
in Christmas movies, her hair dark, his shirt pressed. Once she tumbled
into the lake on a shoot for Audubon—
he rescued the camera first; the expense!

This picture is taken to show the band;
a thin metal ring encircles its leg
but this baby bird doesn’t scare.
I’ve held them myself, hands cupped full of feathers and skin
I can almost see through, skin like that on my grandfather’s hands.
Their hearts against my palms, my eyelashes black
against my cheeks, I look down, down at my hands.
The dark calms them, my grandfather said,
so we’d lift them to his leather satchel,
then squeeze the metal bands with pliers
while their parents scolded and divebombed our heads.

People mailed him the bands they found
from birds killed on highways or dropped
who knows why. He sorted them into glass jars
while I spun on his office chair,
then held down one electric typewriter key
in a long metallic wail and it sounded like he was counting
his pocket change, like nails spilled
on a cement floor, or like smooth white stones
dropped into a lake, one by one, everything lost.
Migration
(Raleigh R. Stotz, 1893-1981)

He becomes light in his bones and refuses
to discuss money. Instinct tells him, keep moving,
soon you'll be home. His hair is white.
He once wore a white tuxedo
with a red rose on the lapel,
but that was long before this winnowing.

It isn't intentional.
Others will not remember it like this,
like following a candle, one light,
across a darkened field. When the car doesn't run,
he's not surprised: machines cannot be trusted.
Though he is becoming hollow, the weight of coins
keeps him on earth. He must pay all debts.
He has hidden his watch and his wallet.
He has spent his whole life gathering wings.
When the feathered cloud rises and swells,
he will be ready.
View

The unhappy bird in my chest won't stop flapping its wings. The way I see it is the way I see it. The bird's underfeathers are blue, just below plain brown, so I can't call it sparrow. How is the view from there? My heart was in my mother is another way to say I felt sick. Or anxious or worried, because my mother says my father has lost some of his good sense. Once he woke himself up coughing; now he coughs instead of sleeps. Why should the body act like that? He melted his new glasses when he burned the brush. The neighbor tells me my father is a sharp man, meaning smart. But I watched my father turn on the kerosene heater in July when we cleaned the garage, and then he couldn't shut it off. Wishing cannot change anything. I chased the dog into the empty lot, among the neat piles of grass clippings, as soon as I smelled smoke. In the refrigerator, the tea changed into something bitter and dark. I've never wanted, I've noticed, to state the obvious. According to the checklist, the one I just happened to find, I'd already made almost all the critical errors, all the don'ts. But not quite everything. I'd saved everything, all my errands, for a day in town.
One of Many Photographs of My Mother as a Child

Young enough to smile in anyone's arms,
Mary smiles, held by her father's father.
She knows the world is in love with her.
The camera loves her too, and her father
behind it. She wears a pinafore and a plaid bow
in her hair; she holds up her three fingers.
He has seen enough of the world
and still misses his teeth, manages his best smile
without them. Which isn't lovely, isn't large.
She strokes his gold pocket watch, lightly, lightly,
and thinks because she touched it, soon it will be hers.

The world loves us while we are here,
and today the music in it is made by tractors,
by chickens scratching up dust. Then near the trees,
a fawn reveals itself like a gift, leaps to its mother.
The deer bends her head to the fawn.

Grandfather has spoken of his dead wife. He is lonely and homesick
for her. Because the weather permits,
he makes Mary wooden boxes, more than she can use,
more than her parents can bring home, for filling
with anything, for filling the space.
September, Miner Lake

The lakes hold their submerged anchors and cool flat fish, the delicate white flowers which have not yet lost their gloss. I feel sorry for the taxi driver who’s spilled all my dimes out the window. A flash of lightning and then wanting to paint someone like spangles all over my body. Not wanting to go and then being gone, nearly in the same breath. There are apples simply waiting to be picked, to fall into our mouths. Today if you told me sunlight would heal me, sunlight and crisp wind, I might believe. We are all in need of a black velvet cloak and an orchestra playing waltzes while we walk home in the rain. A woman I know pours salt and glittery stones in a bowl, then leaves them outside her window at night. She will tell you she is not a witch. The simple shine of an apple on the table, waiting to be painted. If anything, I’d like a love letter and too much light in my eyes. I know better. Dogs follow me and lie at my feet, breathing their golden breath. My father is driving to Chicago today, to see another doctor. This obvious world tires us. That’s all it’s good for. The white lawn chairs are lined up and waiting for us.
At the Piano, June

Music drawn across sky:
beautiful arc, nose to forehead, nose
to lips and chin. White, white skin.
The line believes itself,

child's voice gone: look, a life story.
Hands clasped,

voice that will not leave or sing
calls to her missing arms,

strong, square chin.
Little light, ice spilled like glass

in the road. Black notes rise,
black butterflies, heavy in sweet air.
Christmas, 1960

My mother lived a year in a cold country
to perfect her French accent, to learn to express her thoughts
on politics while my father, one country east of her,
spent his days decoding the military secrets of the Czechs.
But haven't they always been married?
Haven't they always known? I'm reading old letters,
letters from my mother to her parents,
the year she lived in France. Christmas morning, thirty years ago,
and I'm not there, but somewhere
in Germany there are Jim and Mary, not married,
not even engaged, and a Norwegian girl, a friend
who drove the 26 hours with my mother.
Look at those three, making small talk, decorating the tree.
I'll see Greg, my mother writes, I'll just tell him
I'm about to be engaged.
What other secrets has my mother kept folded for years?
She couldn't have expected the ring,
despite what she said in that letter, not knowing
what she wanted, her friends even telling her this.
Every night she talked with Madame as they made dinner;
I see the warm kitchen, pots boiling,
my mother on a three-legged stool, trying to shape the language
into sentences she could live with.
How long can you put words that aren't your own
into your mouth? She draws a picture of her diamond.
She knew enough to want to say yes, after
Sunday visits to chateaux with the other man,
one with 300 chimneys, peacocks, and they let you walk the roof.
A chimney for every day. So how many days,
how many days on days, shadows on silk
on the walls inside. My mother lived in a cold country.
My father knew enough to ask,
while the cold wind blew through the stones of the chateaux.
He put the ring in a box of chocolates and worried
she wouldn't want any. But that same night,
somebody made ornaments from the foil wrappers that still
smelled sweet. And somebody made white yarns dolls for the tree.
Tulip

Water poured from the mouths of golden bulls, and music played from up in the trees. Really, I couldn’t say when my kisses got closer to his mouth, or when he began crossing busy streets to get to me. He had a certain unapproachable quality—do we seek in others what we lack? For a moment, I was unable to speak, even near water. The heart is in the middle, badly drawn and soggy. It’s difficult to predict when I’ll feel this generous again. It began with a picnic near a fountain with a gendarme. The rest of the school girls were jealous, until they heard she simply couldn’t shake him, how he’d drive by her window at night and leave things by her door. No one wants that relentless, sickly attention, a wilted tulip, brown at the edges. We’d rather find our own signs in the sky, in the water that’s always running somewhere in the back of our minds. No use beginning with the police report, a young foreigner chased back to her apartment, signs of a struggle and still she can say she overcame him. It wasn’t me he was after, she’ll say, partially in comfort. It was the idea of something unusual, something elegant in its bones. We want, and we want. Mainly they watch how we walk and pause.
Near Drowning, Ihla Comprida, Brazil

Evening comes so slowly it is mere discovery; small white flowers blossom in my spine. The market opens—so many times with just a little money, mouth open in front of shiny dead fish. A small boy wants to carry the flowers I buy. So far I’ve bought nothing and I plan to leave empty, I plan to leave slim so I can easily slip into what’s expected of me, another skin. It is a matter of saying no to everyone. A matter of taking my body into the ocean, beyond where the waves start, but something in this story has been left out. We thought we were gone to larger currents, almost heartbroken, salt water in our mouths while crabs scuttled sideways up and down the sand. Yards out, taken further by each wave. Those watching us from shore were alarmed. Wouldn’t it be stupid to die this way, with bright pink passion flowers growing near the gate? Later, salt air came through the car window—I could hear the waves as we drove across kilometers of hard wet sand. We didn’t die. We weren’t even sure, looking back, what the danger was, but birds circle my balcony, and if anything, I feel I’ve finally done something right, something as simple as sitting quietly, alone at the end of the day.
Instrument Factory, Brazil

It's simple enough to give away the coins in your heart, when dust settles over a pool filled with mineral water and the dogs, those sleek guards, raise their inky noses to a silver saxophone moon. Beyond Sao Paulo, down a dirt road, men make French horns, flutes, and cymbals with the delicate precision of angels. Blue-suited, they sit at tables: one tests a saxophone, another welds the key of a flute. And each has tools on the table, a candle, a blue welding flame. Stacks and stacks of half-finished instruments crowd the factory aisles: bells of horns, all sizes, rows of French horns hung on a green metal rack, pyramids of tambourines and drums. I love to watch their mouths emerge, but I have closed my own against the men with their suit coats hung over their shoulders. Our guide runs his finger across my cheek, then down the elegant neck of a flute. And the slim scraps of brass, shaved off, curl like hair when they sweep the floors. Here, they use plastic for clarinets; even the good wood, when they can get it, rots in the sun. Behind us, a young boy plays scales in a testing room while vats for nickel and brass plating steam behind windows. And the workers walk with horns slung over their shoulders, the almost obscene curves shining in their closed hands.
Overnight Ferry, Yugoslavia: Ljubljana to Split

The man on the ship said it would be nice to hold my hand. The unshaven man in the next seat with teenaged kids back home. Yes, that sloppy man said it would be nice, my hand. He said he was famous and had money. He offered me some. I thought, why not throw my saucepan and tortoiseshell eyeglasses into the sea and proclaim myself a duchess? Couldn’t it happen? But it wasn’t a ship, it was an overnight ferry. The tea was oily and the duchess could not bring herself to take a sip. We had passed a loaf and a knife back and forth until I put them away. Marmalade sun shone through a jar on the ship’s windowsill; I left the ship to walk the boulevard under the palms. The cars were nothing to be afraid of, but the long afternoon was, so many hours to fill with a map, walking and looking for a room. Even in the museum I heard the ocean and the palms rustling in the sunlight outside the white walls. I’d exchanged my backpack for a small silver key. On the museum grounds, the bushes trimmed into actual animal shapes almost hid the marble statues rising out of them. The garden seemed wild, overflowing with growth, but the wildness was carefully calculated and, for example, the plants did not overgrow the sidewalks. When my nose began to bleed there, I had only my two clean hands to stop it.
Another Question of Travel

We think we own the lake by walking its circumference, pointing to our own rented lot—there. A blue heron flies over the interstate, but why travel? The landscape of the heart stays the same. We are not singing this simplest of songs, the hurts were small, really; the lake could swallow them all. It is still the time of night before dark comes but I know it is coming. I am thinking of how uprooted trees smoldered in large piles in the fields all last week in the rain, three tight lines of smoke rising. The trees seemed too large for any force to have done that kind of damage—slow orange fires despite the rain, the next day soot-blackened roots. Today I’m interested in reduction: the smallest size, the quickest way, how can I stay in a corner? Summer’s ripe desire fades from the days, color removes itself from skin, leaves, flowers. Still, I have a little light left. When I saw the armored guards loading money into their truck, it was a way the most complicated problem to dollar signs. There’s no owl in the dark and the mourning doves sit complacently on the sidewalk until the dog quivers and can’t stand the challenge. I’d always equated being rich with having enough time. A dog is barking itself into my morning. Maybe we can catch ourselves before anything is lost, but already my words are rising into the day, already half the town has driven through the pearl-gray dawn.
The birds didn’t mind being cradled, being hand held, days after birth, then weeks, and the parents didn’t reject them though they smelled of hands and cameras. But what was Gladys Snauble, my great aunt, doing in Tokyo anyway? Holding birds? No, she’s standing in front of a temple, a group shot. She never married anyone. But in Tokyo, a deer ate from the women’s outstretched hands. Not Gladys, but a postcard she sent. The situation will be difficult but not impossible to explain. The deer could venture closer because that was its nature. And the same for the woman in the red blouse, it’s her nature, one said, simply to be approachable, though she and the deer are essentially alone in the world, the only other structure a birdhouse in the shape of the tin man’s head. I am being honest; remember, I like you. As for marriage, Gladys will be the first to explain: girls hang off the caboose, pretending to be brakemen. Girls smile and smile and silently add up their weight in journals, neat rows of numbers, their burden on the world.
III.

"She says, "This butterfly, this waterfly, this nomad that has 'proposed to settle on my hand for life'-- What can one do with it?"

--Marianne Moore, from "Marriage"
Song

You say it is easy to confess, then walk away, but I’ve heard enough. I wish your lovely white lady would get it over with and descend, descend again to you like a flurry of pigeons or doves, or land like snow on the lawn. Something must be green because new love smells like grass. I’ll watch from my seat at the curb; I’ve got my sandwich and sunglasses, and after the bicycles pass, like silly geese speeding after each other, of course she’ll be standing on the other side of the road, petting the chained elk. So you’d have me believe. But you’re not quick enough—you rise from your chaise lounge, fold your newspaper, or stumble, or tie your shoelace, or someone asks you for the time, and when you turn back to her, she’s gone. Couldn’t wait or didn’t want to. Maybe she wanted to lift herself out of herself. You were already thinking, you’d confessed, about how her hair would look on the pillow, how you’d balance on one hand and look down at her. But she’s changed her life, why can’t you? Because some of the trees have died, leaving behind their red leaves which rattle after the bicycles. The elk is lonely, too, think of how lonely, day after day, getting his picture taken with whoever wants him. But she, of lovely, indescribable color, she’s something else. You swear she was right there.
My own failings are far too evident: all day long I have wanted sleep and a letter, something brand new and packaged. I must tell someone else's story. How about the bride who was the picture of radiance in her off-the-shoulder dress in Indianapolis two days ago? I, with my small heart, noticed the hors d'oeuvres. Wished for more food, less talk. Only the family got champagne. Was that rude? To be so obvious about pouring it? There I go again. Money. Love of it. I don't love it, but I worry. Try this: early evening, Indianapolis, and I watched at the hotel window for the long white limousine to drive by. We didn't want to be too early to the reception. I didn't, anyhow, and when we arrived, we accidentally took someone else's seats which were not reserved. How were we supposed to know? This is still her story, but look!, we had to pay to dance with her or the groom. It was unexpected, the deejay's ploy, and we didn't do it. We said instead, how cheap. Can't one control that? The deejay? Then someone from our table got cake for everyone but me. So I went to get me some: sickly sweet butterscotch with nuts.
June Afternoon, Ragdale

Still, the other choice, always the other, appears more attractive. Shall we go arm in arm into the fountain, to cool our feet? The earth will take us all back. The proud children hold the stringer of fish, the string of birds, the weight of their bodies approaching the earth. It's harder than one might imagine, a long string of written words, eventually trailing to yes. The setting is perfect and would you believe that music often rises in the afternoon as if on a current of air? Here in the attic there are empty trunks and stacks of books and heat enough to fill your chest and cloud your vision with anxiety. People look, and the looking matters. With this much time, I could write my life story and people would clamor for its completion, someone would knock gently then take my hand. I have finally figured out all the machines here, which come with the briefest instructions. As for the story of my life, it's still forming, though how interesting is it: she stood by the window, the frame painted blue. Or, she seems to desire something, though she can't put a finger on it. Or, she walked in the woods, through Queen Anne's lace that grew over her head, like nothing she had seen before. There is a fountain with two stone cats intently watching. I've been told to walk as if I'm the happiest person on earth, to place each foot into an open lotus blossom. If I were that truly happy, the earth couldn't hold me down.
Stranger Than Fiction

A sinkhole swallowed a house, a gorgeous and decadent house. Nothing could be done! The house disappeared underground in a matter of hours, the velvet upholstery unruffled, the tassels and chandeliers trembling. In that house, they must have amused themselves for hours. Certainly they had time. This disturbance came in the night, rather near dawn. Night faded as we lived in its tattered grace, its evening clothes, as the house moved in regular—not slow—motion under the earth. Even the sparrows quieted themselves, a larger sound grew behind them: a hunger of years, the sound a heart might make in the midst of a mistake. Someone at the sewer department in the city will have to pay. If the earth suffers such terrible hunger, what could begin to satisfy it? Not one house, not books and trees and telephone poles. Though everyone must feel it, a constant ache. Or maybe I’m the only one. I could walk around all day suspicious, checking over my shoulder, then under my feet for light shining up through the earth.
What I remember most is not universal truth but it is mine: Stan in a t-shirt mowing the lawn, his broad bald head shining. I always thought he made sense though my mother said she knew. She had seen it before; he'd gloss over weeks and months, unsettled to find memory gone or changed with no putting his finger on why. He called his granddaughter's boyfriend, then husband, Lover Boy. In the end it didn't matter. But he was a grandfather and mine was gone; he was next door. I thought, how nice. How nice to see him though he later sold the place and talked earnestly of the deal. Whose details, including price, changed according to the day.

At the picnic, he apologized again and again. He said, "If only I had known." On the way, we took a corner too fast and three bean salad spilled on the back seat. Even if I dedicated myself to cleanliness, things would get stranger, not better. A woman of mops says in an anguished voice, my clean floor! The state of cleanliness is not constant and the floor belongs to everyone. Like the road and the act of crossing it to get to his granddaughter's high school graduation. And the confusion and sirens that followed. At the picnic, he called me my grandmother's name. There is more mud here than is reasonable for spring and no goat-footed man walked the trails near the beach. But deer have left tracks and eaten so many tulips that now no one pities their hunger.
Imaginary Letter About the Weather

Soon, you will put your message in a boat and send the boat downstream, downstream to me. Can a letter contain light, or the clink and splash of dishes? Look what's lost: gifts for the heart's own weather:

tiny tea sets in the shape of watermelons, silk fruit with the patina of bloom.

But now, the weather's changing: slow constant rain all afternoon. Or high winds. Or hail.

Now you have something to write me about, instead of goldfinches alight on asparagus in the field,

light and memory such long songs. The red sun sets like a jewel, bright in its clothes. Soon, soon,

call the doves. The sun a great egg pining in the sky. Not for me, but someone like me. Trick of the eye or weather: how far away am I, am I walking in a field, just one person, not two? I walked to my red mailbox twice today,

and the storm remained the same: a guess, an expanse of wing, a leaf blown across water. Clear like the ring of a bell.

When will the fish surface and swim behind me? Soon, soon, call the doves, dusky in their trees.
The Moon in My Grandmother's Watch

My grandmother looks away from the camera. She says she's unattractive, an old woman, an empty glass. Her first patient left silver spoons and sent picture postcards from Switzerland. Touch them and the phone rings: tonight, an eclipse over the lake. My brother tells me, go to the window and watch.

Picture this scene. Picture my grandmother, young, on a train. Men watch as she leaves her seat, then forgets her rings in the bathroom. She travels with her brother. The dining car fills with the music of trembling glasses. He doesn’t want her to marry. This is what he says.

Hours after they met, my grandfather bought a ring. This is true. A diamond, not the flawed glass star I’ve held on my finger. My brother says the constellation is shifting: he can picture her nurse’s uniform, her profile, but he can’t say he misses her. He watches the sky even as he talks. Each mirror, each plate glass window in his house reflects the world pictured in her Time-Life Encyclopedias: we loved the stars, the glossy rings of Saturn. But the moon in my grandmother’s watch has stopped. She holds her wrist to her ear, she says something to the camera. This is the one my brother wants. He can say this much. He says her tidy black jewel box burst that afternoon. Her gold watch was new. She sifted cool pearls from bracelets. We drank glasses of ice tea and left rings on the mahogany table. She wanted a picture. She wanted all of us in it: me, my mother and brother.

Tonight, the stars make diamonds in the waves. As I watch, only a slight ring of the fish moon becomes visible. If what we love turns to glass, how do we keep it safe? The stars say nothing; they bury their mysteries in light. No picture rises out of itself. But my brother
is happy. My brother has his telescope; he'll watch
for hours though the glass, then wake, his eyes ringed
in black: the gilded stars, he says, only outline her picture.
No light, just a sense of satisfaction, something sweet on the tongue. I haven't
told enough but don't know every story, only the story of lake and field, high
and clear and away, sense enough to stay out of the woods. Here I am singing
in one hour wrung from a bloody clock, a timeless day, a day so empty it leaves
me breathless. But all that luxury silently adds up and someone must pay for
the single swan on the lake, though the lake itself is gone. There will be light
and time enough to hope, still my soul and the dog in the yard. A single swan
in water the color of sky, gray, and the light gone, but the sky streaked with
roses. It isn't dark and the dog's in the yard. Our lake is solid gray but not yet
frozen, holding all my dogs and fears and letters home. It is too quiet here for
such fierce love, but begin the story again, how they met in a museum and then
he cooked her dinner. How did she have courage? Or were they standing in a
crowd watching street musicians, a juggler, and he offered to take her picture?
Were they both far from home? I'd rather not know, rather continue the
afternoon as though I owed thanks, go on inside my own happiness. No one
has written that story about me, but someone keeps an envelope of my hair in
his sock drawer, as I keep the lake's strength to myself, the doves and dogs and
rain.
Block Party

Then voices. Then silence. Then the sky rumbled. Shivery light forked on the horizon. I mean lightning. Don’t blink. I ran to set out my tin can. Then rain poured into the basement and washed all the cardboard boxes away. But now the sky is lit with clouds and patches of blue. No one’s screaming. The doves dream on telephone wires, dreaming dove-dreams where all the hunters fall and rip their jeans and scramble home to change. The metal pails dream of brimming, overfilling and then the moment when it spills, water’s brief life. Still, no one’s screaming, such a messy word; it’s awkward like flailing, or failing, when something’s wrong no matter how carefully the evening was planned. Most events go on in the rain, though they’ll have to rent a white tent and the doves that are released will bump into the ceiling. What were they dreaming of? Telephone wires, that’s right, and the thousand thousand conversations rushing through their claws. Thick voices. Long pauses. Was that the baby screaming? No, just someone crying over sheets dried on the line, and the children who rode through them—look how the walls disappeared!—on tricycles. It wasn’t planned or schemed; the sheets presented themselves, a sunny day, an expanse of green. Someone sold the dream of sun and kids on bikes, a block party where we all eat berries and cream. But they set up the tables in my grandparents’ new garage, on account of the rain. Inside the rain’s hush, the doves rustled their wings and practiced their soft calls. Calling here, here, here. Calling me.
The Wrong Kind of Grace

Called away to look through the window—the heron poised, then walking through the yard—I say yes, this view of the heart, this visitor, is better. The wind is either pleased with me or not, and will blow until notice is taken. It shakes the porch windows, the waves come toward me. The story in this has already begun, though everyone’s still waiting. For the surprise twist. For free tickets to the fair, though that involves money and a whole flock of crows rising up from the road, the dog rolling gleefully in manure. Now the swans return the same day a man drowns: coincidence.

I had one white dress and gave it away. The problem remains: still in love with the idea of motion. Though I’ve made a decision, I can’t live up to it: there’s water in almost every direction. Look, here is the road I drive home. I live on a peninsula. I should say we do. This is not a riddle: the important part must come later, news from a man wearing a hat. Or just a man. Or just some news, some forward motion, smiling faces, a red sailboat on the water, moving, and not too fast. Or walk in a certain, selected direction: here are the raspberry bushes, here is the gravel pit where deer gather on the ridge.
Honeymoon

The animals are sick with love. A white dog
walks the beach like a shadow. A blue heron perches
on the dock, its long neck one deep loop.
Someone was eating roses and reading

love letters while the sea turtles ate out of our hands.
I want the heron to stay. It could have good news.
I could be what it wants. You have to put your face
in the water and breathe, the woman says,
breathe, and the bubbles grow until they surface,
where I float with the jellyfish, where I'll catch them.
I'm sorry I feel this way. There's a spider
on the towel I've just used to dry my hair.

The string quartet followed them in the garden,
the sun shining and all the boats on the lake
gathered out front, and happily,
no one fell into the cake. Acres of sunflowers
bent their bright heads to the bride.
One must surface slowly for all kinds of reasons.
Your lungs could explode. Look,
I can't tell you what's wrong,
it's very loud and the air rattles my mask
like too much rain. I am crying with a stranger.
She asks, "Are you doing it for him?"
I am sick on the beach on a white towel, I am sick

and doing it for him, the animals are sick,
and the parrotfish swim close because I want them.
Why are the beaches deserted and the restaurants empty,
why can no one serve us what we want,
a simple sweet piece of key lime pie?
Animals stamped on silver coins.
It's not too late to ask the blue heron to stay,
to drop what we can't carry, but listen,

I'm not going to beg. There are no love letters on the reef.
When it rains, we run to the covered part of the boat: everything begins here, including bad weather. Here money is no object, and we pay and pay.
Iris Rising

After agreeing to marry him, Anabelle became an expert on fine and delicate lace. Some have heard this story before. You must embellish a little: they live in his magnificent basement while his house is constructed. It is a question of money. She stays alone so much to keep an idea in mind: the lace comforted in the midst of change, though back home they wondered what she could have meant, sending such a picture of herself, such a glare? Now all the boys want themselves in black and white next to her. The cut glads are in baskets on the step. They keep a list of who would like flowers, then deliver them regularly. She is happy though birds fly into her windows, and grows larger in the laws of universal control. Meaning grown men don't stick their hands into fountains. Meaning truth is difficult and swans are best seen from some distance. She loves light and wants it to come naturally from the mouths of people she loves. Though it may not rain, wet leaves and mud may not comfort her, spring brings a certain degree of satisfaction that was lacking. She can't say what she's dreamed of all month—not the president or angry dogs, or fires and irises rising up from the ground. How many wild animals has she seen and from what distance? Fifteen deer and one yearling move in fluid lines from field to field. At close range. Such grace.
Bird in the Pines

It is easier to be compassionate when one has time: I took strawberries to the old woman who lives down the road. I helped another one to her car. A butterfly lay on the dirt road and I picked it up by its wing. Already in writing it, the event has changed; say I saw right away the butterfly’s body was crushed, say its wing smudged my thumb. Say it rained all day and all yesterday and ruined the strawberries in the field, so that leaves me at the old lady’s door empty-handed. I am done with compassion: I wish someone would tell me to stop, to get down on the floor with the dog, where I could admire light from the window coming through glass vases. So it is a small thing, change of self, change of light. Already what I meant to say is further away than when I began; the question is reduced to whether the dog barked when our real estate agent unrolled her yellow tape measure. Or whether the lilting bird in the pines kept calling its two-step call into the day, into me.
First Month, New House

Still, we keep beginning. We believe we can start fresh, forget arguments over water in the basement or whose cat scratched our screens. We agree a limit exists though it's hard to pinpoint. Of course its location changes: the lake lies further away and noise from cars and trucks breaks through any calm, any silence I find. We compare new and old: no doves and swans, just a rooster crowing without regard to the day—started without his bidding—which he cannot call back. A cricket calls from the front hall closet. There is a field here but no other sense of possibility. It is never evening, just night and day and night. The radio tower's red lights blink in the front yard long enough I realize it's no signal, it's not even a sign. Maybe this is the sign: the moon stays in the sky into the morning, the moon must love the world; I can't imagine loving anything so much.
Addendum

But I can imagine loving something that much; I wanted to say so from the beginning, even though I knew some would call me sentimental. The waves froze, it appeared, just in the act of rearing up—though it must be more complicated, no sudden snap, just a gradual drop in temperature. I like to walk in the park and get water in my boots. He says, surely we could have planned better, surely we could have planned more. Still, the long unbroken view doesn’t change. The words on yellow scraps can’t live up to themselves.

So he smirks at me from across the page. He says, look at the finches in their summer color. He says, take a book out on the lawn. I say, can’t you let me have one moment to myself? Talk of vegetable perfection makes me think of giant tomatoes and corn dwarfing the house. By slippery blisses, we mean something fleeting. An exquisite mouth can explain itself.
Last Night, an Owl

called into the dark, over and over.
The mourning doves only cooed, stupid enough to stay
in the road. Too late, boats come in from the lake.
It could end here, my half-constructed grief
for the girl I might have been, dressed smartly,
speaking another language in a cafe.
Desire of my own making hangs around me: I share an ice cream,
lick by lick, in front of the subway station; I go off
with strangers near the quiet fountains slimy with moss.
Someone is breathing outside my window.
It’s as if I’d never left, or wanted to,
this strange cycle: a wedding, a body other than mine,
a warm house, a dog.

We could see the owl in its nest, growing. But the leaves came
and we forgot it there, flying and calling at night, calling itself
into my sleep where someone was giving me a gift.
But here are two seagulls bothering the loon,
here is the dog with a dead rabbit in her mouth. Here are my mother
and grandmother still in their bodies with the child reaching
for the mirror.

It may sound crazy but last week I interviewed a woman
and halfway through, thought I was her, watching myself talk.
I am waiting for a day where the light is in the sky before I am,
and pours itself into me. I can’t look.
I am not singing. I am not confusing the mist over the lake
and the road with the light I am looking for, the absolute word.
Finally, enough fireflies and sleep. A small ache.
Whatever Shines

At first, you don’t turn the antique coin, don’t feel the chip in the crystal, the dented armor, you just coo in admiration. You simply close your hand around whatever shines—a gift to keep but never look at, like the luxury of traveling somewhere together in a car. You open your mouth and I kiss it; you are holding something under your tongue. This weekend you said the word lover over and over again until it was lost. You wonder what it’s like to be the first and last face I’ll see in a day, but you left the garden a long time ago. Not any garden, but the garden where we’ve never been together, the garden where a father twirls his daughter in a circle in the lake. She wears a red bathing suit and throws handfuls of water in the air just to see the shapes it will take. Her front teeth are gone. A yellow tiger lily opens while a woman on the shore smiles sweetly and waves to the camera. What if nothing remained but the motion of her hand to her chin or her cheek? She removes her white hat and combs her hair. It shines like the gold domes of universities. You know her. She waves to the man and the child out in the water, and to you. The water is rising up to join her, but you don’t see it. You are writing our names in the sand.
I want only to be home, and hurry, stupidly, twenty miles an hour too fast and still twenty under the speed limit; my car skids, then spins and stops. The man in the next car says, if you don't mind, my neighbor can pull you out, offering this meekly, *if you don't mind.* He's good like a boy in grade school, and I'm lucky to be lifted near this light. I can't find the hazard lights on my dash. I could have killed someone, I could have been killed, and before I think this melodrama through, his friend lies down on the ice to hook up the towstrap and I'm grateful and closer to home.

One summer night, mayflies gathered near streetlights in downtown Allegan thick as snow. Then Village Market clerks brought out their cans of Raid and when we drove home, the mayflies popped under our wheels. We might have missed it.

Angels in ice, in stained glass, spread their invisible wings and stop children who tumble out of cars and trees. Even my inconvenience is only that, not pain, no money lost, no one dead.

My car went off the road. Someone helped me. The high wires buzzed with energy, laden with ice. My life is too little to speak of.

That's true, this poem wasted on it, while the hyacinth bulbs over the sink just begin to bloom. The house is so cold some days I can see my breath inside. My imperfect windows leave the sun in my eyes and children in Sarajevo run home from school through cemeteries. The dead never come into the house, a girl says, but bullets have. She's not afraid of the morgue. Her friend just says he runs zigzag, and fast, so fast they can't catch him.

But one morning snipers shoot children as they play in new snow. There is calculated evil, and calculated risk. A perfect white blanket of snow. And no sign of another day, yet one comes, then another, with terrifying regularity.
IV.

New Work
Spring Fever

I'd like to say we heard the ocean's hush from the classroom, long breaths and sighs on the sand. But make it Lake Michigan—that's closer at least—and some of us did go to the beach. If I am following a formula, I would like to know: I can't remember my high school biology teacher's name. Black hair and beard. We compared, my mother and I, and found the same earthworm diagrammed in her old college book. Then Joe Kim hung a cat in my locker, the one we were supposed to dissect. Scott Schoendorf died suddenly and what did my black-haired teacher do with his desk? It couldn't have sat empty the rest of the semester. I flinched when they rolled his coffin in. One dead friend. Not from childhood, not really a friend. A kid in my class who played basketball.

Later, someone was always sad and lonely by the door: the students on the prom committee who didn't have dates. They sat and took the money, and the girl with red hair tried not to cry; I brought her a rose when she wanted a date. The yearbook was dedicated to Scott: once it is written, the truth begins to unravel: we could only eat so much cake and drink red punch before the chaperones noticed something awry in the dark cafeteria turned dance floor. What did they do to get the teachers to stay that late? And smile out of tuxedos as blue as the sky?
Exercise in Sorrow

Try this: exercise in sorrow. You bought prom tickets, which included dinner, but you ate somewhere else, maybe the Hoffman House on 28th street, with its fake rocks stuck at intervals on the white outside walls. Not everyone knew to do this. I didn’t feel transformed in my lace dress, ivory ribbon at the waist, ivory pumps. Result of endless hours at the mall. I still had my same big nose, same hair that could be okay the day after I washed it. Lacy sleeves worn on or off the shoulder. Shelly Oliver’s red strapless dress fell down while she danced; she ran to the bathroom, tearful and needing perfume and baby powder, tissue and lipstick, many girls to whisper messages to her date.

I hadn’t seen a thing. The guys gathered in the hallway, tall and sleek in their tuxes, but sweating. Would she ever come out? Shelly’s date shoved a guy wearing leather pants while the chaperones were still ladling punch. Someone gulped and burped. My gardenia began to turn brown at the edges. I always asked for a wrist corsage so there’d be no awkward fumbling near my chest. Already the rumors circulated: who yanked down Shelly’s dress? We were almost-adults playing at being adults, though that would have insulted me then.
Riker

I never liked Mr. Riker's hair, how he feathered it back, and his curved, beaked nose, like a bird's, a bird of prey. His cheeks fell in wrinkles around it. Let's say he was a good teacher, gifted even. That is not my memory. I never took his government class. He and Scott Stovall, a student, stood in the hallway during break and watched the girls go by. I can say this now the police reports have come out: *how dare you?* My righteous anger does little good: Riker still breathes in a fogged-up car in the parking lot, with a student, whispering *let me unbutton your sweater.*

I walked fast to get to class, with damp armpits and sweaty hands, past laughter and smoke from the senior girls' bathroom. I tried to look pretty, but Scott always said, *didn't you wear that shirt yesterday?* Riker never heard. He was watching the girls. With his feathered black hair he was trying too hard. He wasn't even young. He didn't know how to handle beauty, so he put his hands all over it.
Waltzer

Mr. Riker never kissed me, but Mr. Waltzer did. Off school grounds. He taught algebra, which I hated, but mostly I hated him, after he and the whole church choir came caroling at my grandparents’ house. Their breath snaked out of their mouths in white clouds; the chartered tour bus rumbled by the curb. When notes stopped falling out of the frosted air, the choir members shook my grandparents’ hands and smiled at my brother and me. I stood still as his face got closer, the kind of face that looked greasy even when it was clean. He wore knickers and knee socks: festive, ridiculous. It never occurred to me to step back, to move my cheek ever so slightly away. Did he give my brother a manly handshake? Couldn’t he have done that for me?

After he got married, he grew fatter and fatter. He named his baby Zach, he told us in class, because he knew students he didn’t like whose names started with every other letter. It must have been a joke, but I believed him and felt sorry for his boy, waiting for him way down at the end of the alphabet.
Teeth

Why did he always say a little too much? Every morning at the bus stop, Wally Donk told me I had lipstick on my teeth. He figured I would want to know. He had straight black hair and large earnest teeth. My own teeth were too small; I tried to lick the pink smears off with Wally for my mirror. At school, none of my friends nodded when I said I didn't like the lipstick's strange flat taste. Wally wasn't tall and always studied with me the night before a biology test. By then I had finished memorizing parts of frogs and cats, the muscle groups and cells. My gift was to listen and repeat. My power was knowledge by rote: he walked through my neighbors' yards to me in my father's study. After he arrived, the study walls turned suddenly brown; my grandfather's electric typewriter grew monstrous and large.

I had exactly one date with Wally, before which, he told me, he drove his mother's car around the block with the windows down to get rid of the smoky smell. We went to a movie and had, I thought, a nice time. But I couldn't pinpoint the answer, or even his real question, there in the dark.
Lake Anniversary

That is the joke—thinking something had been promised, as though by keeping our mouths shut we would get the candy or the largest piece of pie. The silk of longing is never worth what we are paid: delicious motion, delicious, unstoppable rage. I am new at marriage and winter though I've had my good share of unspeakable loss. It depends on the day, on the slant of light. A quick wash of color, a blink; I am fearful of birds and the quick flipping fish hauled from a frozen lake. Couldn't we have done better if we'd put our minds to it? It's hard to fathom where the empty hours go, yet they vanish into the slinking shy sunrise, to the dark that doesn't protect anything: not possums, not raccoons, not even the cows, composed and mooing in their enclosures. The silver coins give me a way of placing myself in your hands, but something is always lacking no matter how I save and spin. This wicked heart isn't itself today, can't forgive, can only add and subtract. Why, then, hasn't anyone said what she means, why can't we explain what to do, where to go, how to begin? Can we rise and take flight? Someone has tossed strings of glittering beads into the pine trees, out of reach. I'd like a letter, explaining what could have gone wrong, and then what actually did.
Poem for My Mother,

who said, I'll bet you can put that in a poem. Here are the guests throwing water balloons at my wedding and later, Clarence shooting his rifle at water snakes. Not at my wedding, but across the lake. Two houses down, Jack shoots raccoons from his living room couch; think what you will but it's quite a nice neighborhood. Here I am riding in the backseat with my mother's old ladies; Margaret Lubbers fell asleep on me and I thought she might have died. Most of all, here I am alone at a party for high school friends, one so fat now she might be mistaken for pregnant though she owns a lovely firelit lakeside home. Because they didn't hear the doorbell, I thought, I might not go in, I did my best. Still, I sit by the hearth and clap for the engaged couple and think, a house like this can't make you thin. Which is the truth. Which does little to make me feel better, I am ashamed of my heart and still haven't told about Diet Coke in crystal goblets and chatter and bone white hope and panic when the person who spoke to me most went across the room to wash dishes. Would they ever cut the cake? I can be rude on the phone but not face to face. How about the weather, how about the fishing up north? Look. The way I see it, if we get enough rain, we could just drift away.
Brave Faces

We cannot change our smooth smooth skin, largest organ, we cannot grow more. Though wouldn't it be more than a parlor trick? I say "we," though I was only in the right place at the right time, on display. We couldn't use the air conditioner, we'd said that, and then it appeared under the Christmas tree, wrapped. Frankly, any man who discusses angels in a tree opening and closing their wings just puzzles the guests. So they cannot open their mouths. Or will not, which is the same.

Well, listen: the mailbox fell open during the night and snow drifted in. An uncomfortable open mouth, something open that should have been closed. Even if I thought my problems were solved, I wouldn't let the cameras in like that. Her daughter waited three months for her birthday money. How much did they spend on furniture? So dark and imposing. So grown up. I can't hate money when it has such a pretty face.

It wasn't like that, she'll remember, reading romances and listening to opera. No life and death. No I can't live without you. He had a habit of holding his breath while kissing her. So there's that. But he is not likely to remember. Please, pull the shade. So many people discuss a decision but do not make it clear. I can see the two men in hats nodding mournfully. It's no. They would like it—the formula, the antique chair, the six babies—but cannot. So they put on brave faces. Who can look more sorrowful, us or them?
Babies

wiggle their fat fingers and blow spit bubbles at me in the grocery store. In Colorado, older ones barrel straight down slopes much too steep for me while their shiny helmets gleam. Clear eyes and snotty noses. Maybe I am looking? Surely, they have always been here: one burps formula on my sleeve and I find it hours later, dry but smelling of vomit. Vicki’s son—just days old—lies on my couch, balanced too near the edge? I can’t be sure what my cat will do. He bites.

I am not round as a pear. I am not the pear tree, either. I have thought of myself as a willow, fixed but moving gently, moving.

Ideal is a cliche. I won’t argue. I have no remarks about my childhood in the abstract, even though someone in a darkened auditorium waits: expectantly, pleasantly. So I have to say something. “At the time of conception,” I begin, “the soul makes a reservation,” and someone else lobs a tomato. Of course, the garden’s overripe, overrun, but I only planted the seeds a week ago. The vegetables are horrid: misshapen and huge, sickly green and dirty purple. There’s no way I can set up a little vegetable cart in the yard, white with a green-striped awning and a money box, run on the honor system.
Expectations

_Await_ is more elegant, more terrifying than _wait:_ the maiden awaits her fate. And if the jewel, if the admirer never arrives? If her dress grows tighter by the day? The day falls down around the ravaged wish, still kicking.

It’s natural to want to know what happens next: a phone call, a doctor’s appointment? Vitamins? She doesn’t know what will happen, but something could go wrong. The car could leave tire tracks on her white dress. The dog could beg and then roll over dead. For play. For the baby’s sake.

Telling is more fun than waiting. But she has no one to tell. Now she just waits. In the backyard, in the house. She shows the guest to the room she has prepared. She says, _I thought you might come._ But his misgivings, his complaints arrive in an envelope slipped under her door. He has money; look what he doesn’t want. The coins spill and clank on the dank basement floor. She never thought to look down there.
News

When they call to say they’re expecting a child, it’s no surprise. My father-in-law gloats; he’d already guessed during his visit, he’s wedged himself into their private matters. I’d rather not know, not yet: the last time, the news was rescinded a few weeks later, the red carpet rolled back up. Then I nervously wrote a note, the one Ann Landers says you should write, and stayed respectfully silent; we stared into the bonfire while the lost baby grew large around us.

Now the pressure’s off me. My room is cold and has a view: sunflowers and morning glories now, pines and snowdrifts in winter. In the garden, I pull weeds, I cut daisies for a bouquet. I drip with sweat and the sun burns my shoulders.

The first day of his visit, my father-in-law had watched his other son’s wife all evening, then called us to report she wasn’t drinking wine. And his son was, right in front of her. But his son has it easy: he won’t swell or puke, his body won’t grow frightening and large. The next day my father-in-law burst a water pipe and flooded the house while his son’s African frogs chirped happily, convinced the Amazon had come to them.
Crystal H.

Last fall, Crystal jumped on the trampoline in my neighbor's backyard. She said, between bounces, "I know your name by heart." This pleased me. She was seven. Then this spring, she walked by while I shoveled the driveway and said, "What's your name again?" She comes to my window when her mother locks her out and does not try to hide. One day her shoes are on the wrong feet; when I tell her, she crosses her legs and says, "Now they're right." The next day she brings along her dirty dog Snowball, who has a terrible growth between its legs, all the more terrible because Snowball is a girl. The dog won't eat the biscuits I offer but shyly buries them in my flowerbed with its nose. Crystal scratches her head and talks about the bugs that fly out of her hair. She wiggles a tooth—not a baby tooth, she tells me—with two dirty fingers. She gives me her phone number so I can call the next time I water the garden. I try to be nice to her now because she could be dangerous later. I am not her parent. I am not anyone's parent. She has to cross a highway to get to my house.
Joe

We take the boy with one leg out in our boat. That he has one leg is not his fault: no accident or lapse, just bad luck. He throws his crutches in the truck, hops, then grabs his friend's baseball cap. I've met him twice. Today's his grace: he balances on one ski around the lake, around the only other boat, a family fishing, who nearly drop their poles and stare: a one-legged boy, did you see that? A contraption held up with ropes and mirrors, wind and light. Seen from another angle, it's the same imperfect picture: he grins. He's playing. I don't ask, do you think about dying? How stupid of me, how gloom and doom. He watches for girls in bikinis. We're all dying. That's one way of thinking: the foghorn's deep groan can't rescue us, lost in our boats. But in the noon sun of Saturday, he's blonde and tan and lanky, the picture of sixteen, so far from how he began: a tiny package, rosy and sleepy, ten fingers, ten toes.
Details

After Easter dinner, my nephew asks, "What's a detail?" and my mother replies, "It's a part of the story." He accepts this answer. We are reading: rude Squirrel Nutkin has just been captured by Great Brown Owl when my father falls down by the dining room table. I try to read in just the same voice as before so my nephew won't be scared, even though I am. But I no longer hate my father for something he can't help, I hate the falling. I hate the outward appearance of weakness. My brother is holding my father's arm. I've never asked him what he thinks of dad's frailty. Squirrel Nutkin escapes without being eaten but doesn't change his impertinent ways: he still won't offer the owl minnows or berries or nuts. That's part of the story. Another part of a different story: my mother looked up and saw my father at the end of the dock with the dog. Mist began to gather over the lake and the railing wasn't yet installed. The rain had trampled the daffodils during this, the season of rebirth. Later, my brother untangled a set of car keys from the ivy at the waters' edge. My mother thanked him profusely; she gives him credit for such small things, such details: for finding the keys, for raising my father up.
Sweet

I know where my father's been when I find the paper from his broker among the candy wrappers: his worth on that particular day. Why should I get my feet wet sweeping puddles in the garage? I have tried to be good, tried to keep my paints clean, but parchment came out more like *vanilla dream* or *marshmallow*. My muffins weren't sweet or sturdy enough, then too sturdy and brown.

Are you scrubbing your teeth too hard?, my father asks. You should hold your toothbrush like a pen. And my pen? It should be obvious. When somebody asks you to do something, you should do it. But my father won't ask me to steady him, even on the stairs.

I know what I know: I am clean and clear and light as smoke. As for vegetables, I would become one: a root that grows sweeter in the cold. If I say I am sleepy, I have to drive the Jeep to the store anyway. I'd like to keep warm but that takes heat and my father says he won't pay for something he can't see. We have too much food in the freezer to live happily ever after: the milk in the soup disguises the pepper, so all he tastes is sweet, sweet cream.
It's only 9:30 and the world's tucked in; dusk falls slowly into my yard. Today the new vet called me by name and took me by surprise. The moon will rise or not, depending. The neighbor's orange and white cat runs out of our garage as the door comes down, slowly, always the same creaks and groans. Lists wait on the table in the hall: the dog must see the vet again because I can't clean her wound. When I press down hard as instructed, something in my stomach unlatches into twilight, twilight that ends my argument with the day: it's added up to nothing.

Already it's later than I intended, the purple vetch turned skeletal, clutching the chain link fence. The ceiling fan's *whup-whup-whup* covers the noise of the cars on the road: it must be motion I can't stand. Everything I did today will get undone tomorrow by the other person and the animals in the house, the pleased visitors who beam and track in sand. After the morning glories bloomed maroon they crumpled, then clung to the vine. Night silhouettes the trees and the neighbor's sullen children walk through our yard. We hear them. They see us. They do not speak.
A Punishment

An eyelid uncurls across the sky. Lose an eye, any eye. Not mine, which sees
the fountain placed in the lake by two men wearing waders; the geyser shoots
straight to the sky, then splits into ribbons; is it crying? Moved from one place
to another, one place and not the other. Choose, choose. Small irritation:
eyelash in the eye. Tickle, salty prick. The same eye as always, the field of
vision cut in half: the sweet bride yelled at her grandmother and then excused
it, saying, "Nerves." Seen by the eye of her intended, she was shamed to tears.
In the kitchen, the watery eye of the summoned onion made me cry. Its taste
invaded my mouth, though I only sliced it, I only breathed it in. Hold it under
cold water, he says, hold your breath. He has made up his mind, he will chop it
next time: he loves me after all.
Their Mercy

1. During the Day

I invite my dreams to come to me. At first, nothing. I hadn’t realized they were shy. Then the doorbell rings and I see puffs of dust rise under the dream’s invisible feet, which are running away.

They send me an Australian shepherd in the midst of a thunderstorm. She is scared but polite, and begs to come into the house. But she has a collar; she belongs elsewhere; I send her back into the rain. She sits and delicately raises one paw: she doesn’t want to disobey them, or me.

I buy a glass door and leave it open. I put a pool table in the living room and bring in many comfortable chairs. I kick the mice out of my dishes. The dreams send word that only the bad eggs are coming. They want to smoke in the house. Soon I’m falling off cliffs in my own backyard, in broad daylight, scribbling my last words on goldfish which float like petals into the sky.

My dreams deliver charred bacon, a deep pit. Velvet that crumbles and alligators loosed in the streets. Empty picture frames, the gold leaf chipped, festooned with damp tendrils of seaweed. A half-empty jar of salsa: they call it portable sunset.

So they know I’m at their mercy. Still, I ask for my first dead friend’s lost philosophy book. Plato. Hours later, I find only the title page in my dog’s mouth, partly shredded but still recognizable, her name scribbled on it, faintly, in pen.

2. Pleased with Extremes

We women sit in a half circle and watch another woman cook. Taco dip, double chocolate fruit pizza. Then we must purchase kitchen gadgets from her catalog. The plump hostess sits, expectant, with her calculator at the wobbly card table in front of the tv. My dreams hover, taking notes. They should know me better. They’ve never obeyed me: they sip pop from unopened bottles, they tweak the order slip out of my hands. When I touch Vicki’s shoulder, she briefly looks up and the baby she was helping sit up falls onto his back. My dreams do not cradle him. He wails. The other women discuss kidney stones and crazy Aunt June, who wears too much Taboo.
3. Their Good Fortune

A couch appears in the cow pasture at the dairy farm down the road. An earth-tone flowered couch, good condition. Lavish tapestry blooms stand out against the snow. It didn’t fall from a truck, it’s perfectly, carefully placed: right side up, inside the fence, and facing the frozen pond, which is east. Which in summer the cows clamber into up to their knees and simply stand, staring moodily at the cars. Someone has turned the whole outdoors (bleak and cold and bare) into something to watch.

Cows lumber and gallop, they touch the fence with their noses when we jog past, as the doctor ordered. In the moonlight, they rustle through the stubble, large and solid. They sniff the couch but are not interested. The couch will grow soggy and mossy. It will move again. Dawn will break over it, frosted with a thin skim of snow.

4. Private

My dreams say keep the show private. They do not like to be discussed. They drip into my head through my ear. Not like poison. But, yes, like Shakespeare: four lovers, feasting, have eyes only for the person sitting to their right. They cannot see the soft glances and pretty words are not for them. The jester rings the bell in the tower but forgets to release the rope. His skinny green-stockinged legs knock over the wine. Resolution? A drunk man walks to his house on the bay. It is morning. He pulls up the wooden blinds. The dawn is not brilliant, not yellow or white. Impossible. What has he orchestrated? Are the lovers still unsatisfied? They toss me scraps: a silver goblet, an enchanted ring, a mumbled phrase about—I think—betrayal and revenge. They wink.
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