Rain Town

Melanie Crow
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RAIN TOWN

by

Melanie Crow

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

Western Michigan University
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My project, a collection of poetry, examines both loss and transformation. Personal loss informs the poems, but the work also addresses how the speaker is accorded insight into the world because of loss and is transformed. The work takes into account mythology, science, and the act of writing in order to understand what it means to live in mutability. Many of the poems demonstrate an acute awareness of the body. Robert Lowell and Jorie Graham are both writers who have informed my poems in this way; both explore a dual consciousness of loss and renewal and both represent moments of actively living and perceiving the physical world. Many of the poems also use the symbol of the city to represent both places of destruction and renewal. A central concern of my poetry is this kind of dual consciousness of living fully in the world, but being aware—fully aware—of its mutability.
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Melanie Crow
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INTRODUCTION

In trying to think about ways to open this collection, I keep returning to moments with my brother and father. I go back to my brother, so conscious of his body, getting ready to run some trails in the mountains. He is telling me the right way to breathe, how to get the most out of the lungs and to go farther. He is telling me this and then running off until he is just a small point in the distance and then gone. I could never keep up. And then I am out on the prairie. I've come to watch a star shower with some friends; it is probably 3 or 4 in the morning. My Dad has mentioned he might come out, but I think he probably won't. The stars begin to fall, bursting against the sky and fading out, and there is my dad, who's come 20 miles out of town. There's a biting cold wind, and my friends and I and my dad all huddle together under two very small blankets and make jokes and watch the white streaks burn across the sky, past Orion and all the other constellations in their path. And then there are all the moments when I've had my heart broken or been crushed in some way or another, and my father's standard response: "Intellectual pursuits are the most gratifying." I relate these moments because they are the first that come to mind when thinking about ways to frame the collection. I don't have to go far to think about why they come to mind, they are joyful moments, but they are also moments that seem to me to be some central concerns in the collection: the workings
of the body, the physical world, and wonder/questioning of the world-beyond-the body.

In the Proteus chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus goes to the beach and closes his eyes in order to “hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shell.” He does so in order to understand Aristotle’s “ineluctable modality of the audible.” Joyce’s artist tests out the world around him, but he is consumed by the world of representation. Early on in *Ulysses*, Dedalus is immersed in the world of forms. His later acceptance of the physical, sensuous world transforms him. It is this kind of joining to the physical world that interests me; one of the largest concerns in my collection is the idea of transformation and negotiating the space between the body and the world of forms/ideas.

Writers who explore the complexities and realities of the body have always appealed to me. I became more invested in representations of the body after my brother died. Sharon Olds was a writer whose words on her dying father resonated with me: “If anyone had ever told me / I would sit by him and he’d pull up his nightie / and I’d look at his naked body, at the thick / bud of his glans, / his penis in all that / sparse hair, look at him / in affection and uneasy wonder / I would not have believed it.” And with Olds, I thought, well, here’s a writer who is telling the truth. I was also ready to read poetry that told stories of physicality. I wanted to read and in some way know the realities of the body and the realities of the natural world. It really seemed to me that my whole perception of reality had changed. My
body felt different, heavy, more pulled to the earth, even the air was weighted. But I also remember being pulled into the world more. I have flashes of memory from this time: sitting under a bridge, watching cotton tree seeds float down in afternoon light, seeing the tops of trees catch wind, riding my bike into hard northern wind far outside of town, feeling my leg muscles burn, sitting by the Red River and feeling the water get into me. I remember being both joyful and pained in these moments and in my body. I was open.

But I was also still feeling loss. Perhaps this was my pull towards the modernists. Yeats, Eliot, and Auden all have helped frame my experience of loss in representing forms as fragmentation. Yeats' multiple personas—the different "voices" he embodied in his poems—seemed a very deliberate attempt to put some order into the world, to see universal forms in the face of loss. When Yeats cried out for his desire to "live alone in the bee-loud glade," to return to some kind of order, I understood his conflation of the natural world, his imagination, and his own country (real and imagined).

Eliot's Wasteland addresses loss on so many levels—cultural, historical, and personal. Yet the image of the King sitting on a darkened shore always struck me as Eliot himself—left alone with all of the comprehension of the chaos behind him and nothing to bring him together: "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?" It's the moment for me in the poem where Eliot comes through the most clearly, that seems the most wounded
but open and honest, where he is bringing all of his “fragments” together in what
seems like a last breath, a plea for some kind of peace.

Auden’s early love poems showed me how loss and longing could live in
poetry and his later poems, so focused on the city and all of its errors and beauty,
were an impetus to move beyond the personal; his words were humbling: “About
suffering they were never wrong, the old Masters: how well they understood / its
human position; how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a
window or just walking dully along.” I love, too, how Auden uses the symbol of the
city to suggest the responsibilities beyond the self:

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,

Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,

Round corners coming suddenly on water,

Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,

We honour founders of these starving cities

Whose honour is the image of our sorrow. (“Paysage Moralise”).

It’s this kind of widening beyond the personal that still feels personal that appeals to
me. So many of Auden’s poems seem communal. And his myth poems speak to the
very core of human suffering but also suggest different kinds of knowledge that can
be gained through suffering. The way these writers attempted to bring meaning to
myth, to have the “old” symbols speak for their own unspeakable losses made sense
to me. Even though the modernists called for their own, often exclusionary,
aesthetic, it always seemed to me that the poems were heartbreakingly personal. And so much of Eliot's "tradition" does seem just that: personal, what he's taken in, what is valuable to the "artist."

I loved the romantic or modern idea of glorying in all of one's own perceptions, feelings, and symbols. Yet I wanted to read writers who went further and explored the body in both public and private terms. Yeats and Eliot and even Auden have a strange kind of distance from their own physicality, and I wanted to read writing that connected to bodily presence and represented transformations. Carolyn Kizer, in "Semele Recycled" and Maurice Manning's "Allegory" both enact these kinds of transformations. In both poems, the body is broken down into fragments. Caroline Kizer opens with a declaration of loss as impetus for change: "After you left me forever, / I was broken into pieces. / And all the pieces flung into the river." In Maurice Manning's "Allegory," the transformation happens immediately, and works on the level of the unconscious: "Late one night when the first hint of spring was singing through the air, / Booth had a strange dream, in which he turned himself into a tree..." Manning's poem works, as the title suggests, as an allegory in which the narrator/hero's body is transfigured into various objects and uses. Kizer's poem is a rendering of a Greek myth in which a woman's body is fragmented by the loss of her "other." Both suggest a fragmentation of the psyche, a disintegration of self, and an ensuing transformation.
Kizer’s language is immediate and visceral. In her poem, a “grizzled old man” finds the narrator’s, or Semele’s, torso, and uses it as a canoe, and her arms for paddles:

When catfish nibbled my fingers, he scooped them up
And blessed his re-usable bait.
Clumsy but serviceable, that canoe!
The trail of blood that was its wake
Attracted the carp and eels, and the river turtle,
Easily landed, dazed by my tasty red.

In Manning’s poem, there is a distance from the physical realities of the body. Kizer’s poem is more invested in the material world. Both poems, however, represent transformations of the body. In Manning’s poem, the body floats away: “She raised a sail on his bony mast and said, Oh, you, and your cantankerous visions / of peace, then patted his gunwales lovingly, and they sailed for another land.” There is a change here, but it is more a shift of the speaker’s consciousness than his body; the poem represents the speaker’s desire for meaning, peace, and contentment. Kizer’s poem also works on the metaphysical level; she creates an archetype for loss.

This type of recreation of myth is what most interests me about Kizer’s poem. In her poem, the body becomes a text, one that can be used and re-used and is given to the reader to define. It becomes public. In the poem “Before III” from my
collection, Eve steps out on her own from the garden and transforms herself. She asks, what would happen if I stepped out of my role? What would happen if I created my own world with its own burdens? I have been influenced, in other words, by writers who have re-worked myths.

Jorie Graham is another writer who extends the traditional readings and ideas of myth. Her work re-orders myth—she represents the fall, for instance, as a state of imperfection—but asks what is possible in that moment. And I was also drawn to how Graham is able to represent a dual perception of loss and renewal. Her “Self-Portrait” poems inhabit both of these spaces. There’s that wonderful moment at the end of “Self Portrait as Demeter and Persephone” where the world seems to open up as she describes the trees:

14

that would bend more deeply into it inventing (if they could)

15

another body, exploded, all leafiness, unimaginable

16

by which to be forgiven by which to suffer completely this wind

Robert Lowell does the same work in his later poems. I love this moment in Lowell’s poem “Harvard”:
I wake under the early rising sun,

Sex indelible flowers on the air—

Shouldn’t I ask to hold to you forever,

Body of a dolphin, breast of a cloud?

You rival the renewal of the day,

Clearing the puddles with your green sack of books.

His “Shouldn’t I as to hold to you forever” suggests the momentary hold we all have, yet there is an attendant appreciation of the physical, as the other becomes a renewing force.

Part of the shift for Lowell seemed to be a movement into the present-ness of his life. Lowell’s earlier poems are grounded in cultural and familial instances of the “past.” Even in the poems that suggest a present voice, there are movements back, like in the poem “Concord”: “Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search / Of a tradition.” The speaker looks out over landscapes but they are filled with past lives. Lowell’s early poems are weighted and the past that Lowell inhabits is deep and resonant. And in the poem “The Mills of the Kavanuaghs” the protagonist, Anne Kavanaugh, embodies the conflict that Lowell seems to be having in his work—the movement from a sense of the “past” into his later work, particularly For Lizzie and Harriet, which is filled with references to the body-in-the-moment. Of this collection, Lowell said in an interview with Ian Hamilton: “I wished to describe the immediate instant...Things I felt or saw, or read were drift in the whirlpool...”
Many of the poems enact the struggle between mutability and the body-in-the-moment:

  Yet tonight means something, something we
  Must let go willingly, and smash:
  All flesh is grass, and like the flower of the grass—
  No! lips, breast, eyes, hands, lips, hair—("Boston" 614)

The speaker shuts down his own ruminations on decay by realizing the presence of the body. In the same collection, there are moments of complete stillness of time:

  "...and we two lying here, / one cell, / still over us our breath" ("Same Picture" 623).

Having said all of this about the body and about being present in the world, I am also fascinated with the world of "forms." Many of the poems in the collection explore the possibilities and problems with science, with theory, antithesis, and hypothesis. My poems look for answers, certainly, and are grounded in a kind of narrative, but I hope that they also live in possibility. My hope is that they demonstrate the world as in-process, not static, and not absolute. I try to enter into my poems in the spirit of discovery, seeing what I can find within language and within poetry. The language of science—suppositions, observations, deductions—all of these words don't connote absolutes but reasoned conjectures. What I admire about this kind of thinking is what seems to be the continual renewal of old ideas, of one's own suppositions about the world. We're not static, we evolve, we transform.
This is part of what draws me back to both Lowell’s and Graham’s work again and again. The shifts in Lowell’s works at times seem Emersonian—the contradictory or paradoxical turns in lines such as: “dying in our undergrowth, dense beyond reward” (“Through the Night” 610). And from the poem “My Heavenly Shiner”:

The fish, the shining fish, they go in circles,
not one of them will make it to the Pole—
this isn’t the point though, this is not the point;
think of it going on without a life—
in you, God knows, I’ve had the earthly life—
we were kind of religious, we thought in images.

The turn in the third line, the “this isn’t the point,” where the speaker interrupts his own lingering in the images of “the shining fish” becomes even more relevant with the heartbreaking last two lines, where the “without a life” parallels the “earthly life, the religious life, and the writerly life, the “thinking in images.”

Graham continually turns back on her work within her poems, collections and from book to book. In “Self Portrait as Demeter and Persephone” there is this moment: “It was the given it was finally given // or is it or is it . . . It was then she remembered //slit hum mob wing of // and what did you do? For a long time I...”

There is a dialogic relationship in the speaker or narrator and between the poet and the reader here. I’d like to think that the ordering of some of the lines in individual
poems and from poem to poem in my collection exhibit the same kinds of dialogic progression.

When I was very young there was a very clear link for me between creativity and what was "up there"—I would read and imagine what could be. My brother was also a science fiction fanatic, and we often shared fantastic stories about space travel and the future. So this informs the work in a very large way. Star Wars, Blade Runner, Philip K. Dick novels and other science fiction texts all have influenced my writing. The childhood notions of space are mostly gone, but I still hold to some ideas of possibilities: chaos theory, unpredictability, the questions of stars and distance and relativity all seem still connected to my belief in possibility: the discoveries that still happen in science seem to extend hope that there are still new paths to uncover. And this parallels all the possibilities still "out there" in language. It is the continual "what ifs" of science that attract me.

Chaos theory has informed at least part of the work. Scientists who study this theory claim that there are patterns in what appear to be disordered elements. They use what they call fractal images as one example. Computer generated images of these fractals appear at first to be random—but going further and further into the image, one sees that the patterns are not random but actually repeat similar patterns infinitely. Chaos theory proponents have noticed this kind of patterning in blood vessels branching out further and further, the branches of a tree, the internal structure of the lungs, and graphs of stock market data. What appeals to me here is

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the ordering within chaos, and finding that patterns are infinite within all these
disparate elements in the world. This seems to be one kind of answer to the idea of
mutability.

And there are some many other "what ifs" that are appealing and come into
the collection: "dark energy" that makes the universe expand and all of its
connections to gravity and the beginnings of the universe; the discovery fairly
recently of molecules so small that they can traverse solid walls. All of these
instances of science are suggestions of what is possible in the world. When I was
young, I remember running across a bottle in my father's desk labeled "neutrinos."
Now, of course, I realize that the bottle was a kind of joke—probably a gag gift from
one of my Father's friends. But back then, I the bootle made me realize there were
things in the world that I knew nothing about, things that surrounded me that I
knew nothing about. I still have this kind of fascination with the "unseen."

I learned from my mother, too, about the "unseen" world. She taught me
early on that the world can be read—how even the smallest things, particularly
things in the natural world, can have deeper weight. After my brother died, this
idea took on more significance. You internalize the world more, you notice more,
and you value the act of noticing more.

In the most basic way, I'm drawn to the figure of the scientist--the idea or
ideal of the scientist at work. I imagine someone who is solitary or at least isolated
within their own work, taken with ideas, trying to figure out part of the world. I
suppose I see this as part of the job of the writer, or similar to what a writer does—someone who is trying to find new avenues for language and thought, and someone who continually questions and changes.
Singularities

After the man who was almost blind discovered
the new collapsing star, after the high-fived victory dance by
his other near-sighted, lab-coated friends, after the troops
were still being killed, still minding the hostilities,
a body walked out into different air, joints aching
from possibility of rain. Bones rubbed each other
the wrong way, tendons finding new ways to agitate.

The body breaking down. The local dogs considered
the air of it, made it jump from its skin, from their
bark-attacks of whooo are youuuu, deep-throated mourning howls.

It must have seemed different, having walked these roads before.
That man—who discovers all the collapsing stars—can't see
past his own hand, but looks into a telescopied eye and sees things clearly
giving way, white gases exploding millions of miles away,
a glimmer on a black and white horizon. A soldier
on the other side of the world picks up his rifle and
discovers he misses his mother. Coming home, the body picks up
a blight of coincidences, some forms familiar in the air:
trees shivering in their oranges, their reds,
dogs settling in, backing off, rested, the body
picking itself up and running—the knuckle-boned click
of each parading step, before the rain comes
barreling down on skin, nerve, cells that bloom
into the new world.
Answer

The kind of questions we ask
are as many as the kinds that we answer.

Because you can plainly see and feel
the pull, the upending earth, the world's
obvious pains, the pull of it on you:
cloud-swell, dove-call, verse, line, word.

How many forms do we need?

S perceives O if and only if:
(i) S has the capacity requisite for receiving O's sensible form;
(ii) O acts upon that capacity by enforming it; and, as a result,
(iii) S's relevant capacity becomes isomorphic with that form.

Things that you enform:
the world covered with water,
clouds letting in light,
not blocking it out,
your movements
out into fields,

*first cause,*

stone that is not in your soul.
Before

Give up your ruins of bone,
we have new bodies

drawn onto walls.
Search

The winter we looked for the body in the snow, the sky opened up swirls of white, chasms of white. I lived alone, listened to the wind tear at the ragged edges of the house, the house that shook when trains would pass by. I dreamt of flatlands covered with water. Waving to passengers in boats, and they would float by, smiling. Old cities submerged. Wanting bread and a blanket. And a boat. The breadmaker's on the island, my mother shouted. Then passed by, smiling. My brother gone eight years then. The storm arrived, descended on the town, a blanket of hard white. My friend bought cheap beer, struggled over in sheets of zero-below snow to my shaky house. We volunteered to search. They gave us rods to poke the snow. All winter, giving up the dream of dreaming something better. It was enough to listen to the wind, to feel it. We pushed our sticks in the snow wanting not wanting something solid.
In Northern Light

The horizon is certain. A man drives up, kicking white flurries with his truck. He gets out, stumbling a little. *Had some trouble back in town*, he says. *The field is mine, and that house*, he says, pointing and shaking. He asks where you are going. You say just here to watch the sun go down. His teeth are crumbling and brown. You imagine a table and chair, some whiskey, a book, a warm room. The sky opens up new colors. Your breath releases white into the air. He talks of raising peacocks and asks where you are from. You say you are from town, and he smiles, crookedly, looks at you for a moment too long, then stumbles to his truck and drives away, light blinding a clear view of his truck. Starlings arrange themselves on wires, stare at you awhile. Wind moves through snow, picking it up in swirls beneath you, beside you. Somewhere, feathers fan out, brilliant against the hard white ground. Black birds rise up from the belly of the field.
Mouth

You've got another thing comin', the heavy-metal-headed fondling Jon Weedling kisses me deep and long and too wet. The basement dark with couches and small white lights strung up and Judas Priest screaming we've had our share of sorrow something opening up in me a black light a dense spot a part that feels like teeth in my chest that part that won't go away not for years not after he got on his motorcycle running away from the police and how his body tumbled out into the roughest patch of his life the end outside of town the way down deep of ditch grass.
Heart (Letters to C.)

December
In this painting a winding blue path rises out of the pale countryside. The painter's formless bodies, land-swells, shapeless roads say *move, go*. Let's take the Trans-Siberian, C; move through the rough edges of this world—Tayshet, Beijing, Vladivostok. At night we can go out on the last carriage, lean into the strong cold wind. I worry for you.

January
The painter paints his own eyes as dark, endless. His mouth about to speak. In the self-portrait, he is months away from dying. You wrote of feeling *just off, dizzy, not quite solid*, as you rode through the country south, to Albuquerque. People flashed in and out of your ride. Strangers offered you food, drink, smokes—and I listened, intently, and knew what they had seen in you—a certain look, eyes that linger perhaps just seconds too long, a particular lean of the body that tells of interest, hunger, need.

February
A dream: you and I, on the edge of a cold, dark prairie, lights burned in the sky, explosions echoing in the distance, and then the final horrendous orange glow. When I woke, I felt a warm terror, it was this real, C., and I told you of it, and you laughed, talked of the ends of all things. Art Bell and his dire predictions. Our late-night listening to stories of the apocalypse, drinking, smoking. Our drives to see the farmers pulling their slow fuming tractors, the old men in dark country bars, the yellowed grain bins spotting the landscape. Your one-room dank apartment, your bottles, your pipes.
April
A dark shadow rises up from the body, in this painting, as a girl lies sick, dying, her mother looming over her, her face in half-light. The painter's mother preaches to the painter, curses, calls to Jesus, his dying siblings. I imagine you struggling inside your own mother's crazy womb, sharp noises echoing from the other side. I see you in the hospital, all wired. Pale. Heart-sick. You died there, for seconds, on the table. They pulled you back. Electricity ran to your arteries, sending messages to your body. Oh god to begin to start again.
Tongue

The bartender jokes with the people who come and go in the lounge car. I cannot sleep, and there is this voice, over the intercom, promising “the best Bloody Mary in the world.”

He tells me he’s worked for the railroad for twenty-five years. Later, he asks about my family—any brothers or sisters. I tell him I have four sisters and had a brother. He stays nearby, closer than he has to, singing and humming.

An ache rises from the towns we pass. The whole night in the lounge, stronger and stronger drinks, burning spicy tomatoes on my tongue. The humming blends more evenly with the swell-and-grind of the wheels.

The dark outlines of the last town fade out, and I think about how my brother was always running off, mostly when we were hiking. Soon he’d be just a small point in the distance.

He starts to talk about the daughter he lost to “the drugs.” His voice cracks a little. The train should careen to a halt or break wide open, spilling passengers over the rails. “She was beautiful,” he says, and the train keeps on, persistent. I tell him I’m sorry and he nods, “I’m sorry too.”

Everything stops here, on this train spinning through towns, through darkness.
Bones

How good it was and old. The last departing ship. The half-faces. They wanted me to love them. Soldiers ripped open their chests, showed me their insides. Notes of herky-jerky music drifted over the water. Was there a blind man? Playing the accordion? The soldiers talked of their cities, their lands. But their blood streamed into the air. It was useless. I loved them. I wanted off. The ship slowed, its masts billowing slower. I tasted salt and soil. They waved goodbye. I kissed their blood, their shambles, their bones.
Lungs (In Your City)

Get up in near darkness, feel the weight of water, pale ribbons floating down. We gather up branches, follow no direction. In what alley in what city will I find you? You walk with an old dog, you hold your hand up, test the air, swim out in a cold sea. I saw you small against a mountain, saw you running into a cave. You were small in your bed, your lungs watery, crouched in your office of doubt: letters, important notes to no one. You gave me old coins with the faces rubbed off, said they were keys. You saw things; I learned about possibilities. You lay in front of the TV watching men hurtle through space, breathing in nitrous to get your body away from your body, to travel down a lighted tunnel. I followed you and came out into a dusk-city where we were still learning how to breathe and they were showing a movie of your life: you swimming down rapids, you wandering streets again and again, you taking in grey air, you muttering answers to your dark committee.
Bone Dark

On the billboard west of town, that actor
wants us all to sing with him
about hair

and re-growth.

At home, we try
to create the connection
between dark matter

and infinity.

The air tingles, the head tingles, charges.
Currents resurrected.

In Africa, elephants take on the new call
of truck, a rumble born into dry air.

When I was five when I was five
I reached into other worlds
in dirt,
wanted to melt into solid earth.

Oh god
[something of us]
goes on.
First Crossing

Sadness hanging, a thick weight
brought us toward home,
floating in and out of sleep,
from North to South islands
where one landscape breathes
pacific wind into another.

How heavy
this new wind, losing you.

Back then, you wanted to know how far out
the horizon was,
at what point the water and sky met.
I watched seagulls take in air,
you saw waves take the shape of men.
Lights, Positions

Munch himself was the most important subject of his photographs. In his self-portraits he sometimes appears as a transparent shadow, an effect caused by moving from his pose to cover the lens of the camera. This feature is typical of a series of self-portraits taken by Munch in 1908-1909, which he called "photographs of fate"... The artist had thus discovered a way to merge into his surroundings.

Blast of cold air, one good
breath in and then you're gone.

The angry letters home:
the frantic, manic writing.

The bay-lights here in Oslo burn
into a six-month darkness.

We look out on the fjord,
reckless with the state

of foreign-ness. We don't know
anyone, so we talk of things of home—

Iggy, his bladed histrionics—
the cutting in and letting go,

the grand stance of him,
but how he gave a steady beat,

a burning, moving show.
And nowadays, Lust for Life swells

out from the TV—as gleeeful driver
pulls away from too-green landscape.

This leads, somehow, to Munch's
shadows, his Moonlight, Maneskin—
a woman, white-faced, with
dark shadows growing from

her back. How the artist feared
the peace of a comfortable existence,

so lived with only table, chair, and bed,
And things to paint with.

Later, the cries of drunk Norwegians
wash into our room, railing against

the city police, and I wonder
about anger and positions,

visible light and the moving under-light,
after you were gone:

night, battering rain,
footsteps in black soil,

your last images, how you sent home
the last of your art,

your final stance a photo:
Brains on Plate.
Before II

Go out into the field
Tell your lives to the stone
Embodiment

The final flight out:

winged patient horses
their backs sturdy for you

the bodied water
swelling onto land

stray bones on a lighted path

wave on wave of particles
matter of deepest star

I'm sure I'm sure there are
other things growing out there

he said

building up resistance to the world
the green of it all
Dream of the End of the World, Reprise

stars and bombs falling the world moves
  on its axis some news coming
digging at ground preparing
  you wake when
first buds open dirt entering air
  Spring works and
reworks clouds wind streets
  the occasional star buries itself
in atmosphere everything begins
  to fall you run through the streets
shovel in hand get to some safe place again
  your bed or your bomb shelter

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Directions To Your City

Some long-forgotten map:
past the river (past the white
swells, too far out, all those
pale blooming bodies), past rain-town--
the field wet with august beginning--
dig inland past
birds with their day-ending song past
the question of nature eating and eating
(and I am somewhere eating and eating
where you are not)
until it’s done.
Seeds swell up (you are in here somewhere);
cicada-push,
low thrum in the throat
I get lost in
some crooked body trilling
let’s sit in it awhile,
let it green us till we’re ready.
Enigmas

Lost at times, remember when we'd stray too far from home?
   Rain falls, cuts, breaks through,
a haze, all day foggy, and last night I dreamt of you
   now gone, the fog a body around my window
and something familiar hanging in the air there,
   old childhood smells—rotting walnuts
in that forbidden alley we used to run through—
   There are things that pull me back.
Slow-cooked meals, garlic and tomatoes,
   fresh from my garden. All those open living things,
red and burning, and when I bring
   the sauce to my lips, sometimes I want to cry,
and I think escape like yours is crime.
   But you were gone long before your body left,
exploring some dark part of space.

I read the myths, those old stories of exile,
   Orestes, who did the ultimate evil—he was let go—
to wander, not to die, but try the roads alone,
   I see him almost as clearly as I see you:
Drifting on some dark trail, wanting home.

The rain has entered every pore, opened some new channel
   You knew your physics—you can only get out what you put in—
and yet I think of miracles, mysteries, changes, those leaps
   of science we used to read about—late nights, huddled under covers,
shining light on words about the errant atom, the unknown darknesses in space,
   and those lakes, the lakes that had no end.
But today there is this fog,
    and why is there nothing
to bring us through? You say, in dreams,
    look, look, the light comes in
from everywhere. I try to see it,
    in the dusk-light that drapes
on buildings, and I can see the buildings glow and shine
    like a new city—shine as if entirely changed,
a lighter shade, a new construction.
Equinox

Halfway across the world, a few men enclosed in their labs, stretching matter and time, discover the smallest particles of light, so small they cross impossible boundaries—slide through walls, into the walls and out the other side.

Yesterday, after reading this news, I wanted to tell someone, it seemed important, vital, but instead I watched the dog, anxious on the porch.

He hears everything.

Planes drifted through the sky, leaving their lonely white paths,

the day woozy with sun and hints of dirt creeping back up into air.

Today, I don't want the world to be something else. I want to see everything plainly

and true I will not be swept up in doubt, in traces of cold, I will not love anything hidden.
Sighting

There are no words no real language
in dreams, someone says,
but I remember getting directions
to this place and that, remember
run, stop, go back.

Words like wings hovering.

I try to remember speaking

but this comes back to me:
we are lost in the woods
close enough to smell
salty water, the ocean’s
blue body, my mother’s skin
sweating lavender, onions, and fish,

a dark thing
breathing hot
on our trail.

And this:
on our honeymoon
in the middle of
prairie-land a place
that could swallow you up
a light-colored ship—
no wings—
disappeared into
a black pin-point
hole-in-the-sky.

On our street the lamplights
hum loudly, turn on
when they want
dark blue not enough to see
her face

another color now:
my mother, neck-deep in
some grey sadness she cannot name.

I have to bury my face
way down deep into
your skin
tell my self
to get up go out
turn off that movie
where the man travels
eons through space through
his life long tunnels of light
where things go right
and go right
into the world
to see things new again.

I wake up some mornings
thinking we are crazy

to see the world
as it is:
bare and present
or a dark path
littered with words
we cannot quite make out.
Stomach

I would stir; you would talk of using all of the body, the neck, the heart, the tongue of the lamb. You told us about the sheep brains and scrambled eggs you used to feed us when we were young, before we knew what the body was, before we knew. Cleaning the bones for all they were worth, cooking the marrow out. Wanting things just right while we ran in and out of your kitchen, needy. There were times I wanted to tell you everything. There are rewards, you would promise, in the afterlife. You can sit on the right throne of the father. You didn’t want a throne, you said, but deep-giving love. You saw it in Him. You wanted kindness. We ran around your kitchen, gave you disaster and hell. But so many times I thanked the Lord for everything. The sky, American cheese, your sauces, my cat, my plastic sunflower sandals, everything we could afford. Because what if He noticed ingratitude? Then it was over—you’d be worse than dead meat. You would fry, in the flames, eternally gnash your teeth. That always got me, the gnashing of teeth. I think now of your dark heavy sauces, coming home to them, after nights of wavering, uneven streets, eating alone in a dark kitchen, biting into flesh, feeling myself solid, on earth again.
Stew

You cook meat all day long,
blood and flesh changing into some other
life. It's a grey day, clouds descending,
air thick with rain, weight on your skin,
can smell the rusty iron of that house in Christchurch:
your mother, roasting meat, eating lamb's tongue.
sucking marrow from bones, how she used everything—
gristle, drippings, grease and blood—
sopping it up with bread, scraping spoon to metal tray,
recovering everything. You stir and the dark-steam rises,
and you remember your fever breaking after days of steam
and hot-water bottle treatments and you are seven and she is
putting her thick hand to your head, cooing, there's a sunset...
sailing over the sea...it's a long way--bringing up her
father's old songs of leaving and desire.
Gatherings

Into the dark, into the
fire we center on for warmth—
pine and dogwood burning,
a warm easy slipping into day’s end,
we talk of my father cutting men open,
then putting them together—or trying—
so many bodies in that country,
so many young bodies.
Chests blown open, men
trapped in their own skin.
I want to know
the bare meat of it,
because his stories—
all of those bodies—
have moved in,
told stories of their own,
lodged deep,
one image staying:
a boy lying prone
his ribs splayed out
waiting to be pulled
together again.
Slough

They talked of her in hushed rooms,
drinking tea and closing the blinds
when the dusk light moved in and
changed the old Victorian chairs
the old Victorian tables.

She leaves me
silver coins in a windowsill
to bring good luck,
letters written in Latin,
rune-stones, knuckle-bones,
her strong full voice carrying down
the muggy street.

She danced under full moons
in the garden out back.

I wish I could have seen her
singing and swaying.
In those rooms,
in those dark and dusty rooms,
how did she find her new skin?
Cain

_Clean_, her body said.
   hands pressing on her ribs
pressing on her heart.
   A wild dancing of cells.

He drank her in, eyes wide,
   her breasts aching, bruised.
She looked up, saw a red blur
   clawing at the sky,
caved in, let go of him, little by little

over the years. Who could blame
   them for anything: lost,
wandering, knowing there
   was something different,
letting go of earth and all.
Before (III)

Let's say I left the garden, our garden, without you. Left you behind with your labor, your animals. What would it be to step out? What would it be to see myself reflected in the sky, bare my arms to the wind, the same wind I hear call every night? To know I was not held by you or anything else? To sleep in silence? This is my face which I saw one day in the water, found myself to be flesh, beautiful. It was strange, I imagined myself to have wings. So what if I leave you now, brace my body against that wind, leave to make a mirror out of sand? The stars are calling, their voices high and thin as air, the moon heavy on my back.
Lazarus

His hands bring me back here.
This dirt.
The dirt we are
all
failing
this fragile skin.
She Stays Away from Mirrors for a Month

Things start to happen. She imagines herself to be brown and gold.

Ash-tipped fingers,
long black roots for legs,

green shaky arms that reach to the sky. Birds bury their wings in her hair, protected from the wind.

On her first reflection, she feels too fleshy,
barely real at all, blood and white bone
covered by paper skin.
Her hair is yellow straw.

Her arms become long dead monkey arms that should be dragging the ground. Her fingers can barely grasp anything.
Exile (After Joyce)

Bodies keep you going—other ones,
even when the homes are collapsing, decaying.
And you visit them, the houses of the dead,
stumbling through passageways
calling for your love, your country.

A house appears, open to sun,
cup, skin, hand, paper,
light entering a room,
and you blossoming into
a kind of nothing:
lost in the lines of forgetting, leaving,
but some other instinct pointed you home,
V-waves of disappearance and
re-emergence in your sand salt air,
clouds, sky, body, meat and bone:

your footstep sinking ever in.
State of the Union

I.
Walked under bare trees,
Thought about:
Washed-out snow, grey sky, and that
Old sure man shaking his head,
His own dark stories swirling around:
Women and children carried away
In a cloudy river, somewhere.
The trees might look for him
Yes, like skeletons, in half-light,
And wind breathes through the tops of
everything. A kind of light
Touches the uncertainties.

II.
The sky clears,
Washed clean, blue and crystalline.
Boys in dark coats walk home,
Punching each other.
Nothing out of order,
Or grave. But this one blue jay
Arrives at the window—
Looking in—beady-eyed—
To the house.
But then, he took off and came flying back
Again, hit the window with a thud.
The world kept moving on.
I checked outside and the bird
Was gone. All day I thought of choices
Made—barriers, burying lives
In decisions.
Late Night at the Ramada Casino

Two hours till close but still
they come, hungry for money or something
like love. The hours of talking and wanting.
The sun is nowhere but we are all exposed,
all desiring. Me, I want more tips and someone
who will come to the table like light
and carry us all away, past the chips, the bar,
past the rounded table and out, into the open night.
Legacy

There was a trembling, a shaking of earth,
a fear layered deep across countrysides
as the wild men, our ancestors
wandered the Scots-land
looking for their enemies, to destroy
and pickle in jars, in their dark caves.

Our great-aunts sit in their backyard,
hands curled on their round bellied,
soft-voiced, telling us the important stories
telling us of destruction.

Listen, they say, pleased in their warm summer gardens—
the azaleas blooming like mad things—
so fine and graceful in their skin.
Night Class

I walk onto campus after class,
a small class, four women who amaze me
in so many ways. I leave and step
into the cold clear night, the moon is half-full
and I stop to look at it awhile.
A woman’s voice, close by, comes up at once
and she is singing a song unfamiliar to me
but the voice, the voice is sweet and strong
and I get an ache in my chest or somewhere underneath,
and it is just too much—
the sky, the cleanness of song, the cold reaching in—
she sees me and stops suddenly
and I want to go to her
and say no, don’t stop singing,
don’t, please, ever stop singing.
Why I’d like to Go Back

Because I yawn
and, God, it feels good to yawn
and I watch clouds
and they look like travelers
this one line of clouds
except they are moving north
and my pull is south.
I think about yawning—
the urge and the fulfillment—
and how these skies are
wonderful and terrible
wonderful and terrible
sitting on this porch
watching this long slow line
of blue and grey escaping.
Giving Blood

At church, the pastor gives us His blood, and I'm thinking, I don't want His blood or His Body, so pale, drawn, withered. What about the rising, what about starting again. I take the small plastic cup, put it to my lips and swallow. It goes down slowly and I try to feel it move through my body—throat, chest, heart and it settles, deep and heavy, somewhere at the bottom.

**

The first time, I watched the needle dive in to my skin, drawing my blood, so red, almost beautiful, through the clear tube, pumping my hand when the light came on, making me more accessible to them. A man came in, sat across from me, his eyes hollowed out, different. He watched the whole time too as they stuck the needle in then we watched his blood pulse up, higher and higher, watched each other, glancing, looking away, looking up at our blood, and back at each other again. Pumping my hand, harder and harder, suddenly the needle burst out of his skin, blood erupting everywhere. They told him to come back in a month, he'd been coming in too much.
I watched him run
across the street to catch a bus,
but had to stay, connected to the machine
still pumping, pumping.

**

Twenty-five is what they give you the first time, twenty if you come every two weeks. I leave the clinic the second time, body humming, salty taste in my mouth. I like to think that I am cleaner now, lighter. I get in my car and drive away, thinking I need a drink, but wonder if it will go straight through me. I think about all my blood, gathered in bottles, lining the walls in their labs. I wonder who they'll put it in, and if that person will live or die, if my blood will actually save them.

**

They say he was found on
a sidewalk, crumpled, irregular.
I want to know the last thing he saw.
Maybe he was looking up, saw some clouds parting, giving way, lifting.

**

I take the body
and look at the eyes
dark, pleading, raised up,
and swallow.

**

After the sixth week,
I look at the marks, the holes in my skin
where they've taken the blood, touch it and
swear I'll never go there again, although
some part of me knows this isn't true—
I need the money and then there's
something in the way they clean me out—
the feeling afterwards, the lightness
and something about the trade—
money for blood—for this part of me they need—
III.
Teething

Tonight as men pull bodies out of bodies in another country, we are safe, we think, in our backyard, the moon early in dusk-sky, birds gathering in their own with their calls and you wonder about the movement of sound and notes and how they reach our ears, how a voice comes out at the loudest volume and pitch—a ghost voice that erupts out of some other frequency. We talk of how lucky we are to be talking like this as the baby gnaws furiously on whatever she can get—her own hands and fingers, our hands and fingers, she is chewing her way into the world. I dream of her as a mouth only a mouth these days in these days and nights without sleep. That first month: all numb and limbs and liquid and flesh. In this new life I have felt out of my skin—humming along, the news coming in on the wire, nerves running along some signal through the world we can’t see stories of these bodies all these bodies in streets their mouths open to air.
Leveled

Down came more snow than
you'd imagine possible, then
it began to melt, then more snow,
then rain, sheets and sheets of it,
these flat lands they
would open up and break, the giant
looming glacial lake
now coming back,
and we, shadowed by it, in
the absolute level of it,
spring buried in the swell,
the rains breaking up the dikes, the dikes letting lose
the river, the river taking houses, pets, cars, cattle
flowing north, and out to farmlands, and all the minor elements,
dolls and china, papers and books, swirling, taken, and later
someone found a dildo floating lonely in the streets, unused,
a diary, a jeweled purse, some candles, a frog lost in an underwell,
then the after-swell—of musty houses, bread and river dirt de­
composing in the glacial basin, the leveled valley, the city's old remnant water
breaking open, this river I would ride my bike by when I was young
and sit on the banks and smoke and let the smoke fly away in
the one part of town that was truly quiet and there were spots
to think in, this place where the Johanson boy
had lost his life, a slip up from a borrowed gun,
this place I would sit and imagine voices, a sigh, a push
carrying downriver then the breaks and swells of river carrying it all away.
But that winter, before it all broke apart, I lived in my one-room basement
cave-apartment, dying for traces of light to be let in and lie in it mid-afternoon,
you, telling your long and ranting stories,
not listening, not listening, your burdened stories, your
unwanted darkness closing in around us, you pulling yourself to me
until I began to question you, finally not letting you in so you would
stand outside my door and listen to me breathe,
I would hear strange tappings on my walls, late at night,
but then the river—it rose up and you
went away too, but also all my childhood things—
the writings on oceans and wolves and fairies and war,
what I once believed in, what I once held carried
away, the lines of cars leaving town, an exodus,
and you were gone too inhale then gone then the return to
must and decay and a frog trapped in an underwell, confused, it seemed,
the sandbags littering the streets, useless white bodies,
your water-logged body remembering to
breathe when you kept having to
bend and pick up your detritus and
we couldn't ever get clean enough.
Because There is No Order Here

The tide takes you too far. Once, under bluest water, we sang songs. You said, *our voices floated up.* Your form looming on a foggy beach; a wavering in and out. Tried to make sense to make the world over again. But there is no visible light in the chain-sick dark. The prince’s ghost runs in his halls his mind. Dark matter, endings, low rumblings in a far-off car on a prairie. Orestes walking the solitary paths. You let yourself go. I try to see a land-locked, ordered version of you: mythical: lonely runner, space-and-sky-watcher.
Packer

All morning the industry of the unanswered
   who or what, because you look out and
the road is a little more thin,
        the sky paled, birds making their getaways,
and you think about stepping onto the mountain—
        wagon-bound, white-bound landscape, wind-terrors—
and your head answers you in sleep
        to say you're home, traveler, to this dark corridor,
past the frozen tree, the river curling up over
        its banks, a way out.
To go through. To be. To be faster than.
In the Albuquerque Station

The man at the train station wavers,
stumbles like a misplaced angel, almost graceful
in his swaying, mumbling to some lost friend.

*Sincerely,* he keeps saying, and
*fuck them all then.*

I wait, want you to come through the doors,
want to see your face.

I think of the four stars of Cassiopeia
of the old man dreaming his life away,
the unlined pathways.

The man watches out the window dreaming
stars and carriages of light

not bodies not bodies.
Traces

Lights flicker on and off across the long valley
as a boy lies down on the ground, watching
for the people in the sky who swirl circles
in wheat fields of the west.

A man stands at the edge
of the etchings in his ground
and someone behind him whispers,
this has got to be a sign.

Night begins as stars fade
in and out, burn the back of the sky
then die in sweeping strokes of light
sending hope to the man, the boy,

who watch from their circled fields
waiting for miracles, lost gods,
or some spiraling glimmer of grace.
Positions, I

The fog lifts, unlike anything,
from the harbor.

Remember the morning the ladybugs stuck
to you, and you kept finding them
throughout the day? A litter
of wild red, over your body.

Buoyancy and regret.
Your room: swells of papers and books,
photos, journals, notes to
people never sent.

All night you must have heard
the sad boats, deep and low,

tripping out to sea,
charging into the darkness.

You buried yourself.
I see the hard ache of you

in disorder, in daylight,
in swell of root and surge—
Positions, II

Blank looks—the people
at the show swirl in and out and

you are young and wish
you weren't so close to

all of them, sucking in nitrous
and laughing too hard,

You want to be in the clean world again,
open up a door and find

an empty sunlit room.
The skin tingles, traces of

drugs swelling body,
and you go back to sea-side,

pulling in catch next to
your brother, his face red with sun,

who tells you, you're stuck, move on.
The Ride

Biking, these boys and I make new trails
against the city's river. We separate, meet up
along the water. I am guided
by their calls, sounding out
through the town's sick old elms,
these boys, black ribbons
painted on, they are barely there
in moist warm air,
legs and sweat pumping in river wind,
I see their traces everywhere,
tracks and voices
slipping between the trees.

If there was one who didn't
tear me up by falling into and out of bars, into
themselves, if there was one who didn't
end up knotted at the end
of some dark road, I'd let
this body go, be off
tangled in their limbs again,
kissing their old bodies underneath
the bridge, in cars, by the full rushing
river, by the bent and dying trees.

At home, my heart pumping as if
a being on its own, my body slick and dirty,
I can still hear them laughing,
and I think I'd name that love—
the call and the return—knowing we'd meet up
along the waters edge,
and ride for miles
and feel each other there
between the river, wind, and trees.

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What is Good and Wild

Waking, in my hand is
aster, nightshade, bloodroot,
 signs of another landscape,
one I cannot recognize.

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Second Date

--Fidelity to his limits,
lucid love of his condition—Camus on Odysseus

-- But yet the state of things require
These motions of unrest
And these great spirits of high desire
Seeme borne to turne them best...Homer, The Odyssey

We had to go to the prairie at last light:
Opening to wildflowers--some we couldn't name,
Some calling us to bend down. The weight of indecision:
To stay? To go back to the old houses the old bars?
The whiskey the smoke the falling into you.
At times so drunk I couldn't see you at all.
You lingered near,
Hard in your losses
Your body smelling
Like an animal in the dark.
Now here we are, in the middle of the
Dark house we once dreamed
Of. Have nested in. Back in the city
Where old men scratch their beards
And groins, say I s'pose well it's time,
Drift into themselves.
Forgetting our keys our days our hours.
Slipping across black ice slipping into
And out of each other.
And still that dream keeps
Turning:
I was young and you could see
Into me, into my insides
Spilling out,
And I could see into
The open mouth of you.
Miscarriage

The knocks on the door jar you awake
and your mind spills
open onto dark and dying matter:
your memory: corridors of light—
light faster than light.
You were young and sick and
voices swelled past your ear and
you thought: the speed of sound, faster.
You thought, Star Trek, pushing out
into the whole wide expanse
those never-ending visions of space.

You were young, and to think was to
open, and to think on the corners
of the universe closing in was to let go,
dissolve into your small bed, dreaming.
There were worlds in the dark matter, maybe.

Today someone poked at your skin
under what was once held there.
And you hear: The sky has opened up
a new dangerous hole.

And you hear: concerns about relativity.
The matter of light and stars, their echoes.
Too many changes to believe.
Your own body, reconstructing.
Poetic License

The body gives up remembering, gives up its skin and arrives, becomes part of air or some other country.
Because We Are Young

and have not fallen into knowing
the reality of skin, we drink wine
by the river, and dive in, casting our bodies
in the dark river.
We ride the currents,
half drunk and calling to each other.
We are young and because we have not given in
to the weight of gravity, the pull of lines
in the skin, the flesh folding,
we make our bodies light
in the water, let the current take us.

Later, when I wake, I am next to your body
and think about how for some moments
we are beautiful, still, in your broken down room
downtown, where we can see the orange leaves shake
outside your window, listen to the wind move them
In the Sky City

Walking around the sky city, deep
in red stone and the smell of fry bread,
I am taken in by the heat, the swirls
of smoke from the houses, the dark eyes,
the ladders signaling release from earth,
from desires, like hands, reaching up.
The wind rises, sending dirt into our eyes
blinding us just for a minute
and the moment everything settles,
I feel something move, I swear, through me,
something other than wind. I want to ask,
did you feel it
but you are standing on the edge of the mesa
smiling as I’ve never seen you smile,
solid, against the background of a clear, clear sky.

I could stay here, forever,
but soon we have to walk down,
return to our car, the road, our
closed-in apartment. Later, I will
want you to push into me, test
the lines between your life and mine,
let you see plainly—
The Sky Changes

The wind has moved
across my face all day.
I've stayed out in my garden
and the snow peas are as light
as birds on my tongue.
I've been watching the sky change.
Yesterday, you came out
to see me, your hands touching
the back of my neck,
and I wanted to say to you,
listen
I've attached myself
to this dirt, this sky.
Instead, we went inside,
listened to music,
some drifting notes of the
old masters,
watched the cats moving
their slow paws, moving
their ears, hearing something
we couldn't.
Vigils

You lie in bed, tossing in fever
and sweat. I watch you and
the lightning, which flashes down the street,
seizes the room, and is gone.

I try to read a book
about a traveler, a writer
who can't quite connect
with people on his train,
their faces increasingly strange,
his life twisting into fictions.

He watches all the passing lighted towns
remembers trees bent down in the
wake of the train’s wind, dark commas,
remembers lovers reaching with
pale hands, hair wild with sleep;
I have known nothing completely.

He shivers at the grey roads,
holds tight to his notebook,
sees quiet streets like home, but with
gold rivers, blue trees. I look out,

listen to your heavy breath,
worries at your rumbling chest.
What the room is: sweat, rain, 
blue light, possibilities.

My fever, when young, lifted me, 
big hands cooling me, 

the sky parting, giving way 
to something I could never name.

The sky opens up again, white 
streaks tearing the fabric of clouds.

I see the traveler, sitting in a station, writing, 
crouched up against a wall, changing

with this current of people, 
no city has opened

like this one, weightless dream, 
extreme with purpose, 

words floating through the atmosphere: 
body, pillar, smoke, silver light, 

heave and pitch, weight and bone.
Letter to a Friend on the Night of the Last Great Star Shower

We must hear the same mutterings of women gathering
in the roads, talking of revolution, their own sons passing,
the disappeared.

We have our own rebellions here, but do not know what we have fought for,
half the time, and on the radio, a distant scientist says we are all
connected by these plummeting groups of
carbon and dust, that our atoms are the forgotten ancestors of the nebulae,
the falling stars and we both read the old stories,
we go far back,

watch the stars burn
in hopes of getting things right again,

walk the lonesome paths—Arcadia—Orestes, weeping and sobbing,
banished by his own ideals. You write that some things last,
are true because they last.
Accident

Fishtail, almost careen into the canyon at 4 a.m. The light is just coming up. The river sounds out below—a great living and rushing. I stop, wait, new heart pounding, rub my shaking legs and watch the sun come up above the trees and all day driving I notice the slow movement above—the steady crawl east to west, and soon the heat of it is hard on my neck, years burrowed away behind me, but all the roads and voices swell and shine, god the handsome emerging head of memory, root and surge, this body remembering to breathe.