Strange Blessing

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STRANGE BLESSING

by

Gabrielle A. Halko

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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Gabrielle A. Halko
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“Muriel Rukeyser spoke of two kinds of poetry: the poetry of ‘unverifiable fact’ – that which emerges from dreams, sexuality, subjectivity – and the poetry of ‘documentary fact’ – literally, accounts of strikes, wars, geographical and geological details, actions of actual persons in history, scientific inventions. Like her, I have tried to combine both kinds of poetry in a single poem, not separating dream from history – but I do not find it easy.”

-- Adrienne Rich

“We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ poems – the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is divisive, even when necessary. … In fact, the poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred; it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence. As such, there will be nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being “objectively” true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence.” -- Carolyn Forche

I have always experienced writing poems as a way of solving a puzzle, a means of bringing order to the world. In terms of a general aesthetic, I believe in the power of words to contain, to distill, to preserve, to transform. I aim for poetry that is both muscular and graceful, that begins to move in its own rhythm once the reader starts the poem. I fail a lot, but every once in a while I read something that I’ve written and I feel the music and movement take over. I still tend towards the shorter line, and when I can pull it off, the shorter poem. I feel a challenge in writing short poems that is similar to the challenge of writing in form: I want to figure out the math and magic of the rules.
To me there is something about a short poem that reminds me of tending a dollhouse or a bonsai garden, where everything is distilled and made miniature.

During the last year of my undergraduate career, I had a wonderful writing teacher named Nancy Schoenberger. She was a big believer in giving us assignments in forms, and it was in her class that I first tried terza rima, sestinas, sonnets and villanelles. She encouraged us to experiment with found poems and imitation poems; if we got stuck in a poem, her advice was to read it from the bottom up. At first, I dreaded forms; I thought they were restrictive and old-fashioned. Imagine my surprise as I wrote in form for two semesters and learned that rather than restrict my poems, form actually liberated them. It gave my poems muscle and discipline, and I became intrigued with the bones of form – how to maneuver language and syntax so that the poem simultaneously rows with and against the current. I still write in free verse at least as much as in form, but there is always a template of rhythm laid over the poem.

Who do I write to? I assume that there’s someone at the other end of my poems, and my intention is to connect with people and share an experience or emotion with them. Where do I think that my work “fits”? I hope that it fits with other poets of passion and compassion who don’t hide in sentimentality but recognize that sometimes sentiment can be positive. I admire many poets, but if I had to name models, I’d say Mary Oliver, Louise Gluck, and Sharon Olds. I believe in honesty in poetry, but I’m sometimes hard-pressed to explain what I think that means. I believe in straightforwardness, in saying what’s true. I also believe that sometimes the most effective statement is suggestion. I respect the presence and weight of the unsaid, the shadows and half-formed ideas hiding in the margins. Which strategy I choose for a poem depends on my subject, my mood, and mostly what feels like the right way to go.
When I began writing seriously and started to view writing as a craft, almost all of the poems that showed up and wanted to be written dealt with my family in some way. Sometimes they involved previous generations, including relatives I’d heard about but never met. As I got older and began to piece together information about my family, I felt a strange sense of connection with people I never knew. Often I found myself writing to speak for people who had little power and therefore little voice in their lives and whose experiences were intentionally silenced.

Giving voice remains one of the primary concerns in my work. Throughout the poems, the question of who speaks recurs, and the manuscript is a means of working through a number of related questions: what are the responsibilities and consequences, both positive and negative, of voicing private experience? How “true” or “honest” can a poem be? What are my duties as both poet and daughter, witness and member of the tribe -- and if I face conflicting loyalties, which identity wins? How, finally, do I negotiate the personal and the political if, as Adrienne Rich has said, they are one and the same?

I am certainly not the first or only poet to consider those questions; poetic responses are extensive in both number and variety. In section 33 of “Song of Myself,” for instance, Walt Whitman makes the claim, “I am the man ... I suffered ... I was there.” Muriel Rukeyser’s speaker in “Absalom” ends with the promise, “He shall not be diminished, never./ I shall give a mouth to my son.” The speaker in Rich’s “Frame” concludes with the assertion, “What I am telling you/ is told by a white woman who they will say/ was never there. I say I am there.” These three poets are clearly invested in telling other people’s stories, and that investment leads them make
irrefutable statements of witness; they negotiate experience, voice, and observation when all three continually move between public and private.

Whitman, the self-created “Everyman,” continually attempts to step into the shoes of others and represent their lives, voices, and experiences. Whitman merges his life and self with a list of wounded and marginalized people in “Song of Myself.” In “Absalom,” Rukeyser speaks in the voice of a West Virginia mother whose youngest son dies of silicosis. Unlike Whitman, who claims the identity of those suffering, Rukeyser doesn’t insert her presence directly into the poem; the anonymous mother tells her own story. Rich’s poem “Frame” chooses a third route by offering a speaker who is present to witness another’s suffering but limited by various boundaries. Despite their differences, the three poems address similar issues of presence and common experience and explore what it means to bear witness through a poem.

Whitman’s treatment of presence and experience offers a lens through which to view the poems of both Rukeyser and Rich. The speaker in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” explores multiple identities. In line 827, Whitman’s speaker asserts, “I am the man ... I suffered ... I was there.” For the next fifteen lines Whitman exchanges his identity with those of people suffering, including “the mother condemned for a witch and burnt with dry wood, and her children gazing on ... the hounded slave” and claims “All these I feel or am” (833). Here he declares not only his sympathy, compassion, and willingness to put himself into others’ experiences, but also his belief that the boundaries between individuals are permeable enough so that he can negotiate differences of gender and race and enter another person’s experience.

Rukeyser and Rich both name Whitman as a crucial influence in their poetic development, a kind of poetic “grandfather.” Like “Song of Myself,” Rukeyser’s
poem “Absalom” stresses presence, too, but unlike Whitman, Rukeyser does not insert herself as an “I” within the poem; instead, she allows the victims of the Gauley Bridge disaster all of the attention. She is there apparently as a scribe, to take down their words rather than remake their experiences into her own. She successfully commemorates an occasion of suffering, shame, and greed while seemingly keeping her presence outside the immediate realm of the poem. Rich’s poem “Frame” chooses a third route by offering a speaker who is present to witness another’s suffering but limited by various boundaries. Throughout the poem Rich plays with the traditional functions of a frame—as window, as accent, as boundary to keep things in or out—and simultaneously accepts and rejects such functions. In its movement back and forth between narrated action and the narrator’s claim of presence, the regular shift from first to third person, the poem creates a collision of reality and imagination. The action does not stop at what the speaker can actually see happening to the woman waiting for the bus—an observer wouldn’t be able to narrate the action beyond the point where the woman is forced into the police car—yet Rich’s speaker continues to imagine and verify the victim’s experience.

Rich fashions her own way of bearing witness, one that reflects but differs from those of Whitman and Rukeyser. Like Whitman and Rukeyser, Rich highlights the experience of someone marginalized and voiceless, whose experience would never be noticed otherwise. She joins Whitman in claiming a first-person presence in the poem, but she observes through a frame designed to keep her out. While Whitman sometimes gives the impression that he’s giving his marginalized brethren a big bear hug, Rich’s speaker seems separated by barriers of physical and experiential distance. She makes no claims of becoming the young woman waiting for the bus, yet she imagines the
woman's experience long after she could possibly bear literal witness. It would seem that there are some boundaries she must accept, at least partially, yet she continues to look for ways to subvert them.

Despite their differences, the three poems address similar issues of presence and common experience and explore what it means to bear witness through a poem. Whitman, Rukeyser and Rich view poetry as alive, a means of social change which must show elasticity, flexibility, and empathy. If it is a poem, according to Rukeyser, it must “offer the truths of outrage and the truths of possibility” (Life 66). These three poems also support Forche's idea of “poem as trace, poem as evidence” – the possibility that there might be no official account of an event makes the poet even more determined to preserve that event in poetry.

While reading Whitman, Rukeyser and Rich has taught me a great deal about poetry and poetics, and particularly the possibilities of witness, my work so far is much narrower in scope. Rather than write about national or global events, I instead have focused so far on the immediate realm of family and friends. Most of my poems involve some kind of witness – it may be angry or sympathetic or baffled depending on the poem, but the act of observation and validation continually reappears. And this realm brings with it its own challenges, including the stakes in making something public and the question of how much a poet can get away with in the name of art.

The poets I've found most instructive in dealing with witness within the domestic sphere are Mary Oliver and Sharon Olds. While they use different methods, both successfully move between the territories of public and private within the intimate spaces of family relationships. A teacher gave me a copy of Oliver's poem “Rage” when I was trying to write about sexual abuse in my family and found myself stuck. I
was looking for a way to make my poem powerful without making it melodramatic or obvious; above all, I wanted to avoid sensationalizing the incident.

Oliver’s poem packs a wallop in 33 spare, straightforward lines. She intentionally masks the identities of the figures in the poem; although the speaker addresses the poem to a specific second person, he is never named. The child remains anonymous as well, and Oliver offers no dedication. Oliver’s choice to mix metaphor and narrative adds power and a startling beauty to a crime. She describes the predator as both “the dark song/of the morning; /serious and slow” and “also the red song/in the night,/ stumbling through the house/ to the child’s bed” (1-3, 11-14). His capabilities are godlike; he is “the wise and powerful one/who makes all the days/ possible in the world” (8-10). The child is described as a “damp rose” who grows “timidly, crouching in corners” (15, 23); she appears in the assailant’s dreams as “a tree/ that will never come to leaf ... a watch/ you dropped on the dark stones/ till no one could gather the fragments” (27-31). Oliver’s strategy, to use figurative language rather than a more clinical or factual description of the incident, results in a poem that feels almost dreamlike, which in turn amplifies the subject matter. The poem is a public record of a shameful private experience; that record, however, is notable for the anonymity of the principals. Such anonymity means that the victim is protected, but so is her assailant. This poem reflects one way of dealing with private revelation: tell the story, but keep it general enough so that it causes no additional suffering.

Sharon Olds’ poem “I Go Back to May 1937” reflects a different strategy of witness: show it all, blood and guts included. Although I don’t make a habit of assuming that the speaker is also the poet, I think it is a fair assumption in this case; Olds’ body of work contains numerous autobiographical poems, and she has spoken at length in interviews about the prominent role of autobiography in her work. This poem
imagines the speaker’s parents years before her birth: “they are about to graduate, they are about to get married, / they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are/ innocent, they would never hurt anybody” (10-12). The speaker wants to take each of her parents aside and warn them of their impending mistake and its profound impact:

she’s the wrong woman,
he’s the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you never heard of,
you are going to want to die. (14-19)

The speaker is limited by the constraints of reality and linear time – she can’t actually go back and prevent the catastrophe – but she gives another reason for her reticence as well when she says “I want to live” (25). Selfish or not, that desire factors into her decision, even in such an impossible landscape. The poem’s last line sounds simultaneously like a bargain, a promise, and a threat: “Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it” (30). The speaker fulfills the dual functions of prediction and reflection in the poem; she is gifted with the knowledge of what her parents’ lives will become, but because of reality’s limitations she is unable to change their course. Instead, as the witness, she has the opportunity and responsibility not only to record experience, but to do so without editing out or sprucing up the ugly parts.

Although I couldn’t articulate it in clear terms when I began to write, my work has always been about witness. At first I was most interested in recording experience to make sure that previously voiceless subjects finally had an opportunity to speak, even if it was through someone else. I wanted their experience to be on record somewhere, so
that it could no longer be discounted. My family history is full of silenced, powerless people — overwhelmingly women — and I feel a mix of protectiveness, sympathy, and admiration for them. They kept going through some horrible situations, which I have to admire even as I try to figure out how those situations came about. I sympathize especially with my grandmother, who died when my mother was 16. She made up an entire fake life story to tell her daughters, who didn’t find out the truth until about five years ago, when they were in their sixties. I don’t know much about her life — just what my aunts have been able to cobble together — but from what I know, she was equal parts brilliance and sadness. She reminds me of that line in Rich’s poem “The Loser,” where the speaker describes the house as “lit by the friction of your mind.” The protectiveness that I feel manifests itself as revelation, which might seem odd — how can I shield someone by telling her story? But it’s more about setting the record straight and making sure that everyone gets a turn to speak, and that’s something that very few people in my family seemed to have. In some ways, I’m doing what Olds does in “I Go Back to May 1937” — travelling through an impossible landscape even though I know that what I find there has already happened.

There is certainly defiance and anger in my writing sometimes, but there is also the deliberate decision, heavily influenced by Olds, to take an experience and try to hold it up to the light and examine all of its parts without flinching. That decision extends to poems about myself as well. Part of writing about my family means writing about my part in our entanglements, even if I look like a jerk. I may be a witness, but I can never fully let go of my subjectivity, no matter how hard I might try sometimes. I think it’s more honest to write poems which may paint me in an unflattering light than to keep myself out of the poems; sometimes distance feels necessary, but much of the time it just feels phony. When I wrote “Asylum,” about a friend who had to commit her
mother to a psychiatric hospital, or “Aria,” about another friend who lost his mother to cancer, there was some inevitable distance because neither of those incidents were part of my immediate experience. But as an observer and confidante, I had a pretty vivid outsider’s perspective of what was going on, and it seemed appropriate to write about my friends and their ordeals as a way to honor their strength in incredibly difficult circumstances.

I wonder about what my family will think when they see my work. Although a couple of aunts have seen a few of my poems, most of my relatives don’t know what I write. Because I try not to shy away from what’s ugly or difficult, I worry that they will think that I’ve betrayed us by making public what should stay private, even though that secrecy has caused visible and permanent scars. In that sense, “For the Lost,” about an aunt who was molested by my grandfather, is the most “dangerous” poem in my manuscript. Oliver’s poem “Rage” gave me a tremendously helpful model for my poem, which is also full of figurative language even as it talks about the reality of “flesh clawed open.” While there are poems in which my language is factual and straightforward, it seemed more appropriate (and respectful to the victim, who’s still alive) to work with more metaphor and circumspection in this poem.

The question remains, however: what’s to be gained from my writing about such a horrible act? I find it a particularly pertinent question since only one of the parties involved is dead. In terms of what this poem accomplished for me, I was able to order the experience and put it into my own language, and I was able to remove the undeserved protection that silence had afforded my grandfather for forty years. But there are times when I ask myself, so what? How much is it worth that I feel better about what happened, when it didn’t happen to me? Is that enough to justify making
public an experience that could still hurt someone? I still wrestle with that, although for
now, the poem is in the manuscript.

Part of the reason it's still there is ego— I think it's a good poem. But part of it
is that I'm still working on the questions that I've asked throughout this paper; I'm
only beginning to identify some of the responsibilities and consequences that come with

my decision to voice private experience. The whole concept of consequences is pretty
new; for years I thought of my writing as a kind of mission rather than something that I
might have to answer for. I don't know yet how to quantify how true or honest a poem
can ever be, and I'm frankly a bit suspicious of people who try to give me formulas or
amounts. As to the issue of loyalties as both a poet and a daughter, and which loyalties
take precedence, I've been trying to work that out for years. I expect that these
questions and others will keep coming up for me as long as I write, and that makes me
happy, because it means more chances to do as Rainer Maria Rilke advises: "try to love
the questions themselves ... and ... gradually live your way into the answer."
Fortune

My mother dreams in questions. A darning egg, a photograph: how many things vanished into pawnshops that my mother never saw? Here are her credos: Everything comes down to numbers. You can never be too precise. Nothing escapes her careful calculations: a brooch, a spoon, a spinning wheel. I take it back, what I said about gypsy possibility; I no longer doubt how it runs in our family, how we run from trouble. How we stay on the move. She was the baby laid naked and squalling onto burlap sacks. She was the baby who reached down for the bright, cold button and held it, unrelenting, in her fist. I take it back.

A true story: she was the baby born onto a pile of gold, for there was no straw. A pile of money, bagged and ready, her first rough comfort. A fortune teller, gypsy or not, someone whose first language was currency; when other babies crawled she counted beans, her make-believe ingots. Who is she? Someone close but not immediate. Her first word? Money. So my mother tells me, and part of it sounds right. This is the house where that baby was born, and the walls echo what the pots clatter out in their lidded and unlidded rituals: a necessary SOS. Even the wood has something to say. Though the laundress tries to keep them quiet, the clothes-pins squeak their message, they insist: this will cost you, every bit of it.
Resemblance

I look in the box and she's there,
forty years younger, posed like a pinup in the surf
for my father's camera, when she was beautiful,
long before she knew that she could hate him.
Say what you will about tourist towns,
I'll agree except for this one thing,
this lavender box on a keychain, a poor man's
kaleidoscope, a cheap plastic spyglass
with "Virginia Beach" stamped in gold
along the angling walls
and my mother inside, laughing.
To a layman it might not look
like she has room enough to move,
but look closer -- she owns that beach,
she made it hers with each black strap
she slipped off her fine shoulders,
and behind her, the whole ocean waits.
Learning to Swoon

If you're Southern, you know.
It is the unspoken heart, dependable
as four o'clocks and the humid choke
that blooms with first azaleas and lasts
all summer. My mother and aunts learned early
how to cross blacktop so hot it could blister
and how to figure the curve of the spine
into underwater caverns, arched corridors
for jellyfish to pass through, dragging
their streamers, shining just beneath the surface
of the Chesapeake Bay.
My mother and her sisters
spent hours in the stingy shade
of backyard city gardens, perfecting
that lift of arm to glowing brow,
the gesture that said to them Look,
that said I am a woman, everything,
so the story went, and they believed.
They practiced all through childhood
in the cramped rooms of that angry house
on Fairfax Avenue, where worms hid
in turnip greens and pans rattled
on the shelf. They tried it as a shield
and found it merely gesture, worthless
to a father who had always wanted sons.
Optimists in spite of themselves,
when their mother lay dying of cancer
and rage that ate her insides out, they tried it
again, though by then they knew.
All that time they watched, smart
girls, until they learned precisely how
to spend that cadence and parlay
what they were born with into something
practical and theirs, a vein of strength, a means
of movement. Camille swooned herself
all the way to college, and when she got there,
each polished beaker, each clean unbroken
test tube she returned to its rack meant
one more day she could stay.
My mother, next in line, staged
a larger rebellion. College in Mississippi,
as far from home as she could see herself --
she lasted a year, but it was victory.
They saw their future selves
swooning in and out of love
and marriage, the unmapped lands.
And sometimes it worked:
Lina went to nursing school and married
Carl, earnest cub reporter, and Cornelia
met Ken, her department store buyer
on the rise, and they told each other all
was well. And my mother, who still refused
to play along, wore her favorite yellow dress
and learned to smoke in 1959, met my father
playing chess at someone's party,
and managed 15 years of marriage,
arm to forehead, covering her eyes.
1954

Who can explain it? She wakes again to a world where school's out, though it's all red leaves and woodsmoke in the Norfolk seaport sky. Her father's steps slice the thick air of the house; she scurries to avoid those knives, his shoes. At 14, she could stand a little logic in her life, something that makes sense, perhaps a family like she'd read about in school if school were open, where the mother hadn't died and the father.... At night the house is radio, radio, static and a hush the father warns her not to break. The governor speaks, and he is angry. Friends tell her of the crowds that stand outside the school with signs they're proud to wave, but she's forbidden to go and see for herself. Part disappointment, part relief: she doesn't want to know which neighbors take days off to stand in front of Maury High and swear to keep it white. She doesn't want to know. It would be just something else she couldn't explain; this time it's something she can turn away from, so she does.
For The Lost

1.

He named his firstborn for his bitter wife, but that small incest toppled onto you, the youngest daughter, pride of his meager heart. Who would have guessed those soundless midnight visits, his insistent, laboring hands that could wield his thick belt against a delicate knobby spine without flinching, split the two bound halves of a prayerbook every Sunday?

2.

In photographs you wear the loyal face that every daughter knows. In photographs you are the sweetness of plaid skirts and rag curls. It is hard to see you lying corpse-still in the dark, breathing so carefully: some green and bitter fruit set upon by someone starving, your body unripe, your flesh clawed open.

3.

In this life you are the dreaming and the dreamt, some creature wrapped in hazy layers of sleep, your memory and your nioiling girlhood sacked and knotted, drowned in darkness not of your own making.
Adoption

They watch from the wall above her desk,  
er her band of grounded strangers, faces  
of children she doesn't know  
whose eyes urge, Trust us.

The pictures come from attics, rickety  
estate sales, nursing homes that can't find  
next of kin. Some are smiling, unafraid  
of childhood, pincurls, sailor suits.

Others offer eyes gone silver  
with the gravity of living.  
All train fierce stares through dreams,  
the cluttered everyday she sorts and tempers  
with a dishrag, with a serving spoon.

Their steady, guarding watch has eased  
the way she moves about her life:  
a clean cup she raises with delicate fingers,  
angels poised to shatter glass and speak.
At the Shreveport Foundling Home

This legacy is jagged, a mouthful of dust, a stubborn mix of bottles, loss and wives who stayed because it was the only place their hollow eyes could see. Camille, you are my lost history, the skinny girl in the ragged dress, the coveted story whose ending doesn’t survive.

I used to blame your spare and foreign smile on your teeth, those crooked spears of bone you hid and hid. But lately I’ve been travelling with ghosts, and they remind me who you were: a Gulf girl up North, the only mother on the block who’d been to college, a nurse, a wife, a mother to four daughters when you were the daughter your parents gave up, the child they couldn’t feed. Say “truth” to those ghosts and they laugh at all of it: your girls who have never let go of you, your secret, rattling life that would be loud no matter how hard you held its mouth and tried to smother it. Your namesake dreams your face in clay everywhere she looks.

The next one, my particular connection, swears we’ll find you deep within the bisque and marble of Fitzsimons, still in your starched white uniform.

Your third clings to your nursing hat, your pin, and the last takes to her garden, hoeing you out of her neat rows and furrows.

What I keep returning to is how you rose up, left one life and began to craft another. In the new diorama your parents kept you.

As your restless mind delivered you to Tulane and Harvard, as your tapered fingers learned the latest ways to coax a muscle back to the twitch and throb of pain, you tested the paper and glue of your new-made past, building a life strip by soggy strip, then holding your breath
until it dried. You found New York
and orthopedics and a train ticket to Denver.

In the open air wards, in that good mountain
air, men sweated out fevers, delivered
sincere tuberculin love to you, cough by cough.

In the end, those mountains sent you home,
your Louisiana hands bereft of ocean,
tradition buzzing in your head. So when
you met him, charming and bespectacled,
his passion disguising the demons, your choice
seemed simple. My mother passed your lesson
onto me: simple is a luxury. Or else a lie.
Did you wonder how your girls would feel
when they learned the truth, forty years too late
to put their arms around you while they grieved?
You left a phantom, half a story, outlines
fading even as we try to make them out.

I take the ghost train to Shreveport, I get directions
from the station, I climb the steps of the broad porch
and enter the house, which is sometimes white
and sometimes brick. All the girls I see
seem hard at work, they are writing
so I lean closer, they are working on the stories
they will tell their children about growing up,
they are inventing lives far away from here.
Aria

for Mike Deagle

Nights you turn the key and find the dark
unquiet house a kind of lake: azure,
furnished, bottomless. Five steps before
you see her, draped in quilts and rumbling cats,
*Madame Butterfly* floats down the hall.

It is her voice you remember, anchoring
your childhood, swift with love, your mooring.
Always she sang you to sleep: her voice,
in your white house, under the deepening sky.

The year before your father left, she taught
you how to swim, so every summer
you grew into the element of water,
made yourself a tugboat, schooner, barge.
With your cousins you became a small flotilla,
bright scars on the water's glassy back.

The doctor sent her home the first time
nearly bald, with breast to armpit scars.
For months she swam towards recovery,
a slow crawl through the lake, one thin arm
following the other. *If I'm clean,*
she said, *all this will be worthwhile.*

What did you learn? She used to ask each day
after the school bus left you, dazed
and a little smarter, at the curb. Now you know
new math, old conjugations, the delicate seam
that fastens any bargain. Add to that
what you have always known: the simple fact
that you are both unready for her journey.
E Pluribus Unum

I don't remember much about third grade, but I remember how she took the chalk and scratched the Latin words onto the black. That night I told my parents what she'd said while they pretended mild attention, then returned to other planets with their thoughts and cups of Sanka. If they had regrets I didn't hear them; everything was fine, their faith that I knew better leading both to sleep while I lay sleepless, puzzling the reasons any country might decide to stamp their coins with something so uncouth -- the words My mother wears black silk stockings -- but we were eight; her word was all we had.
Kodachrome

In the snapshot, I am barely three.  
My slender mother holds me in her rigid arms  
before a grey house and white fence.  
I wear a sleeveless navy sailor dress  
and try to wriggle out of being held  
by her, an early flaw that never went away.

We're on Cape Cod, whole worlds away  
from divorce and its reductions: four to three  
to two. I clamor to be held  
by doting grownups whose circling arms  
remember who I am: little girl, blue dress,  
shorter than the pushmower, shorter than the fence.

I get armfuls of splinters from that weathered fence  
and its rough boards that always face away  
from the house, towards the neighbors' address.  
Sometimes my cousins click into focus, and the three  
of us explore the barn and come home marked, arms  
scratched from a nail that's left its wall. We've never held

still for the iodine, impatient with bandages that never held  
fast, but we recover, gaptoothed trio posing on the fence.  
The oyster pond pulls us in with long kelp arms  
towards underwater ferns, slimed brown curls that drift away  
as we gather shells we spot through three  
feet of saltwater. Later, I'll be punished when my dress

smells like fish from those shells kept in my dress  
pockets for three days, the stench of snails held  
against their will. It will take a spanking and three  
washings to come out, three dryings on the fence.  
My uncle, dying, readies himself for another life away  
from Chatham Light. He pats my head with one thin arm

just before he goes, then closes his eyes, crosses his arms,  
and waits for God to take him. I wear a dark dress  
to his funeral and fidget on the folding chairs, pretend myself away
like the grownups seem to want to do, though they are held
here by some force they wrestle, argue, fence
with, but can never beat. I sense this even now, at three,

when I still fit my mother’s arms, still small enough to be held
for pictures in that sailor dress or clowning on the fence --
what is given can be snatched away, no magic in the number three.
Asylum

for M.V.

How many times do you sign at the X before she ceases to be yours?

The call comes when I am in Norway, immersed in children and dogs and fishfishfish three meals a day.

The phone bleats crackling news; I close my eyes and see your mother belted in beside you, lost in a country of her own, rocking and singing something you don’t recognize, your practical car marking the miles of drab Connecticut highway, and you at the wheel, afraid to look much further than that next number clicking on the dash. I have never committed my mother. I don’t know how it’s done.

I know before I’m told that your family has scattered -- your sister hiding out at Yale, safe in her art, the gift your mother birthed her with. Your father knows his role by heart, mouths from the African coast that whatever you might ask is more than he can spare. When he is old and drooling, peeing on the floor, his second wife and beautiful blond children will tie his bib and wash his face and love him beyond all that he deserves,

but your mother has just you, and you have no one.

You carry her suitcase and hold her hand and walk your brilliant, crazy mother through the gates of the state hospital. You leave her with her paints.
and books and pen & ink, a roll of stamps, her daughters’ photographs. If you cry it will be later and alone.
You ride nine hours home and when you get there, you live on.

She sends you letters, by turns wistful and afraid and wry, and lanyards that she makes while supervised. Listen,
she writes, each bracelet tells a story. Yours takes you back to summer camp, those bands of braided jute you wore
until they blackened and you grew and had to cut them from your wrist. Yours begs to be released; you let it go

and it unravels past the sound of crickets in the dark, your first communion dress, your mother running barefoot
by the lake, and then it carries on into this grey summer. You are flesh of her flesh, the Good Daughter, though she

won’t love you any more because of this. Who will save you from the bending of your mind when you are 45 and reeling
from the weight of gifts so vast they press you into stone, so bright they hurt your eyes? The questions dance
at the edge of things, out of your reach. Every letter from Connecticut reminds you of the day you’ll have to

answer, but for now your life is yours, and the questions only shimmer in the darkness, last as long

as your thin white breath before the night air takes it.
The Mirror Answers

'O funny duchess! O blonde thing!' — Anne Sexton

In this kingdom there is no such thing as truth, only
the missives of a patriarch, the waxy seal of royal decree.

This used to be your home, inside these walls of stone
stacked three men thick, but it's a different castle now

than when you found your face in family portraits, marked
your dyed-and-threaded likeness in the tapestries,

told massive gilt-framed mirrors, This is Julia and Julia's face.
Because you were too beautiful, the story goes, dark

fairies stole you in the night, but we know better.
This is no fairies' work -- ask anyone whose eyes or hands

have cast away a child, flung her with words or arms
towards deepest water. Who would have thought a child

could weigh so heavy, a stone too great for narrow backs
to bear? This kingdom's wish to wipe you from the slate

defies these twenty years and the black art of forgetting.
The yellowed map of different bloods converging has given up

the frail ink of your name. My only proof of you the arrowed scar
that rides my hand and keeps it bashful in lace cuffs, a wristbone

buttonhole. In the courtyard of the keep, in the marketplace,
the pale wheels of cheese and bruised figs turn from the faces

of women who look like you, women you might have been.
Now you're pretended from your rightful place among the gilded

frames, unthreaded from the tapestries; now none of us can see
ourselves or any other in the glass. That I still cry for you,

that you are all the baggage I cannot misplace, has earned me
grudging audience with bishops, healers, a useless catalog

of rites and spells, and mapmakers who mark and unmark cities
with an ease that knows no ties to you or any honest traveller.

I wish for you an exile in a land whose citizens are unafraid
to love the dead or speak their names in some ungoverned tongue

the palace doesn't know. My funny duchess, from wherever
you call home, can you see your living mirror, the silent woman

bending in the dark room full of bright threads, careful to muffle
the thump and clack of shuttle and loom and hide the wavering flame,

the ready floss, your likeness reappearing, her fingers threading you back?
The Book of the Dead

In freshman Archaeology, I began to learn how much I didn’t know: the rudiments of excavation, how the faithful would return, days into months into years, to squat in the sun and undo the dust, particle by particle, looking for clues. How careful and delicate the work, how important to go at it with a clear head, passion, and the patience to dust off the past a square inch at a time. And mostly how each find, each unearthed shard of cooking-pot or ornament or spear, could read like an encyclopedia if you’d been trained in that sort of thing, if you knew where to look.

Years later, my mother’s transatlantic voice crackles, hesitates, delves into a history: her mother’s death from cancer, the four girls left behind to bear a father’s grief, the house he shrouded in his rage, the cold that seized him that he could not chase away, not even when he took his youngest to his bed to keep him warm. Soon after, my dreaming aunt, his oldest daughter, comes to me and chants the brittle words to that same twisted legend, and then I know this theory is sound. We open our book of the dead and study this tribe we thought we knew. In old snapshots we squint into the light, turn pinched faces toward the beveled lens, and say nothing except that we are too fragile to risk the excavation.
Domestic

I only saw it happen once, from the doorway
of my room, that place I lived, unheard
and unseen, whenever they fought and then some.
This time I peeked and saw the kick from behind, the pivot,
the raised fist, the hands in front of her face, the set
of my father's jaw as he decided he would not,
would not hit her back. I know I was lucky,
that it barely even qualifies as trauma.
There are poems and lives where far worse happens.

There's a lot I don't remember from my childhood, more
than what's normal, yet that picture is indelible,
that snapshot in my head crowds out the treehouse,
the tire swing, whatever good things held my small life
in place and kept it whole. The pine trees listened
with their arms stretched out, the stone wall whispered
here, here, the neighbors looked out windows without
waving. Even then I knew they had their own dark halls
to navigate, bitter constellations to name.
There and Gone

In that neighborhood of brick and stately sprawl,
the keen mirage of rage set every house
on its blade edge and forced each branch to sharpen
to a point. Even the lawns stood at attention,
crisp and green and dutiful. The usual
cast of lawyers, bankers, CEO's, mostly

men who got mean by their fourth Scotch,
dressed brittle bodies in sober suits and steered
their European cars out into the world.
The children woke each morning to another
chance at the day before: breakfast
fast and quiet, sometimes the word "goodbye,"

then the walk away, towards the other kids
already waiting on the corner for the bus.
In school they pledged allegiance, learned
the presidents and capitals, read mythologies
of families who stacked the dishes more than one way
in the cupboard, whose anger was a country

mostly hidden on the textured globe, shaded
in plum and tucked between ridges of mountains,
an expedition difficult and rarely made --
by burro, perhaps, during the dry season.
Each day the children practiced in treehouses
and backyards, like some kids play Frisbee

or hackeysack, with fierceness, with intent,
wearing their want like a tangible bruise:
to earn transparency, the ultimate reward.
The kids met to whisper in the caves of trees --
magnolia and pine that rushed them into hiding.
A girl's eyes glowed in the dark: *It happened,*

she said, and she didn't mean first boyfriend,
first period. *Today, the ride home, my hands,*
her goal at 13 to make herself clear,
uncolored to quartz, dissolved to air.
Each day the yellow bus trundled them back
to rows of neat square houses bordered
by manic gardeners' *snip, snip* of order

and devotion, places of cupolas and nurseries,
the odd servants' wing still standing from before the war,
where children walked as slowly as they dared
up each benign brick path that always ended
at the tall door of some upstanding Federal
or Colonial, shutters muted by sedate

Williamsburg blues or greens. Inside,
order was hard at work, stamping itself
indelibly on homework, folding towels
into perfect thirds, rearranging laundry,
the weave of a placemat, drowned tea leaves
at the bottom of a cup. Good children

recognized the sound of rootbound families
choking on their mean square worlds.
The neighbors heard it too and turned away,
though there was no need, from the bus stop
crowded with shuffle and breath, the snap
of a lunchbox latch, backpacks zipping themselves
open and shut, the rows of invisible children.
Cargo

My father's dreams sail wild, uncharted seas
on ships devoid of crew or instrument,
far from the young man who conjured them,
out of his steady, clear-eyed sight, beyond
the proverbial promise of red night skies.

I walk the bridge, I walk the plank, I trim
the crooked sails, but still those dreams cannot
be traced. I guess they are brittle bones,
smooth fossil trilobites, strict colored squares
of stamps, the mute and polished weight of jade,
jasper, beryl, amethyst, arrowheads of flint.

All catalogued and folded seam-to-seam
in captain's chests, in logbooks neatly penned,
the histories he learned remain pristine,
untaught, his private hoard of word and deed.
Each battle analyzed, each arrowhead,
each fervent pilgrimage: all that he knows
goes with him to the grave -- split mast, split hull,
the patient fathoms wait to greet
their blue-eyed boy, the sailor coming home.

A spirit tells me, Find the cargo. Dive.
I have no light to bring, so I dive blind
into the deep, the blue of what
I do not know, past seachests full of sovereigns,
past women's wooden smiles, where careful sextants
cannot measure, out of every diver's,
every daughter's reach, towards long-lost cargo:
pieces of himself he has forgotten,
chanties he will never sing to me.
The Men In My Life

1.
And each spring it began again,
the ritual of zinnias and peat,
the coarse-haired musk of tomato stems,
the reclaimed territory mapped in stakes
and chickenwire, carrot fronds sprouting
feathery tufts, the hoe taking blunt bites
of soil. Then it was the pungency
of earth, the acrid bite of young green
stalks, where birds fed on the tender fruit
that ripened fastest when it faced the sun.
It was family ritual to tour the yard
while you showed off your Big Boys,
your Sugar Snaps, those neutered
seedless wonders bred and raised to eat.

You were the round, white-haired uncle
of my dreams flipping burgers
at the barbecue in your undershirt,
kissing each of your fingers
before you waved goodbye. Thanks to you
I rode the horses at the corner bar
years before I learned you were a regular,
that you stopped speaking to my mother
when she divorced my dad and forbid
your wife to see her.

This year my father found your garden
green as ever, though wilder since you
are not there to tend it. He was surprised,
my father who surprised me one summer
by leasing a garden plot from the town
and planting nothing but wildflowers,
which if you know gardens you know
can be everything.
2.
My grandfather's life was angles:
his nose, his thin frame, even his voice
was full of jaggedness. On a hook
he hung the long, sharp wish
that I had never been born, right
next to the choked kindness
that was all he showed my mother.
No matter how hard the three of us fought
it, we came from that same rebellious
tracing, a peculiar blooming hybrid
with the strength to yell back.
He buried two wives. Eleanor,
the second, persuaded him to go
to my mother's wedding even though
my father could never be a Mason.

3.
Before my parents split, my father
gardened every summer, learning
as he went. He perfected delphiniums,
graceful ring of impossibly deep blue,
the greeting at the bottom of our driveway.
The grape hyacinth around the dogwood?
His idea. My mother leaned toward
the practical — asparagus and rhubarb,
cukes and pole beans — but my father
always held back part of himself
from that rototilled square,
saving it for his flowers.

One year the sober talk involved
how to kill a woodchuck in the garden.
Our neighbor with a gun warned
my parents that the shot could ricochet,
maybe hit a child — no good.
They contemplated gassing it.
Finally it was settled: my father
would beat the woodchuck with a hoe
'til it was dead. All of seven and full
of bluster, I wanted to watch. It took
years to remember this, to navigate
my father's motives, the bludgeoning,
the refusal. Did he finally do it?
I'm grateful not to know.
The Velvet Fog

Sometimes they meet for breakfast
at the kitchen counter, where puffed rice
rings dully into bowls to the crackle
and drone of his brown box radio.

Before her school bus, before a day
of selling the Navy to boys like he once was,
they breathe the kitchen air steeped
in all that Frank Sinatra, Andy Williams,

Tony Bennett croon about. When she asks
who's singing, he tells her and she drinks it in
with milk, his little pitcher, giggling
when he pretends to forget.

When he first held her, he was thankful
for ten fat toes, the small squirming weight
of her. Never too soon to rock her to sleep
in the kitchen, never too soon to say,
That's Mel Torme -- that's the Velvet Fog.
Belle Isle

She should have had more than just six grades of learning from nuns to parse and cipher, taking her turn at the board, dry silk of chalk in her fingers, teaching her mouth the breathy passage of 'think' and 'Theodore.' Instead she woke to dress and feed her younger brothers, then rolled a lunch of bread and cheese into her sleeve and walked to work, past the dark sea of habits in the schoolyard, towards ten hours in the factory's foggy realm of condensation that hid the windows' grudging light and kept the young leaves tender.

Six days a week she answered to a name that wasn't hers, but her own sturdy hands sliced and creased the leaves, stuffed them tobacco-fat, rolled them into neat pinched cylinders, then sent them to the proving ground: the scales. Stop the machines, clean the machines, three times a day and once before breaking out into the Detroit night, towards home and Freddie playing stickball, Henry swinging on the gate.

Nights she took her place at the stove and stuffed sweet cabbage leaves with mounds of rice and meat, crimped flaps of shiny dumplings closed with the skewed tines of a fork. For the children, sometimes she floated thin, slit ribbons of dough in sputtering fat to loop and dust in powdered sugar. Galupke, pierogi, cruschiki -- the food good daughters learn to make. All week

She chased the small brown envelope Of coins that bought her Sundays. Six cents a trolley, penny a transfer, each week The cars lurched to the foot of the scalloped bridge and let her go, towards the band shell and the fields beyond its curve. There was time,
then, to name each bronzed fountain seal
and walk the zoo that ringed the flowerhouse's green
glass dome. Time to listen while the symphony
dressed the air with Brahms and Sousa, then stretch
sweet blades of grass between curved thumbs
and sound her own green notes. Released
from the factory, the stove, the five younger ones,
she unfurled her girlhood like her mother's
best tablecloth and spoke: *I am Jennie,
I am thirteen, I am happy here.*
Sundays glowed, the bright beads on her rosary
when her family moved back East
without her – *someone has to work, Janja,*
but what he really meant was *someone has to drink.*
Too young to know that fathers and cigars
wouldn’t always own her, she stayed
and went to Mass and sent her paycheck home
and chose to love the trolley and the cello.
When she says *I hated Detroit,* she sounds
as though she means it. When she adds
*Belle Isle was the one good thing,*
she means that too.
Lines On Your 33rd Birthday

In some European city you awaken
to a life you hardly recognize.
Strange pillow, stranger sheets,
so white they almost deafen,
softer than you knew they could be.
Bulbs like sightless pilgrims inch
their sturdy shoots up, up
through the breaks in the dark soil.
Women in kerchiefs, women with strollers
bargain over vegetables,
soft cheeses, asters and tulips
from the floating flower market.
The fragrance of fresh bread rises,
envelops, sends the businessmen home
at night through the doors of narrow houses
where children shriek and chase the dog
who will not wear the bonnet,
and boiled potatoes in a blue bowl
shine like offerings.
Wheat or Fish

I wake up every day and I recant:
every Good morning poised with the spit
on my tongue to tumble out or dart back in,
safe in the cave of my mouth, as easily
swallowed as spoken. All those words, all so fickle --
not just the glamour words like witch or daiquiri
but the more pedestrian: bottle, brother, kitchen shears.
The cows have heard it all, every morning
for as long as cows remember. They know
that once their milk sings into the pail
there's no putting it back, so they relax, they pay me
the mildest cow attention. Each day
my brother must decide if he will swing
a scythe in our fields or wade with his mended
net into the sea. Wheat or fish,
field or ocean -- it never gets easier. Nothing
named remains itself; the clock starts
ticking down 3, 2, 1 it detonates
and meaning sprays like shrapnel, rises
like a gas cloud over an unsuspecting city.
My brother's shadow looms beside him,
ten feet tall in the late-day sun, and still
within the house daylight returns to
sleep those two peculiar children, me
with my cows and words, my brother
testing the sharp blade, wishing for gills.
"Out of myth and narrow doctrine, travelers' tales and some vestiges of classical knowledge, the cartographers fashioned what passed for maps in the Middle Ages. The style was symbolic, ornamental, and often beautiful; the geographic content, impoverished and usually misleading; the purpose, a representation of the mind rather than of the Earth."

-- The Mapmakers

Once I was a mapmaker, the finest in my trade, fluent in the tongues of vellum, amber, herkimer and lace, sweet musk of cinnamon, gnarled gingerroot and clove. Dressed like a man in worsted trousers and plumed hat, schooled in that luxurious pretending, I charted oceans, then floated mute shapes of continents into their midsts a flood of tint-soaked brush on parchment stretched taut on wooden frames. Bound breasts, shorn hair, I hoisted sail and read the skies for coming storms and the stars' revelations. There was no ship I didn't know as well as any man who sailed, no sea beyond my capability to navigate, portolan spread out and weighted to a table, astrolabe steady in my hand. The monks who raised me taught me trigonometry and how to pray. As a girl I recited Latin verbs and learned to press wine, peel drowsy bees from honeycomb, fashion poultices for croup. But always the maps drew me back: the library, floor to ceiling books and rolling ladders, sun in bent streams through the glass, where one day Brother Paul showed me the circle and gave me the words: mappa mundi.

In the midst of that world hinged by Jerusalem, I learned the rules of Ptolemy and Plato, the etiquette that colored Christian cities red, as well as prayers for dying men and where to bury them. When other voices came, I listened too: where to mark each border, how wide the seas should span, how much indigo and gilt I could afford. Parchment and garlic juice, yellower still -- each brushstroke stopped my breath.
I never got over the delicate sheaf of gold
laid to the page and held there with egg white,
scraps fluttering through air as I blew them away.
There were some who called me witch, because I healed,
because I knew things long before they happened.
I had the Sight, I had the faith to whisper in each lover's ear

Round, the world is round 'til one of them believed me
and set sail. In Bruges, city of lace, city of silt, I met the man
my mother prophesied while she lay bleeding from my birth.
Long after he'd set sail we spoke, his whisper still loud
in my head: Mi corazon, mi alma. The ship foundered
off the Moorish coast; I saw it in a dream. Our daughters,
he said. When they come you will see they are beautiful.

I gave it up -- the sea, the hours with dyes and brush --
when they arrived: Two babies, both wee mewling girls,
whose milky prisoner I became, my breasts like globes,
my belly full and round -- I was not sorry.
I felt their swell within me, knew each flutter from my womb:
fist or foot exploring, mapping its place in the world.

How welcome the landed weight of daughters,
unwavering points of a windrose, the oldest steady-eyed
and grave, her sister quick as the flash of sun
on a spyglass. It's true that I may leave no seachart
with my name, no fixed illumination of this life --
it is enough to leave these bright twin planets, orbiting.
In a Paris shop window:

Red spray of lilies, mottled tin bucket, furred circle of sleeping cat. She arches and rolls, paws hiding face, white with black nose and black splotches. The shopkeeper walks from the shadowed rear into the light, suited and elegant and smiling as I point to her cat and my camera. To my hopeful Parlez-vous anglais? she shakes her head. She gestures wait and disappears, returns with a letter she reads in French, and I nod when it seems like time to nod. Americain, she tells me, and shows me the upstate return address. She pulls from the envelope a postcard, a print of a familiar pied cat holding court among lilies. C'est elle, she points. C'est elle!

In the infinite visits of tourists before me, another American, another camera snapped a photograph and voila! a famous Paris cat. We are both pleased with the conversation; the cat floats in her pool of sunlight and purrs.
Some Girls

You could have knocked me over with a feather
the day my editor assigned to me
not floods or locusts, fires or another
disaster, but those Garbos of the sea,
the Lorelei. *Don't ask 'What if,'* he growled.
*Don't drown and it's a scoop.* I tried to see

his point. At home with spouse and friends I trawled
the notion through the ocean of my brain
til I was satisfied, and then I held

my nose and jumped. Arriving from the dry land
conspicuously finless, I gave up
on blending in -- how could I go unnoticed? --

and tried to get to work, but found my hopes
of pencil and recorder useless here.
I felt the crush of fathoms, their blue depths

beckoning, and fought the urge to gasp for air.
I watched their gills flow open, flutter shut
and tides of envy rose, as green as their

seductive fins. Beautiful, they'd float
around me, ever mindful of the distance
from their mosaic scales to my arched feet.

I, who am world-famous for persistence,
at last gave up. I watched my questions sink
and find a home within the lower currents
dissolving in an oceanic trick.  
These women were too mythic and too real,  
suburban mermaids living down the block.

Some chatted in between their siren calls,  
but strictly off-the-record; for example,  
Vi (red-haired, gum-popping, tall)

kept her explanation rather simple:  
a manicure, lunch with the girls, then wreck  
a ship or two and that's considered ample.

Their secrets came too weighted and too slick  
for my dry brain to process, borne of the sea's  
affinity for gravity and rock

guarded by clownfish, angels, mysteries  
disguised as bright persuaders who protect  
the lacy, tufted reefs from greedy eyes.

I have to say that sitting on a rock  
appears to be a decent living. Some  
fishtailed, singing girls have all the luck.
Dark Angels

It's not so much the substance as the order of miracles I find intriguing, principals listed in order of appearance: the Virgin Mother, Christ, the Holy Spirit in all their various disguises. Stigmata, ascension, the bread to flesh -- these are all gestures with presence, gestures with whole histories behind them. It's a gesture of that magnitude I want for you -- it seems I have no aptitude for grief.

I have two poems left from the year we worked together. Two poems and your obituary, not much of a collection. Since then, I've tried to write your elegy, but Chris, this lament and consolation is a slippery business. Two poems and your name in the paper, where I knew I'd find it sooner or later, dressed in the peculiar terseness that always gives away a suicide.

My first priest, Father Ayre, sang parts of the service so clearly I still hear them twenty-five years later. For years I thought there were angels and dark angels in the company of Heaven. My father appeared every Christmas and Easter, his seasonal nods to religion and my mother. One Easter without warning the Regis boys' father showed up out of the California blue with cheap plastic watches for his kids. There were words, and then their dad and mine were squaring off on the church sidewalk, fists raised. C'mon, you clown, I heard my father say, still in his good jacket.
What about me? I haven't been to church in fifteen years. What would I say that God hasn't heard already? Even as a kid I worried God would know I didn't really mean it, didn't think anyone deserved a faith that strong.

I am waiting for these words to take on more than I can ever give them, transcend the daily, assume the barren grace your poem deserves. Before you pulled the trigger, was the picture clear? Did you see through the dullness of the everyday, is that rumor true about everything freezing into its rightful place and can you tell me what's the good of having it, the sudden flash of knowledge, if the choice is to die or spend the rest of our lives coaxing it back?
That Ocean

I remember when we thought it would save us,
we'd grown sick with something only it could heal.

We bowed, believing in the power of anointment,
the way it could restore us to ourselves.

We shed our clothes like lesser skins
and gave ourselves up the night we arrived,

trailing towels around our shoulders, the sigh
of the screen door behind us. The cooling sand

gave way under feet too used to more resistance,
packing harder as we neared the water's edge.

A word or two, then we were wading in, polite guests,
as wavelets met and rose over ankles, knees,
and soon enough the rest of us. How easily
I found you in that dark. Light
distorted our discoveries past recognition,
giving us the taint of strangers,

but in that blueblack August sea I swam
no unsteady course to you. The layers of water

fled in all directions when you stood, no match
for the hum of your skin, its warmth insistent,

balm to my seachill when your arms came around me
and we stood together, waist-deep in the tide.

Not til later did we learn how waves ride piggyback,
sneak up and overtake other waves, break and reform

into themselves, the differences among them only slight,
but new waves nonetheless. I did not know this tide
would rise again, guided by the lunar, the astral, everything that floats beyond our ken, to pull me back
to you and a familiar, changeful sea, where the shoreline stretches and unfurls itself in a slow curl
I know because my hand helped draw its map.
What of this discovery, seaworthy and watertight,
that floats beyond the breakers, past the channel buoys, beyond what can be named?
These thoughts swell, tumble, break over me, answers gone to foam. You're curved beside me
like a shell, some conch or abalone, full of nightlit chambers where I fit as though I belonged there
and I can't fathom what I feel as I look at us now, naked, still, and nowhere near that ocean.
III.
Turtle

It swims beneath my mother's collarbone, aloof and silent, hidden in its shell of flesh and muscle and whatever clothes she wears. Instead of movement, it prefers the calm of stillness -- sitting down, or sleep. Its ocean cousin digs a shallow bowl into the sand with fins to lay its eggs, but this dome owns no flippers, only tubes that minister the drug meant to destroy instead of hatch. No delicacy here, no danger of becoming a tureen of Sunday dinner soup, nor any drag across a road so slow it's barely motion. No tender-hearted motorists approach to help it on its journey; those who brave our parlor only see the aftermath of surgery and sometimes her left breast, as if immodesty could scare this creature back into its shell, her cancer with it, and she could watch it swim away. As if.
Diagnosis

Just when you think it's only a test,
you've been lulled like a child
into the safety of blood
that's always normal -- no, up to now, textbook --
just then is when the lady waiting next to you takes you by surprise,
whips out her billfold and shows you pictures of her daughter.

She's a girl who looks just like your daughter,
a normal kid, good in English, freezes on Math tests,
once in a while pushes curfew -- big surprise --
but not a bad deal for an only child.
Her mother confides, "In her baby book,
I saved just one lock of hair, but every baby tooth, dried blood

and all. She used to cry when she saw her own blood.
Something she never got over. For all the nights I said Daughter,
you're alright, Mama's here, no doll, no rocking chair, no book
would soothe her. They say the good Lord tests
each mother by giving her a child
just like she was, and if you know this, no child is a surprise.

But I let myself forget, and so I knew the sting of surprise
from the moment she surged out of me in a gush of blood
and water. She was the fish who kept jumping towards air, the child
who would not wait one tick longer to be born. A daughter
to follow three sons, and nothing of them prepared me for the test
of her existence." You nod and try to get back to your book,

some paperback your daughter lent you, a romance, not the kind of book
you'd choose yourself, but one you've found to your surprise
you rather like. And it makes sense for you to read it now, during this test
you don't want but are too scared to refuse, equally scared that your blood
will betray you. You sit in the waiting room chair, steelwilled daughter
of parents long dead, and think about your daughter, that one child

that your body kept, and wonder if her child
will know you or just your name and face from the heavy book
of family photographs. You tell her you're not surprised
by this latest diagnosis; you say your blood
has whispered to you all along how this would go, each test

confirms it's war. And oh, daughter, how it hurts, how it surprises
to know your enemy when your enemy is your own blood, to wait with no child,
just a book, to hear *This is a test; this is only a test.*
Ghosts

Some nights when sleep is sleeping down the block
and it's you, a teabag and your regrets
you think of them, there in your empty house
where even the dust is well-behaved.

Your hardwood floors still smooth, your furniture
unscuffed -- your rooms retain the ordered air
of childlessness, or children grown and gone.
Your story is, no yearning was enough.

Three times you rode with sirens to that place
where three babies bled out of you -- the last one
almost took you too. I knew the word
h
dorrage before I could tie shoes.

And then, there I was, your fluke of nature,
full-term, ten-fingered, your inheritor,
the only one to wriggle out alive:
your great relief, your stubborn, brown-eyed prize.

You see them as your missed chances at greatness,
Lost opportunities for mothering.
Perhaps they would have eased the way you draw
the air around you like a cloak, to cover
everything that isn't there. You shine

your black eyes on me in the night, but I
am here and whole and nothing that you seek.
You chase your sleep with empty nets
and reach for ghosts who could have made you something,
ghosts you dreamed of, calling, yours.
Transfusion, 1968

1.

Thirty years ago she started bleeding. She knew the signs, had read the runic stains in underpants before, no stranger to her uterus clenching in refusal. She cried through the call to her husband at work, the cramps that she thought would halve her, the ambulance ride when she hemorrhaged so much blood she nearly died. It took all the doctors had to save her: all knowledge, all will, all arrogance, all the B negative the bloodbank held, more than you'd think one body could receive.

She didn't die that time (new blood, new blood) went home to her survivors, a fat, bald baby girl and crewcut husband and gave up on more children, told herself she was content with the small expectant faces in her classroom every day for nine months of each year. Was it true? I was swimming in my own new blood, trying on my own new skin, taste of toes fresh in my mouth, fixed on the bottle, too young to remember, too young to name those infant wishes shadowing our lives.

2.

Hard to believe such sadness could produce any life at all, but in the end one cell from that new blood abandoned all its goodness and set out for parts unknown. The sacks that saved her came with something extra, started something ticking and today the doctors guess there is no fix. Who can I blame? Not God or my mother -- rough equivalents -- not her besieged organ bulging out of itself, not TV or pesticides or lack of self-esteem. She's feeling fine. It's no one's fault and no one's luck.
3.
She says the scar bisects her, substernum down
past the curve of her waist. She says she doesn't care
about the scar, and I say I believe her. She's 60, far
too young to die, old enough to live without bikinis or men
who profess need for them. We have been savage sometimes,
going after each other with the pure bloodrage of any mother
and daughter, our own survival resting on a killing.
I fought that urge and its attendant guilt too long, for what
feels like my whole life, for what is my whole life,
and it's only now at 30 myself, my mother still hoarse
from the tube down her throat, that I can breathe the words
out loud: *new blood, new blood*,
that I can understand the hunger.
Rescue

Ropeswing dangling from the tamarack,
sun bright and benign overhead,
again I dove for you. Lungs blue explosions
of almosts, I jerked you from insistent
reeds and hugged you, squirming to the surface.
For weeks, that dream would call me every night
and I relearned fresh sweat, fresh fear;
I watched dreams play across your face, stayed ready
to rebruise your lungs with air
‘til you were safe, and we could both awaken.

Respect fell onto who could swing the farthest,
whose leather hands the rope could not bite.
Toughness and a steely eye: predictors
of a champion, the one who knew
how far to travel, just when to let go
and fall to water with the biggest splash.
We ruled those summers' lake and mud and flight --
leap, swing, cannonball was all.

Nothing compares. The haze of years
consumes us; we cannot swing out.
You joke that salvation has lost touch, and if
he's still around he's old and sagging
like the rest of us, but no one laughs.
Though I heard my whole life it's like riding
a bike, once you do it you'll never forget,
here I am, useless at rescue, the swimmer
who's forgotten how to swim.
The Good Daughter

Though you swear I came from you,
I say I must have floated by, moss-wrapped
on a raft of reeds, brought to shore
by one of your attendants. Or maybe I showed up
on a doorstep on a day someone had tricked you
to believe you were the finder of lost things.
The spell wore off. Now when we talk, mostly
we hang up, an audible click I was never allowed
growing up under your tightfisted reign. This is our story,
brought to a close by a tumor more faithful
than anyone has ever been to you.

This is what I expected: to be angry
with you for dying, last in a long line
of abandonments. That you would wrestle
with feelings I could never fully know, even
if you chose to tell me. But not the resurrection
of these rutted tracks we've travelled since
my birth, this exhausting tug of wills I thought
I'd grown beyond. The mother dying is a story
you know firsthand, but I'm reading that book
for the first time, and I don't know how it goes.

You are the rigid queen, the starched empress
in whose presence certain words are never spoken;
you recognize no words, no wishes but your own.
So when I speak another language, tell you
with my stumbling daughter's tongue
that I will do my best to get there any way I can,
your voice tightens, seeks a higher pitch and then decrees
If that's the way you're going to be, don't come
and you are still screaming tightly in my ear
when I choke out We're done and slam
the earpiece on its hook.

I wish that it were so, that your dying
were a smooth stone I could wrap myself
around for the ritual drowning; I never knew
your death could be your death and shrapnel too.
Here we are, two women from a thousand stories,
stranded in this tale which is broken

beyond meaning, some halfassed prince swinging
back and forth like a rusty gate, squeaking
"Whose side? Whose side?" The exiled king
mouths instructions that he is really shouting,
but I'm too far away to hear.

Tell me again about the Good Daughter,
that rare and significant foundling
fresh from a nap in the woods of her discovery,
unburdened by blood connection. The one who looks
like I would look if I were beautiful,
the one who answers to another name.
Ghost Pantoum

Ask me for a word and I’ll tell you it’s a tangle,
a thicket of memory where no light wriggles in.
X is still angry that Y stole her doll forty years ago
something Y claims never happened. Y suggests therapy.

A thicket of memory where no light wriggles in:
welcome to the family album, watermarked and aged.
Count the people smiling on one finger. For people
with no money, they sure had plenty of pictures taken.

X is still angry with Y, for the doll thing and a catalog
of other sins. The pair of levelheaded nieces chime
Get over it, but who listens to the levelheaded nieces?
Not X, not Y, nor the rest of the frail alphabet.

Y claims it never happened: Get some therapy.
X, who has vowed to freeze Y with her silence,
now vows to somehow be colder than frost. Z, the youngest,
takes Y’s advice and gets to work; she flourishes.

Welcome to the family album, watermarked and aged,
full of pinched faces, eyes squinting back at the sun,
thin frames, thin gruel, the taste of homemade gin
and sometimes blood. No pictures of the bruises,
just smiles no one is used to, rare and stiff as new shoes.
Someone bought those snapshots, but with what currency?
I think of words like paucity and dearth, words that mean
the emptiest, words so dry they crumble on the tongue.

The levelheaded nieces sing as one: Alphabet, alphabet,
who loves the alphabet? They’ve grown up dodging
the sharp corners of their elders, angry letters buzzing
their way into algebra and angles, the more hostile professions.
Algebra

for Kirstin

Never has math been so beautiful:
the errant growth removed, the neurons
busy reclaiming their twisted thickets,
sawblade scartracks under hair
your surgeon swore he wouldn't shave.

You chug forward in small increments.
At twenty-five you have to study trains,
practice making dinner, making change,
fending off seizures with an abacus
of milligrams. Every day you exercise
your left side out of its numb tunnel.
Then you grapple with the textbook trains,
their speed and distance, points of origin:
Hartford, Boston, Santa Fe, Seattle.
\[ x \text{ equals: } y \text{ equals: simplify, factor } \]
\[ \text{balance each equation}. \]

There are things you want to know that the books
don't bother asking: Where are they headed?
What are the names of the engineer's children?
How far does the headlamp cast its beam
into the blueblack, rushing night?
Fuse

Your tumor, that has us all
afraid of dying, has left you
unafraid to live. Picture

the melted circuit board, mutinous
rows of disconnection sparking the air
blue. Your brain, that mischievous

conductor, sends the skittering
impulse to its unplanned
destination: lightning in its own
dark sky. For a moment, everything
distills in a flash of pure light.
Science lays its clear template

over nature, the buzz and hum
of current: electricity.
You are ready to learn this new

machine, to will it back to working
order. You wake up to a just-made
world that none of us can know.

Each post-op seizure brings its own
instruction, sometimes keep going,
you're alright, sometimes

ask the cute EMT for his number.
Only your eyes see beyond
the patina the world rusts into.

That wild confusion in your brain
has made these things
as clear as they will ever be.
A Poem in Hand

Ladies and gentlemen I pretend to address,
why have you come?
You are not due till I am finished, so
you are never due. This poem sees me
watching from the margins of the page,
picks me up and hands me over, though I
am not the travellers' prize,
no object of this pilgrimage.
This poem begins as a watched clock:
Readers, make way for the sweep
of the second hand -- it stops for anyone.
The page slips from fingers which
become my mother's every morning,
beginning to knot and thicken
like gingerroot, gnarled
rhizomes of tendon and flesh.
When it hits the hardwood
floor, the poem shatters, a dropped
mirror that is always fogged, always.
It is time for the girl with the broom --
young hands, young eyes to ferret out
that lost piece in the corner, sharp
spike of diphthong, marooned capital,
an article weeping of loneliness --
Time to sweep. Sweep it up.
The Plan

It's time to talk about afterwards,
about what we will do with her body.
She has a plan, cremation,
and we expected that, the one certainty
in this year blown open, hollowed
by surprise. But let me remind you:
in her silverware drawer, all the knives
point due east. A lazy susan spins her
alphabetized spices to nowhere. Teabags
salute. The Model of Efficiency took
lessons from my mother, and there you go:
a plan.

I learned the random beauty of ash
from rock, a fist of snowflake
obsidian my dad brought home
when I was five. I grew to fear
that rushing lava less by each degree
once I could picture flurries of ash
dropping from the false-ceiling sky
to hush and pepper in reverse
grey flakes on black flow.

My father no longer a part of her, the ash
remains, a fixed point on her horizon
as she plans her funeral. She will not choose
an urn, no rounded, dumb receptacle to hold
her burned remains, no curve of brass
or stainless sweep to cool my cheek
against. For once she belongs
to the school of release; she hurries
all she knows of clenched fists, of things
held back, into reverse: the open hand.

Where is she now? Still here, of this earth
and the flesh she was born into,
as safe as chemotherapy can keep her,
and the columns and rotundas
make Charlottesville feel almost like home. 
She finds things to do while the poison drips 
through her body: quilt, read, redecorate

the condo, dodge phone calls from her crazy 
sisters, stay up nights to pore over maps 
so she can tell us where to scatter her 
body, the least part of her, ash by indelible ash.
Mama

A child says *dada* first because the sounds breed sooner in the mouth and line themselves behind the teeth, the palate's honor guards. And meanwhile, future noises strew themselves across the tongue like playroom toys that catch unlucky feet. The great reward comes later, when lips and tongue and sound at last attach to make the sounds that match the ones for *pater*. But look -- a child might use those words for one year, two, then cast them from her mouth. I've learned there's no way back, the word is gone forever, crowded out like baby teeth in spite of my mouth's best attempts to keep the second word I knew, the first that I gave up.