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## The Hyssop Tub

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE HYSSOP TUB

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the  
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For my father

&

For Joshua

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## ABSTRACT

These following poems are variations on the personal narrative poem. Most clearly influenced by the post-confessional lyric poets, who continue to introduce hitherto-taboo subject matter in the manner of the confessional poets but who have also transformed the use of the personal by bringing lyric strategies to bear on autobiographical material, I, too, use the strategies which Gregory Orr articulates as an implementation of Eros, Sympathy, Symbol, and Proportionate Ego; subsequently, these poems work to display the lyric longing for transcendence and enact the dramatic premise that this world's forces upon a being create it. My father and mother continue to figure prominently in these poems, and, now married, I explore both the beauty of such intimacy as well as the interspersed relational angst. Though I write largely about or with my own experience in mind, a number of these poems are also attempts at social portraiture or persona poems that explore another's experience.

My dissertation is comprised of writing that attempts to exteriorize the interior (as Marianne Moore declared of Elizabeth Bishop's writing; she exemplifies this aesthetic and, as such, is one of my models) while allowing a profound sense of the personal to be a connector to human experience at large: therefore, poems of illness and healing, both psychological and physical; poems of desperation, in response to war and other circumstances of reality, as well as the stark understanding that language fails us—or we fail it; love poems, many and many of them, of motley sorts, offer a thematic under girding to these poems of the complexity of a living that both breaks us and is broken by us. The simultaneous and often paradoxical theme also present in these poems is that recognizing beauty, delight, and joy should not, perhaps *cannot*, be neglected or excluded from the human experience. Given these multiple aims, my work seeks to abide in W.H. Auden's assertion that the role of poetry is not emotional transport or political transformation but the perception of truth and the affirmation of an imperfect world.

I.  
The Necessary Dark

And in the days  
when you find yourself orphaned,  
emptied  
of all wind-singing, of light,  
the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue,

may there come back to you  
a voice,  
spectral, calling you  
*sister!*  
from everything that dies.

Galway Kinnell, "Under the Maud Moon"

## THE BOILED CLEAN FEEL OF YOUR BONES

*after Psalm 51*

In the middle of your floor, a man is crying. You are  
on top of him, trying to kiss his shoulder, trying to

hold still the corners of his face, perched  
in dereliction, a skin of remorse balancing itself

carefully over bones, the absurd cylindrical  
hope of bones, sturdy and pillaged, as they are,

at once. His face is beautiful, his face  
hates you, the bric-a-brac of usage, the doors

opening and shutting on the tongue, its dumb oil, and now  
you finger the cracked peppercorn of that-which-is-not-but

damp ache hanging in your room, so you pull your hips  
away from him and the particles of your bodies melt from each other,

that river of borrowed blood, the enterprising cells.

Now, having emptied its dark pockets, air falls

from the four tines of the ceiling fan, the unbelievable,  
stupid ceiling fan, its slow spin the most perfect thing you can think of,

from here, on your back, in your room. *Sometimes,*  
your lips making a strange bargain, *I can feel you break.* He

offers nothing yet, the rhythm of sorrow so coarse it holds  
tantamount distance from psyche to Now, spirit to Yes, body

to God. *I can't pray like this,* he says, finally, his voice a shallow pit,  
*Look at me,* and the angles of his face are an uncached

latch at the sprucewood gate. *I want to pray,* he tells you,  
only you realize it's not him speaking, not him

after all but you, who knows the black shape  
in the corner is the whicker basket, filled just today

with towels and a lavender sachet, you who knows  
the boiled clean feel of your bones, *I want to cry out—*

## WHERE WINGS COULD BE

Preserve not, want not. If the tumbleweed of faith  
kept its spore, as my walnut-hearted whole its promises,

rumped as an inner nest, no wind would send me  
reeling. Send me reeling. What's left of the glass pitcher

from Denmark, a wedding present four months old,  
is the handle. The rest sounded resolutely, shards swept

singing to the dustpan, his shoulders keeping  
time with the broom, me in the doorway, stepped back

to lament elbow, glass, one movement's vacuum  
of grace knocking all beauty to the floor.      What I need

from life: a few loves brilliant with return. Bundle  
of papers, music, each pocked round of opportunity/ mistake/

acolade/ what have you, a proof, here and there, knowing  
the nothingness of knowing: the self a dim understanding,

those great hollow spots where wings could be: brutal,  
stunning flight.      O Daedulus. O inescapable

God. Air, lungs, legs and belly, holy holy torpid heat:  
holy tubes, holy rigor. My father stretched on the harness

his therapist swears will soothe seven bulging, two ruptured  
discs, my father who answers *How are you feeling* with

*With my hands*, who has slept on the floor  
for years holy disc holy nest sac toponym and cup.

Saucer. Diastole. Sweet systole. One holiness spread  
across all faces, one stroke from the fingers

of truth: what but bones are left to sing? Maybe  
feathers. Maybe not. Even they are gift—hen, pheasant,

mallard. I said, send me reeling. Texas for the preacher  
electrocuted during baptismal. California

for the baby girl suffocated by a fallen window fan,  
Oklahoma's mother of four run over right in front

of her kids and even the man who strung himself up in BC  
and his wife returning ashes to South Africa,

Lord. What I need from time to time: not news:  
homily, reverie, psalm. Should I ask my daily bread or

sun and shield. The starving padlock of self sent beneath  
the house for the floorboards' fallings-through.       Once

small as a fawn I slept in the curl of my father's arm,  
held in that holding pattern we know as love and then

I was grown and then a mandolin and then opalesque,  
a handle unattached from its cylinder and spout, desolate

with what I couldn't name, a particular ache I sent on up  
to Jesus for our set-on-a-spindle globe, for the undone,

the millions. For the breaching heads of Calla lilies  
fallen from their stems in my father's back. Send me,

send me. In winter all but basil in the nook of the great oak  
will yield. In spring the knots of faith trip up the spine

into the neck, shoot straight to that patchwork  
of nervous gray matter and what brain can hold such

soft pelt, dear God, keep one candle burning       won't You.

ON THE INSTALLATION OF A TITANIUM MESH STENT IN MY FATHER'S  
HEART

The body is ready; the body is down—below, like a lily's bulb.  
Imagine the balloon they are making inside him: cutting-edge,  
battered with slow-release meds to dissolve the arterial blockage  
that, one toothsome day, would kill him. Imagine how silent, how full

of blood my father is, brimming, the dark, mendicant fluid, culled  
through that muscle we'd like to believe not in bondage  
to the gallimaufry of love—but ardent nonetheless, a Caravagg-  
ista who paints Holofernes' death spurting on Judith, powerful

temptress. O hero, heart! O hapless blood: *exact* bouillon of my father's  
myocardium and Mariama Barrie's infibulated clitoris, blood from the skin

of labium minora and majora cut away. She, too, recumbent, the vulva's  
aperture now sewn to the size of the tip of a matchstick, thin

as the hole that strained my father's vein to send its blood. Surgeries  
make art of the body: marvel, then, this canvas, sixty-two; another, ten.

TO BRADLEY G., WITH GRATITUDE, FOR THE HANDMADE BLANKET

Of all the going-away presents, yours was by far  
*ne plus ultra*. Why should it embarrass you, my praise?  
It's good and true that a man should knit, your feyest  
moil be wrapped around me now, so that, despite the war,

despite temerity, the epigone of leadership, the fear,  
the dying everywhere, the suffering, hatred, our crazed  
negligence which surely will erode my spirit like the face  
of that limestone statuette—goddess or kore—*Lady of Auxerre*,

I am, for a moment, happy. Brad, it's the kind of happiness  
borne of peculiarity-*cum*-generosity, the kind you get by looking  
at brilliant Marianne Moore in that tricorn hat she wore because,

she said, her head was lumpy. It's alright my husband gets  
off the phone with you and weeps; this, too, perhaps, a way of giving  
thanks: an oblation for knowing you at all, an oblation for its cost.

## CRYING OVER ONIONS

It's not the fumes. Purple-tipped like soft fingernails,  
these slivers won't be tossed in the compost we've begun. It's you,  
sitting, sagging as a fruit tree in the living room with the new  
lampshade lit up, its methodical brown diagonals

thrown against the wall. My Cherokee great-aunt is full  
of remedies, last week her mouth like an eyrie says *A-dobi* to you,  
says, Fix him red onions, dear, in salad, in stir-fry, in stew—  
they are nature's truest anti-depressant. But I'm a narwhal

tonight, long tooth spiraling before me, diving my 3000 feet  
time and again, praying *Please, God*, praying *Do something*  
*you fucking onions, you caramelized pieces of crap*, make him

well. I call out like the town's bell tower for you to take your seat  
and the plates steam, your chemicals eddy, a plumb line with string  
enough to hold. *O Lord*, we bow, and I reach for you, I touch a single limb.

FOR MY FATHER'S SELECTED ANECDOTES

Recently a friend admitted a fear of birds, how,  
as a child, he'd meant to rescue a fallen robin: he reached  
to return the bird when a grey sprawl of lice left its body  
for his hand, so he dropped the bird and ran. It was

the telling that made me think of you, the way a grown man  
relives his ancient anxieties more vividly with time—that field  
of sorghum stretching before my friend like the rest of his life, each  
white cedar humming under its scabs of bark, branches promising

oriel, blackbird, grackle as he flapped the lice from his arm. It may  
be true, that even the smallest deaths are mother  
to beauty, but you spared us stories of your parents launching plates and forks  
at each other, of LA gang fights, you traded your buddy's

blown-off face in Nha Trang for the kneaded silence of its truth  
beneath your blood: you knew what it was to fear, you let me  
believe man is good, the four chambers of the heart  
more like a cow's prodigious stomachs than the cavities

of a pistol. Still, I crawled beneath your knees  
to watch cop shows on TV, still hollered midnights  
when the closet kicked with deer, the woman's ears bled bees, the neighbor boy  
clamped his penis against my cheekbone at someone's

birthday while upstairs they pinned the tail on the donkey—  
green and blue balloons floated down, popped  
at his elbows. My friend says, *A bird's most terrifying  
feature is its tongue—blanched, cracked—think of it*

*coming straight for your face.* I meant to laugh  
a little, his arms raised, fingers aimed at my eyes  
like claws. Instead I heard myself gasp, as though I could  
begin to understand this, his personal horror. I could not;

I thought only of Philomel—human turned nightingale  
whose tongue, torn ragged like the kitchen curtain,  
continued to sing. Dad, how could you know that balloons, to this day, loose  
my bowels? I never told you. I swore it was a dream.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FALLING IN LOVE

Begin by throwing something away: the microwave, for example. This will be easier after the roses fall from where you hung them to dry, their petals spilt like chips of black blood and your own ticking pulse

won't stop you from sagging to the floor with a heady, comprehensive loss, those flowers you strung up by the broom, stunningly ruined, their long stems, too, snapped like the legs of a praying mantis. After this, yes, sweep your arm

across the cupboards and fill a plastic sac with the butter pickles and wheat germ nobody bothered to open, the prize-winning box of cereal, the spindled cheese grate. But, whatever you do, do not toss the egg shells, which, after having broken each open,

you returned to the carton like a dozen viscous sockets that might yet sing. Run your fingers over and over their fractured edges, and don't be surprised if, quite suddenly, you've never touched such a thing, ceramic-thin,

specked with the memory of earth, grains, wind, now crooked halves of a yolky hollow, cupped grottos of sound you've become deaf to, your ears dwarfed with importance, so that later, when you are standing here with me, wondering what you'll do

without the toaster oven and why my face is an insouciant cheddar pink, you must hold the old knife in one hand and arch my back with the other, slice open two avocados and with a ridiculous shock behold their pits, so beautiful that after you enter heaven

and get a look at God's great knuckles it's *these* you'll recall, and, subsequently, your hand hovering over the trash bin. For now this is what you must do: stand still a decent while; know why you weep, slowly turning your hand over, letting them go.

## THE NECESSARY DARK

I send the letter, in the corner a stamp  
like the eye of a fish, promising something

neither of us know how to say. I send the rain, the cracked  
green shell of a walnut, the top loop of scissors your thumb

slides into. The last letter you sent unfolds like an accordion:  
so you're standing at the sink, scrubbing tomatoes, sharpening

a knife and the problems keep coming, though it is what  
you know you must do, teaching sixth graders in a time of war

all you know of love: this one stayed after to learn his parts  
of speech, this one knows a word—*fagged*—you must explain

even to adults. Under a rhythm of longing like July's dream of gourds  
and beetles, here I am, a good piece already spooned from the cup

of my heart, that hickory meat, that red-breasted bird. Indirection,  
you say, protects us from truths we cannot bear. You, gentle

as a mandolin, are right, and I will know when to say  
what I mean to say. Until then, I send both hands

into the whorl of my hair, where I find a bee, flowers' syrup  
on its wings, which I also send, which will not be

enough. If Rilke, too, is right, beauty a terror that never crushes  
but comes close, we have whole margins of hope, will call that part

of the day exactly what it is, the necessary dark, left for me  
to find like a vial deep inside a cabinet, the farmer's mark

on the flank of a ram, you at the kitchen counter, you  
at the desk. I send to your emptied mouth a whistle

on the end of a string, my last true place, silence plaited  
in the gristle of the spine and tendons of the arms raised waist-high,

hollowed out as if to hold you, yes, even this I send.

## AUTUMN OF MY THIRTEENTH YEAR

When I came home quoting *nearly* every line  
of that lambent speech, played on Mrs. Dowell's beat-up

tape recorder those quiet afternoons the autumn  
of my thirteenth year, my father told me

of your infidelities. Here, in Texas, your academic robe  
frozen in iron billow to spite the old aspersion,

the features of your face speak as much as, against  
your immobile head, the sky. I am a girl white

as bone and if I am honest I'll admit the one snatch  
of my pavid adolescent education I still recall: *With this faith*

*we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair  
a stone of hope.* I heard once that more streets

are named after you than any other figure in American  
history. Which is what reminds me, your literal

figure on my walk to school now, past the LBJ museum  
and the towering music hall, you, in the October breeze,

active monolith of *dream*: I didn't care that day  
if you made babies with women besides your wife.

## THE GREEN SPIDER

I will take your mind off the things you think of only  
in the shower—space cleared by an egg-shaped soap turning over  
in your hand, by the white tile, the wet sheets down your

length. You might finally have thought of the seven children  
in Madagascar whose parents were taken with no explanation,  
the children walking each day past the prison until finally

one of them, desperate in a child's true way, lobbed  
a stolen fish through the bars for his mother, for which  
he was shot: once in the hip and once in the ear. Or

perhaps the woman in Utah who buckled her daughter in  
for a ride to find the girl's father, her cheating husband,  
catching up with him outside a paint store and running

him over, and backing up, and running him over,  
and backing up and running him over until, according  
to witnesses, he stopped screaming and lay still, spilled

as the canisters of Alaska Bay Blue purchased for his new  
home. I'll even take your mind off the teller in your mother's  
bank who swiped \$3 from accounts late on various afternoons

for over a year and would've made a clean break but for  
the octogenarian who hit the bank president over the head  
with her purse for nine weeks of miscalculations

and the \$27 she could not do without. Today the chamber  
of your shower is hallowed with the smell of lathered hair,  
equal parts ginger and goat's milk, and it is my joy to deceive you,

to be so small, translucent and green you'll forget these things,  
the slow crimp they might have made in your understanding  
of peril and need so that instead you'll bend close to me

and stare, think how intricate the world is, how delicate  
and composed, motionless on an inner curtain.

ALEXANDRE ET THÉODORE SONT BEAUX ET INTELLEGENT

*Janine est plus jolie que Monique.*

*Monique est plus jolie que Bernadette.*

*Bernadette est plus jolie que Amandine.*

—“Learning to Compare,” *Beginner’s French*

It’s this. This, and not the silence at dusk, plumes of an anhinga stretched to dry, and a gator’s eggs, of which less than three percent in a batch of sixty will make it, buried in a nest of river grass. When has anything so pert as *comparaison* messed with the copious world,

its mangled precedence, its closing vein: the book has no section on learning to survive. For that, I’ll enunciate *Jen e vois aucun taxi* though it might come out *C’est un bel arbre*. Somebody’s already sung that one and I’m thinking alligator eggs—how temperatures engender—

though the parking lot song makes sense: on this river, men played banjo, harmonica, kazoo, they sang of salamanders, egrets, blue mullet they could or could not catch. So *why* is Janine prettier than Monique, Monique prettier than Bernadette, Bernadette than Amandine. There sit

Alexander and Theodore, beautiful and intelligent, the bastards. With a gator, everything is a predator the first three years of its life, even its father, and what has a mother to do but hiss and smack her tail around even if the babes are not in need of warmth, not like me, on the porch, this

*Beginner’s French* lit up with colors, fonts, superlatives. After the first three years, it’s the alligator’s turn to be predator. Works just so, the ancient noise of *d’etre*, like the striated, hollow bottom of the bald cypress: widgeons wade there, far beneath the osprey. Here there’s such a thing, but no use for, any kind

of comparison: none more lovely, none more inane—just alive, just not.

## MORNING OF MY FATHER'S FOURTH MRI

First on the scene, you found her minutes from dead,  
a head of lettuce pressed to the dash and her purse spilled

like blood, *What are we doing here, Phineas*, she'd asked, *you and me,*  
*we got apples to pick*. No older than you, thatch of hair gone dark

with winter, the careful touch of a mulch spreader, it was you  
she knew, without knowing you at all, musky with the strength

of daybreak, it was you held forth from the shawl of her end: the heart's  
soft ball unraveling as the car careened and struck the divide,

and then you appeared, tender cylinder of lies: she  
would not let go your hand, whoever you were, her last,

reassuring mistake. Given over now, as you are, to the long tube,  
it is not time to think of her death but of Phineas: warm delusion,

opening the darkest moment of that woman's life like a vault to send  
a strobe of light thick and stubbled as the cornflower's stalk. Settle in,

send your whole body down, down into Franck's sonatas, cello rivering  
the brain. Listen close: at the end of track three, you can hear

Jacqueline dú Pres' exhalation just below the bow, quiet as a stem.

II.

A Wide Hole, A Whole Mouth

Marvelous Truth  
confront us  
at every turn, in every  
guise, dark horse,  
egg, iron ball, shadow,  
cloud of breath  
on the air.

Denise Levertov, "Matins"

JUST LIKE SOLOMON

It's happening fast, four years unwinding  
like the tire swing  
twisted up tight and all of a sudden  
let go, Go on, you tell him,  
take the washer and dryer, take the cat,  
but leave the motorcycle,  
you tell him, I've decided. He  
doesn't flinch but straight out  
tells you no. No, he says, it's rightly mine. This  
might stun you only  
it doesn't, same as your bleached-hot hair  
didn't stun him at the DMV  
when you changed titles, when he said, Halve  
a thing, see if you don't feel  
full of wrong. You want to say,  
what's it matter when, after hating him  
for so long, I can't get Merle Haggard  
out of my damn head? You don't  
say this but hold onto the sounds of it  
inside your mouth, the way  
you don't let much of anything shrink away these days,  
though it goes and goes  
whether you like it or not: shock,  
the blotched red couch, his mother  
that first Thanksgiving taking your picture  
over and over—You two,  
she kept on saying, You two,  
with her camera clicking and this  
you've clutched so hard it tastes like a nickel  
under your tongue, though  
right now all you taste is misery  
so you take the bike keys  
and throw them straight at his eyeballs,  
and then you both stand  
still and just when you think for sure  
he'll whip off his hat, slap  
his knee and yell your name, he says

calm as pie, I hope you  
find somebody, somebody who'll  
be good to you and give you  
a baby and then he says he *means* it and comes  
just close enough  
to rub a knuckle under your chin  
and then he's pulling at the dryer,  
fooling with that stupid metal coil that breaks  
if you touch it wrong but  
he doesn't touch it wrong  
and it doesn't break and this  
is the dark almond lodged in your throat  
when you remember  
what you said once: if I have to  
I'll saw the place in half,  
I swear I will.

## ARGUMENT AT THE GREASY SPOON

Watch someone listening. Her face will say *Stop*, will say *Enough*. Her face is a strong place, a place under the bridge, holding things together. A man is saying to her *I want to protect you* and *What you have to understand is*—only the words lose shape after that, his face a hasty graph, forehead furrowed as Ezra Pound's. Still, she listens. This is what you must do: onto a shirt, stitch the words of "Hills Like White Elephants" and walk circles around him. He will read the story, slowly, a few words every pass. Jig will say, *Please please please please please*, except she will have a real name on your shirt: Sophie, maybe. Say to him, *Know Hemingway?* Say, *Think you're Hemingway?* This is what you must say: *You are not Pound! You are not Hemingway!* For now, watch someone listen. Her body is small, her face a bulwark. Suddenly she is leaning on her hand. She looks tired, lovely and tired, lovely and worn. Breeze from a window touches her and she touches back with the dark ends of her hair. His hands are slowing. He kisses her face, once, quick. He stands for a cigarette. Watch him go: tall and lean, shirt tucked at the belt. Someday he will be bald. Out his nose, smoke curls thoughtful as a sweet, heavy asp. Say to him, *They are dead: Ezra, Ernest*. Say, *Some of us do not mind*. You must say nothing. She is looking at you. You must look away. Later, on their way to the door, notice one thing: in the folds of her purse, a giant, untouched, red apple.

IN LIGHT OF LANGUAGE, OR, LAUREN GOES BACK TO TENNESSEE  
*for J.*

It's no wonder you couldn't tell us the morning  
she was gone from you, how you woke

to the silent sprawl of her note, *I'm leaving you*,  
her entire vanishing from your dim apartment: we send

our sounds through a cataract of vowels,  
the tenacious wire of murmur, grunt, sigh,

why, even our lips have needed nothing for so long  
save the tongue's golden flick. When you saw the ring

left by a lotion bottle on the sink, dribbles  
of soil from the window plant, a single hair

stuck in the weave of the couch, what acrid siren  
rose up inside you—which sounds made it past your teeth,

which flung back to the epiglottis, and which  
for that pitch of space—all those days

you could not step out the front door, spinning  
the small band under your finger like a mouth

in permanent whistle, the final keening  
she never spoke. I agree: our few noises are not enough,

guttural hum of sorrow, urgent squeal of sex,  
those motley lullabies—though we are not a subtle

people—eliding the cracked spools of the heart  
with the mouth's heavy consonants as if all we knew

was an ancient song: Won't You  
Please. Won't You Come Back To Me.

WHAT LINGERS (WHEN GIVEN TO DREAMS)

As pitiful as a diver  
far out in Suma Bay  
who has lost an oar from her boat,  
this body  
with no one to turn to.  
—*Ono No Komachi (834-?)*

If it's not her own body, she  
would push it away, slowly, the summer-heavy sweat a gracious film  
against her neck. If it is her body, she'll bring it back

from its surrendered countries, back  
to her unwitting command: hand, shoulder, hip, dim stalk of thigh,  
other hand. And there—distant ankles. From the stretch

of swollen hours (dark, sap-fingered,  
circus-hot), she lets what lingers name her, then fall away, morning poignant  
as the tall cat-tail perched against its lonesome cup. Today,

again, it is her own body.  
Somewhere reckless, within her, as she runs her palms over  
the shaggy tips of elbows, vaguely hairless arms, as she reaches

into the shapes of anxious sun  
just above her bed, she wants his body there, if just to pull  
herself from, to untangle in a solid, unlikely way, letting

what lingers from another frog-sung July  
name her whole soft, stupid body, name his, a living beast who dreams (wind,  
mud-speckled, eye-green) of loving her.

## FETCHING THE MOON

1.

Coming home, my flight is delayed two hours, and when I finally arrive at the farmhouse on Papermill Road the first thing I set eyes on in the dim light is a note taped to the mailbox: *Could you please put mail in the box bellow until the birds are done?*

For minutes I try to recall what a *box bellow* might be— another miscellaneous crib, speckled with dried kernels of corn, something my grandmother has upended and dusted. Then I notice envelopes jutting from a cardboard box on the ground *bellow*

*until the birds are done*. I creak wide the mailbox door to find a swirl of grasses and twigs, ragweed root and a tatter of blue ribbon.

2.

Great-Grandma Olive boiled half a dozen eggs for my mother to take on the plane to California, where she would meet my father's family and show them the white gold ring he bought by preaching a whole summer of Sundays for Baptists.

Olive had never been on a plane. In fact, she had not been out of Indiana since '79, when a horse show across the river drew her into Kentucky for the first time in a decade. Even then she would not let go her bulky, quilted purse, its pockets hiding pieces

of taffy wrapped in wax paper, a family joke almost as old as she, born two weeks before the grand and tidy burst of 1900.

3.

The Chardells tell it that Great-Aunt Gwen was betrothed before she knew what her father had done, 17 and reading things a woman usually didn't: Emerson, for one. So when she went in a calico dress to Seth Ferguson and begged he take back the tobacco fields from her daddy

and forget the whole thing, that she was in love with Jesse Chardell till she died, she didn't know such a kindred thing as love had taken hold, too, of Seth, that he'd cry that day, wiping his big hands on his britches, and declare he loved her so hard he would pay for her and Jesse's wedding,

if that would truly make her happy. This is what they tell you, the britches, the calico dress, never mentioning if happiness is what she got and each year the pink blooms on the tobacco plants curl up just before July and the whippoorwill scoops up fat yellow worms from the leaves.

4.

I was seven years old when they told me my mother had been killed.

It took another seven for Grandma to tell me how it happened,  
the sharp discs of the combine and Mom and Daddy up top, hauling out  
errant stalks of corn long as their legs. They'd guess she got dizzy

or maybe was looking off to the pasture, or even, though this is my  
rendition entirely, had craned her neck to make out the pale half-egg  
of harvest moon, turning too quick to direct my father's gaze  
in the afternoon sky, and she fell in. For years they've told Thom

it wasn't his fault, that first summer he managed the wheel, though these days  
it's only whiskey Thom listens to and the prickly sweat of memory,  
knowing my father will no longer come for him in the cool haze of the bar,  
shoulder him up, lay him down in the bed of the Ford to sleep it off.

5.

The Dupont Hornets are raising money for the school library,  
and when I settle on the carrot cake muffins instead of Pamela's  
mince meat pie, it hurts her feelings. *Nice of you to come back,*  
she says, palming my quarters. *Nice to be back,* I say, the muffins

wobbling on the paper plate. *There's some people,* she says, *who know*  
*how a fancy thing goes sour.* Yes, I say slowly, unsure if she's insinuating  
my schooling or my marriage. Yes, she says back, *Some people think this place*  
*is all crops and hogs and crossroads.* I stare at a daub of icing on my thumb,

but it's chicory I taste at the back of my mouth. Then she seems sorry.  
*Your daddy was a fine preacher,* she says, *Help yourself to some lemonade.*

6.

The year they drew my mother's body from under the combine,  
I watched my father tear down the wall between kitchen and dining room.  
In the rubble he found a newspaper from 1884, a matchstick airplane with only one  
wing, and a handful of buffalo nickels. He stared at the newspaper a long time,

as if he remembered its stories, and finally he stuck it in the back of his Bible  
with the leather cover worn smooth as a horse's neck, his name in the corner  
so faded you could make out only the consonants of *Lamar Charles March.*

He and Thom worked to rebuild the rooms that summer,

Thom never speaking of the sister he thought he destroyed, Dad unable  
to stop speaking of her, of the moon, of Isaiah, chapters 40 and 41.

7.

If I have learned to take a place seriously, it's Muskatatuck Park,  
just north of the Ohio, cuddled in the outskirts of Jefferson County.  
No one had to tell me its mute, sacred places under pine and willow,  
the old stories of Susquehanna and Cherokee, even older stories, glaciers

that rippled Southern Indiana like a woman shaking out a tablecloth.

Here I met shy Eddie Chardell, who came to Muskatatuck in the evenings to look for the coming winter, striped caterpillars and roots of wild chives touched with orange. He never asked why I came, and if he had,

I wouldn't have known what to tell him, something of my mother, perhaps, or Great-Grandma Olive, both of whom I was having trouble remembering. The second time we met, Eddie brought Longfellow, butternut squash, and my very first beer. His voice dipped low and he foretold an unkind winter.

8.

Of all the storytellers and wagglers in the county, my Grandmother is the most reticent. She is the kind of woman who wrote me a letter each month I was away, relaying things like, *My green beans are about this long* ————— and *You ought to see the forsythia today,*

*it would stop your breath up short.* In the twenty-two years between my mother's and father's death, I never saw her cry, though she's had this little tremor in her bottom lip as long as I can recall and what looks like petals under her eyes, so violet I'd always wanted

to reach up and touch them and ask her things I shouldn't: why water arches from the hose like a rope, why the eggs are flecked with dried blood when I find them, if it hurts to get old, or alone. She's told me enough, though, the way *telling*, fashioned like a nest, is not the sound of a thing but its hearth.

9.

Aphids gather on Grandma's porch today, the hard rain calling them up from the ground. I try to sketch the fence twined with honeysuckle, the Heifer from memory, blank-eyed and sweet-milked, but I am tired of flowers and roots, weed and fern, the bovine. Today I want the angry

call of a jaybird, a cup to fall and break, the rain and the stink of woodsmoke.

I drop to my knees and frown at the aphids, their gridded anteriors nimbly making a path along the steps. I am fetched today: a dweller in the bewildering land of the mind, not unlike Indiana, its cavities

and its coils of light, its stones and minnow, its hovering moon a promise of God's, something like nectar, something like thirst.

## SOMETHING TO DO

*for B.*

Mother's at the hospital, her mouth  
hollow as a gourd birdfeeder, her body  
a cocoon from which she cannot speak

her son's name. Dad's been mowing,  
has raked and mulched a good four days  
before it's due. He's watching the sky,

the general east, whatever he can find  
among the hydrangea and the mint. He's been  
to the store: bananas on the counter; cat food,

just to feed someone. You find him  
behind the shed, pissing. You join him,  
let fall what men often do, what falls

naturally, nothing louder than arcs of urine  
dropping to the ground in wordless  
ritual. Zipped up, you remain silent, turn

to face the stretch of soybeans, of sorghum.  
At the pump, you push at moss and soil,  
churn the handle into a rhythm, slow,

the rusty arm sullen, finally embracing  
water. When it spills clear and casual at your toes,  
he, too, cannot say your name, but tries.

He works to still his chin. The two of you  
walk to the house, having done what there is to do,  
your four long legs stepping over shoots of soy.

## AFTER A STRIKE AT THE PLANT

There are ribbons—planets with thin, falling strings—meant for her hands. This is why she has long hair. He's begun to think it entertains her, separating the rivers like she does, the straight, deep brown a thousand paths of sun and water, of her going on and on with her fingers in her hair, restless, tired, fascinated with a passive kind of fever, the slip and pull of both her hands in that which hangs from her head. *There's too much to do*, she says, the small knots choking her knuckles mid-air. *There's too much not to be done*, he says, eyes closed now, head against the pink couch of her legs. She takes a drink of morning juice and he opens his eyes in time to see a fine strand of saliva swing between the cup and her mouth before it pops into nothingness, the soft air skimming every thing, the daylight his friend for a moment, backlighting that subtle wing of spit. He reaches up, an awkward stretch for his shoulder, presses his fingertips along her face. Yesterday he saw a blackbird flying low to the ground, trailing a long dark string, moving fast, weaving, skittish, away from the other birds. There was something brave about it, that nut-sized aggression. *I will make a home*. From the middles of her fingers, he untangles her hair.

## RIDDLED WITH NAMES

*"For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things."  
—Psalms 107:9*

If it is possible watch the man you think you love be drunk  
The next day he will take an apple a knife his fingers  
will shake but he will go slowly not cutting  
apart but into the apple wedge by wedge by wedge

disappearing on his slight red tongue Really Who is to say  
what alone is You sit knowing Here  
you make your prayers in the back yard cardinals  
flitting by but slowly with a glance at you you'd guess

to tell you what their color means God or someone  
like God washes the long mornings with Bergamot  
Wheat Hollyhock On the flight home  
you will be afraid of the man next to you His elbow is trespassing

your rib You say nothing Minutes ago he poured  
Johnny Walker Black into the airline's plastic cup He told you  
he was a Bible smuggler long ago in Austria  
*I was a preacher too* he'd confessed *A damn good preacher*

finishing off the drink he'd said *Fuck them all* turning close to you  
*You only get burned once* *And then* his hand  
springing open near your cheek *Fuck them*  
Now he sleeps and you'd like to think all those good things

find their way into our bird-open mouths Only God  
knows pain turbulent as the long sky stricken  
or at least riddled with names It is after all  
your year to be alone Names have gone wandering

A Loggerhead Turtle has lain three dozen eggs under the sand  
with yellow flags In May beach house owners  
will keep their lights off at night as the hatchlings  
scuttle like mad for any beam they think might be the moon

which will lead them they say without fail to the sea

## ARCHITECTURE OF AN APOLOGY

When finally we see each other again, this time under the pretext  
of an apology you wanted to make in a hallway after the plenary speaker,  
your wife stands there trying not to look uncomfortable which at the moment is  
impossible and gets me feeling sorrier for her than for myself—a particular accomplishment  
considering inside my coat pocket two fingers

pinch a balled-up gum wrapper like it's my cherry stone of a brain—this means  
we're each sorry for something now, me for her and she for you and you for,  
what? mislabeling love is what I'm guessing— though in the actual air your  
*Sorry*  
doesn't carry like I'd imagined, sure as the morning call of a Common Loon,

and of course now that I'm standing here and now that you've said your apology,  
I can't for the life of me figure how to respond, this gulch between my mouth  
and the long, long tunnel to your heart: *Me too* isn't what I mean at all  
and *I forgive you* would also sound wrong though it's closer to what belongs  
in the space you've cleared between us. What I manage

is *Thank you*, the only thing left on that short list of possibilities,  
but when you say *I'm just tired of being pissed off* it's not hard  
to fill in *at you* and there you go, gathering up a raw breath as though  
somewhere it feels right to say these things to the woman you didn't marry,  
for which I have shouted at the moon, God's good eye, so many

thanks, but for whatever reason the whole sweet speech I'd prepared  
while examining the scruff of my toothbrush this morning has started to slip away, words  
like *reconciliation* and *closure* just drop their napkins on their plates and saunter out  
the house so all I can do is nod dumbly that, Certainly, *Being pissed off*  
*is a waste of energy*. What it seems is that your apology has made a strange

shape of my throat, I'm guessing a triangle with too much susurrations  
say, *Isosceles* and now the tiny pellet of gum wrapper has lodged itself beneath  
a fingernail like the hard angles of our youthful mistakes, you and me and each  
of us, really, so ridiculous we thought the house we built of walnuts would stand  
forever in the forest and by now I'm ready to leave but can't quite make it

happen, unsure how to construct a salutation for you or your wife who was also  
my friend once and who this whole time has been inspecting  
the wiry flex of her wrist, one hand rotating back and forth like the smallest  
nodding head.

SÓLUS MEETS IPSE

Oh, you'd write of famine or genocide, the man made quadriplegic  
when his children pushed him out a window, the teenager molested  
by her math teacher, but you don't even know where Serbia is

according to the Canadian fellow, fat enough for three of you, looking  
at your poems, whose editor in Bosnia (*Have you heard of it?*) told him  
a story of sheikhs floating on a river between the two countries—

and meanwhile here you are, writing the *typical American anecdote*,  
here you are contemplating your navel (or, novel—that too will work),  
wandering into jazz bars, lighting up, staying all night, moustaching a picture

of the Pope to scandalize your mother, falling in ecstatic love with your breasts,  
buttering them with schnopps, and while you're at it, here you are, officially  
calling the penis a blind worm. Look at you, pillowbooking your anglo-angst,

his afro-angst, capriciously whining: your cancerous parakeet, botched  
Jell-O, the Reds, energy-saving light bulbs, frigid neighbors, the pollen count,  
while Barry, still on the sheikhs, the river, his editor playing a quick game

of chess before walking the bridge to work, doesn't notice you're stuck,  
unsure where to go from here, having nothing but an American anecdote  
to write, and having wandered deeper into that—lost, wedged, dumb.

CHLOÉ PHONES AFTER THREE WEEKS WORKING AT THE HOME

It's *crazy* she says Most of them have been abused some throw shoes and scream  
some know how to wield a knife one to cut off his cat's ears Little Shop of  
Disorders she calls it laughing that thrown laugh one to force an eight-year-old  
into sex but *his* mom's a multiple who named him Marjorie after one of her selves  
You can't say *crazy* here is the thing someone undoubtedly is and Claire's mother  
must've cussed to a group of women as in *Life's a bitch ladies* when angry  
this kid yells *Bitchladies! Stupid Bitchladies!* Claire who can't bathe by herself  
having been raped by her stepfather How about *That's nuts* No  
no good *Insane* Worse *Wacky* then scalded in a bath when he panicked  
scrubbing clean the spread of blood between her legs I've got it *That's wild*  
Another Claire-ism she tells me *I already did a shitloaf of spelling words* and  
*There's a shitloaf of dishes ain't there* That's wild she tries that's wild that's  
wild It'll work she says but isn't satisfied I can tell It's the way  
she laughs hot stippled there needs to be no right word there needs to be  
  
a wide hole a whole mouth where  
the right word isn't

## THROUGH HEAVEN

### I.

They have played me the tapes, ones sent after Gran died,  
bubble-wrapped in a box with pictures of my mother

and father, newly wed. I left the songs we sang, left my sister  
behind and began by myself into a hazy land of words,

all its red doors open to the two-year-old. In my mouth, the tongue  
was a wand of sounds. Hearing them now, my working

through the brambles of language in a perfectly joyful swipe,  
it's as though I prayed without knowing I prayed, started all over

with the sweet ache of not remembering myself but knowing  
it is me long after the demulcent edge, my innocence spent

in heaven, as Wordsworth would have it, before I was born.

### II.

The gods of the world wrapped themselves in my mother's

credulous laugh, her limbs giving as stalks of wheat, her lap the whole  
moon, and my father's voice, stentorian, big-beared, searching out

our shrieks of enchantment; his body, too, my castle. I was also  
lovely. It is not foolish of me: surely I was lovely. I hear the awe

of my voice at itself, spilling from the tender napkin of my throat,  
ticks and shirks of consonants, hums that tripped through each

of the known vowels and words that were not, will never be,  
words. It doesn't matter how things grew too bright, how fear

etched its haggard lines under the sac of breath in my chest  
or how I began to faint before breakfast when my father yelled,

how I'd think he was spinning me around and around, my ankles  
bruising against the doorframe, when actually he'd carried me

to the couch, angry again once I'd come to, such a *chickenshit*  
I'd fall unconscious to beg off the Orthrus guarding his sympathy.

### III.

What is true is that I told lies, stole from them, squeezed an entire tube  
of toothpaste on the sofa, shoplifted from the Christian bookstore, kicked

my brother in the privates, as my mother would gingerly call it,  
*privates*—a word that seemed more than *that*, a promise, a blossom,

a word I'd say to myself over and over. Soon what wide vats,  
what lavalieres of words came, faster and blacker, banana leaves

shriveling over flame, canaries set loose in the kitchen, more words  
than I could handle bulging darkly from a face I knew,

the tortuous vines of his blood all through me, the fetid and fantastic  
blurring from one body to the next—a prowling cat, the cuspid

of splendor seemed to nip at me, needing to hurt. My father's heels  
came down like a drunkard's. The wind of his mouth shook doors

all over the world, swung crazily the lanterns near my heart. Long after  
the sky snuck from our room, my sister would pet my face.

IV.

I am the child, they tell me, who began making things up  
as soon as she could speak. But we agree he was never drunk; what we

could not have said is this: despite what we wish, it's not memory  
that tells us who we are but what we find just below the roof

of the body, that precious attic wedged full of words, there  
among the ribbons of nightmare, fulgurant eyes, fingers

that shake, shoulders strong and dumb, and the great, insoluble blocks  
of love when I look at a photograph of my mother and father

in 1975, three years before my head fell crashingly  
through heaven. Who can blame my mother for being so beautiful?

III.

Lord, About the Women

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
drawn from the cold hard mouth  
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and  
flown.

Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses"

## WHEN THE RAINS CAME

When the rains came late in October, angry  
as a muzzled dog, seven boxes of my books  
were ruined. Mother told me at Thanksgiving  
after I'd found Thoreau, Nabakov, Joyce  
Carol Oates belly up on the washer, *I was  
drying them out for you*, she said, and a great feral  
weight slipped from her eyes, rolled helplessly  
like cobble into a stream, to her knuckles  
bending and scurrying over hundreds  
of marred pages. Without warning, the entire  
basement was covered in open books, Sappho  
propped on the blender box, *Midnight's Children*  
like a tentative palm on the old VCR,  
Norton Anthologies and periodicals lined  
the 2x4 planks at the window. When I started  
to cry, my own fingers uncertain how to touch  
the *Leaves of Grass* I'd marked up in college,  
Dr. Marj Elder having lent 48 years to the green ink  
of my marginalia, my mother, also, began to cry.  
She led me upstairs, where she pulled from under  
her bed the most substantive volumes: *Moby Dick*,  
my autographed Gwendolyn Brooks, a thickly bound  
*Great Gatsby*, the golden-edged Pocket Sonnets,  
all of them halved and breathing, tended to  
by my mother's cautious culpability. *I was afraid*,  
she said, *I was waiting for the right time*, she said. And then,  
there in my hands, I was turning the dampened,  
molding sheets of my mother, her bleak ubiety,  
unable to recover the ironed-flat flick  
of the chapter's end, her delicate scrawl now  
bleeding through that liable derivative of papyrus.

UPON FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOUR MOTHER, THIS TIME IN MICHIGAN  
WHERE AUTUMN COMES SOONER THAN EXPECTED

You sit in the breakfast nook, soundless as the petals  
of the final red phlox outside the window; you have noticed  
small veins beginning to rise over the knuckles and back

of your hand. You are not yet thirty, are not thinking *age*. Once,  
in church, you sat this way, pressing the veins of your mother's  
hand, that web of vague emerald channels, resilient

under your thumb, pressing down, around, over, like the nose  
of a deer into wild blackberry bush, thinking *this is*, until  
your mother's other hand would reach over to still you and she

would nod, slow as the opening tilt of a paper fan, toward  
the preacher. Here, where you are, a glass of water held  
as though it were a nuthatch between your thighs, the sun's

long, last slant across the back deck, the bowl  
of chrysanthemums dare September to snuff them out  
and your neighbor's boys alternate shouting *Die-die-die*

with *Ay'ay, Cap'n!* on a trampoline that yawns them up  
and snatches them back while they clash branches torn  
from the sagging Sugar Maple. Suddenly one of them is crying,

their voices dissolve as sea-salt in broth, but then, as quickly,  
begin again. Above them, a black squirrel runs the telephone wire  
with a brilliant green ball of walnut in its mouth. All this

is part of your mother's body—that opalescent bottle,  
that absolute pulchritude, yes, each necessary furbelow. Only  
you could not find these words even if you wanted to, will not,

perhaps, until the first snow falls. For now, the gelid tunnel  
down your chest after you swallow a drink of water  
is the mounting grace for all you never knew you never knew.

## THE GRIT OF YOUR GIFT

Thistles mock all, growing. . .  
in a heap of broken glass with last year's soot.  
—Genevieve Taggard, "American Farm, 1934"

In the moments after you have told the patient  
across from you she has cancer, the prognosis having finally  
slit the room's throat, papers and charts in your hands and she,  
not yet crying, looks up: who are you?—doctor,  
woman, human, which of these great plaited gorges  
of self manage the words that must cross from diaphragm  
to tongue and settle like the dusty yellow stamen of the amaryllis  
in its own red home—tell me, what is it you say? The summer

I called out in my sleep for Scotland, you stopped  
on the highway, wrapped your hands in an old sweatshirt  
and, down in the muck of the ditch, sawed the barbed stalks  
of thistles with a house key. I meant to hold to the grit  
of your gift, heliotrope stubborning to gray after all these years,  
but they prick and prick, crackling against the honeyweed  
you kept in the bunch, slivers of their hoary stems tucking deep  
into my palms through even my gloves. Won't you come to us,

doctor: say what you can. No, I'd rather you spin with me,  
sister, as if things weren't how they are, the way we used to  
around the dinner table with spoons and forks in our hands,  
neglecting to set all six places properly, when even the galloping pup  
could not squeal louder than we, lithe little dog who would mark your arms  
with his dying, on the roadside, in the wake of a hurtling  
white pickup. *It's alright*, you said of the bites below your elbow  
scarred soft, now, as a dried apricot, *he didn't mean it, he never meant*

*to hurt*. When I try to imagine it, this informs how you say  
what you say to her there in your office, hands that took thistles  
from their mottled home for the sake of my lost  
heart now reaching for the face of your patient, *I'm sorry*,  
*I'm sorry*, not doctor or woman but human as you've ever been,  
*I never meant to hurt*. And she, still crying a bit, will understand,  
will take your fingers, each of their prints perceptive  
as the stethoscope's, and hold on to you for dear life.

## DEAR MARGERY

after Robert Glück's *Margery Kempe*

I swear to God if one more time  
a man sends the word *cunt*  
across the page like a pellet  
into the face of his game

\* \* \*

(Let me begin again)

I've never hit anyone  
except once my sister  
who had me in a headlock

By then a splash  
of blood on her pubertal lips  
scared us breathless

and we cried out  
for forgiveness  
will it surprise you

after I threw the book  
against the wall I was weeping  
fierce as a typhoon

unable to distinguish  
among the sounds of rage  
and fear what injury

or that being injured  
by this *delightfully wicked*  
*ingemination* is naïve, they'll say

\* \* \*

(Dear Margery)

I love you in my way  
across the centuries  
locked away with all those

ordained misogynists  
and your own audacious love  
for Something I've dabbled to face

God, I feel spent  
having wept over an hour  
emulating without meaning to

you so recently splayed  
by this man's dual objective  
to capture the *depth of her desire*

you whose complexity  
was no man's, not the one  
you married and persuaded chaste

not the friars' and not the one  
they held would smite  
with a sword your soul from heaven

should you not love him  
*wiP al bolines bi chaste lyy3*  
which you did and for it get

(at long last) a voracious sexuality  
six hundred years later  
with who else but well-endowed

sadist Jesus  
by some man's *what if*  
all the splendid shouting

of nipples and cock  
Forgive me Margery  
even now I'm reeling

today part of a circle  
who took Lacan  
Marx and Derrida to you

to anchorites with blood bubbling  
from their noses for thirst  
your sisters we can not

*imagine* would brick themselves in  
from such a wonderful  
wonderful wonderful world

## ONE CALLING IN THE DESERT

*A Meditation on Isaiah 40*

The first time you see *the rugged place become a plain*  
is the mopy red hair of your mother's retarded cousin  
Roy Dale, cropped, stern as a recruit, something

of a joke on top his docile body: slack, spittled, set in  
the corner with cross-legged abandon by Shirley Ann, his sister,  
for whom you're hoping *every mountain and hill shall be*

*made low* since she's baring more than details of last week's  
breast enhancement: blood, stitches, pus and pain—that bitch,  
which she fought through to give Roy his cut since

the last bastard with clippers must've been blind, or at least, she  
says, fucked-in-the-head as Roy! Mother gasps, Shirley Ann laughs,  
almost shouting, and without warning you, too, are laughing,

oh how you're laughing, something of that same joke,  
the woman's sense of irony, *the glory of the Lord revealed*,  
and Mother giving you a deep blue commandment

in the scint of her eye: Sober Thyself. A corner of you  
knows to fold: for sweet Lucille, her pickled life, you sober,  
dear Aunt Luce who cried out, *Speak tenderly to me!*

only she didn't ever cry out, died in a wild-eyed stupor, unable  
to prove it was Shirley Ann who tapped cocaine into her hospital  
cup. Roy Dale broods through a bag of shelled pistachios

and turns again, *Look, Joyce. Joyce. Got my hair cut, Joyce,*  
*lookit*, and my mother, without fail, deems him handsome before  
Shirley Ann yanks her back to *They been saying* and *Look here, she*

*changed her own damn will* and so forth. You have stopped  
being here, with Mother, the white hot of your heart saying  
*lookit*. Bentley died young, left Lucille with a girl—not yet

turquoise brassiered—and a bovine toddler the doctors called *not so*  
*bright*. Why the whole lot didn't *proclaim her hard service*  
*completed, her sins paid for* is more than you can ask,

but here you all are anyway, funeral four weeks past,  
Shirley Ann's God-awful chunk of money, the shorn red  
head of Roy Dale, and your mother, reluctant emissary

of the family, *making straight in the wilderness a highway*.

And you, let's not forget, your mother's own dark daughter,  
a buffer, handing Roy another bag of nuts while Shirley blows

her top, Shirley, tattooed, orange with tan, Shirley, said  
to have blamed herself, to have bawled and bawled when her  
three-year-old brother, unattended, drank Drain-O and scoured clean

his grey-soft brain. The wry world shakes its head but  
what *is it* they want? Comfort, comfort, only you are not  
His people and if by chance you are, you're shot through

with withering, field of flowers, plain of grass, the Lord's hand  
giving doubly, doubly for sins and now Mother has begun to cry,  
Roy Dale announces, again, his haircut, and Shirley Ann's breasts

splotch red as holy text. Where, now, to go from here? Back,  
you think, the shadow must go back ten steps on the stairs,  
not before birth but just after, that first brusque shout,

not *What should I cry out* but *What shouldn't I?*

LORD, ABOUT THE WOMEN

Who pummel their children  
in public      Sweet Jesus  
you turned over tables when you saw  
wrong so why can't I      lady at the airport  
flinging her daughter again and again  
into a chair      *SIT* loud enough  
to render an ocean still      only  
the girl doesn't she wails      You saw  
the one in the grocery store dangle  
her son by an ankle      drop him  
head-first into her cart      like Peter  
he stayed upside down and I swear  
I almost screamed myself      but  
stood instead      a box of salts  
in the aisle

    The problem      Almighty  
is what Mama said of French-kissing  
teens      *do that for the world to see*  
*and you've got to wonder      what's done*  
*in private*      This  
is not loaves and fishes God      is not  
the white stone on which you'll carve  
our new names      You know enough  
of mothering to send us hell-bent  
upon each other      so let *me*  
slap      Let *me* pinch the tender flesh  
between armpit and breast      wrench  
the hair at their necks till they  
squawk contrition

Of course

    that      will not do  
You who cover me with your feathers  
who bends but a portion of our hearts  
toward hell      Let me read  
in the lettering of their oversized  
T-shirts      my own failings

    Give me  
the weight on their hips      Send  
their own childhoods      away Holy One  
about the women who  
have no shame      crack open  
my hazelnut of a heart      Let there be  
meat enough to go around

## EVE'S VILLANELLE

Rename the world; begin by calling clouds Your Hand,  
and let each flower be known by scent alone—  
this one's Mother's Neck and this one, Sea-foamed Sand.

Our ancient words, O blessed rib, have long been manned  
by those possessed with tongues of reason, thought enthroned:  
rename the world, begin by calling a cloud Your Hand.

For pronouns, refer to yourself only as Your Friend,  
but christen every limb: this one's Pearl, this one's Stone,  
this one's Mother's Neck, this one, Sea-foamed Sand.

Then all things will be confused: sky for body, body for land,  
and as they should—not lost but sweetly twined, ingrown—  
rename the world: begin by calling a cloud Your Hand.

No one will argue, though none will understand:  
why call this tree Balding Priest when we knew it as Pinecone,  
why is one Mother's Neck and one Sea-foamed Sand?

If you must say anything, say gently, Your Friend can't  
denote beauty by just *any* plucked phonemes, or else intone,  
Rename the world! Begin by calling a cloud Your Hand!

Beware: you'll find, in time, even the new will demand  
a careful latticework of peach pit, kestrel, pelvic bone:  
rename the world; begin by calling one cloud Your Hand,  
one Mother's Neck, and one Sea-foamed Sand.

IV.  
Finishing the House

Take the emptiness you hold in your arms  
and scatter it into the open spaces we breathe:  
maybe the birds will feel how the air is  
thinner,  
and fly with more affection.

Rilke, from *The Duino Elegies*

## TAKING HOLD OF THE QUIET

The poppings of the house tonight remind me of the July  
I lived alone in Alexandria, Indiana. If I listen,  
there are the same kinds of nothing. Somewhere nearby I am

breaking into a pear, waiting for Daniel to call, digging out  
the wick of a votive with my fingernail. Mid-evenings,  
the shadow of the grape arbor hides me from the road

and the southwest neighbors; even when I am inside the house  
no one can tell I am not wearing clothes. When it gets  
dark, the underexposed skin always thinks she hears noises near

the windows. *It's the popping of the house*, I tell her. During  
sleep, the filigree curtains shake slowly over  
the vents with the silence of being white and eternally

vertical. Mornings spin the house with yellows on yellow. Then  
it is day again, and evening, and night. This varies  
only occasionally. It wears me out, thinking

of the maintenance of the rain, the foot slipping on the slick  
inner floor of the sandal and the way old Pollock  
ran over the ephemeral world with a paintstick—how he left me

here, the drips and curls of each piece a mutiny to the House  
of Shabby Chic that Gloria has lent me. No numbers  
on the Grover's Corner sign, no mailbox. My prescription comes

to the office and letters from Mother arrive occasionally.

It wears me out, but I like to think of it: a quiet house  
takes hold of the quiet differently than a vase of Bluets,

differently than a bashful man over rootbeer, than long  
bus rides or porch furniture facing the shore. The rooms  
close their lids. They breathe heavily through the stairs.

## WAITING FOR BENJAMIN

### I.

The first thing you see this morning is how  
your slippers lie on the floor, turned toward each other,  
heels out. You don't remember being in a hurry

to sleep. Your feet nudge back into the slippers  
as though they are familiar, the flesh and the furry cover,  
one wearing, one whose purpose is being worn. This morning

you have the urge to scramble eggs, but first the house  
must be opened, as though each porthole will bless the shine  
of hours, procure it: the day is a white sheet, flapping

against the walls. Perhaps it the inverse of settling  
your body last night, walking alone to bed, freeing yourself  
of clothes, dropping into sleep. The doors and windows

waver in their upright positions, the wind pressures  
the rooms to talk; the wood and glass obediently titter.  
A fly wanders past at the breakfast table

and dried grass moves slowly across the panels  
of the floor. If you didn't live alone you might feel bad  
for allowing the outside in, you might write notes

to yourself, *Buy screen door* or *Sweep front room*.  
As it is, you are comforted by the attention.  
It's as though you're being visited.

## II.

It's moments like this, when the pockets of your grapefruit  
are emptied, spoonful by spoonful, when there is only  
a taste left in your mouth of the soft, sour beads

you rolled over your tongue, separated, split open  
with your front teeth, this is when you must  
begin to move. In those moments, when there's nothing left

to eat or put away, you are a joke to yourself. A portion  
may tell you it's time to jog, start a load of laundry,  
go buy an ink cartridge for the printer, but there is

a stronger part of you, one that will take a blanket  
out to the front yard, a blanket and a collection  
of ancient poems, a blanket and a book and a bottle

of lemon-sweetened water, and let you sit. You know  
the real reason for going into the front yard. You will do  
your best to look detached from the perfection

of the day, sipping the liquid, penning a note  
in the margins: *Faustian reference? Or Look up 'totemic'*  
or just *Nice*. Even then, barring some untapped

nonchalance, you will perk when the tires of the mailman,  
the Knippas next door, the Acevedos two doors down  
slow into a driveway, you will flinch

with every car passing at full speed, you will be  
continually distracted by the dew still in perfect droplets  
in the palm of a green weed patch you've been meaning

to mow. Those tiny white hairs, how they  
keep the spheres perched so that even  
your fingernail does not burst them.

### III.

By noon, you want to think about him. You pick details you've not thought about yet: how he won't eat the white near strawberry stems, never rolls his eyes,

thinks his hands are too large. He said once his kisses were not goodbyes, just bookmarks. And once, just one time, when he was frustrated, when you

were pulling away, he said he loved you. It's getting windier: the blanket curls around your calf, the pages of the book flip forward, the hair behind your ear falls. You start to wonder if

he's not coming. Inside the house, when you reach into a bowl of garlic, it feels like knuckles. When you pull the damp pulp from between its white layers,

you begin to imagine how the feet must leave the slippers. Each foot stops and pulls out slowly. Or each foot, mid-air, gives a little kick. Both feet agree.

And the slippers lie still where the feet have left them, where the feet will rejoin them. Heels out. They don't mind the night. You begin to think you weren't in a hurry

to sleep last night. You were just unable to watch the dark fall into the house any longer, around the blinds, under the door. The dogs in the neighborhood had quieted. The phone

had rung once: he said he'd come by, mid-morning, bring the last of your things. Outside, a car slows and stops. The windchimes gossip. The door to your mailbox grates back into place.

LOVE, ANONYMOUS

It used to be, back in the ninth grade swirl of skirts and books,  
a vacant look on every boy's face but Jeremy Toppe who soon  
learned better than to smile behind you on his way up the stairs,  
you dreamed of the kind of attention only you

could give yourself, so much, in fact, that you'd write anonymous notes  
and tape them to your locker on Valentine's Day, dangling a pouch  
of candies on the latch for good measure. *Do you know*, one note  
began, *you've the wit of a pasquinade, the mind*

*of a Cubist, the sad strength of a eunuch and oh*  
*my darling, the quick song of a finch at roost.* All this  
and Tootsie rolls too. *Love, Anonymous.* Someone's got it bad  
for you, and after class when your only friend saunters close

to speculate who, examining the handwriting, you know  
she knows, just enough of the curl and wisp  
on the ends of *hs* to give you away, though she's too kind to say  
anything, takes the Jolly Ranchers

you proffer in a kind of *détente*: *It's true,*  
you want to say, *surely this fella's right about me?*  
Now, after the many years you gave up anonymously  
giftng yourself and instead, each Valentine's Day

let your sister buy you the FFA's stupid carnations without signing her name  
because she wanted you to know what wondering  
if someone wanted you was like, that you're *awesome*, girl,  
really, you are—now,

now that someone has actually left an anonymous gift for you  
in the department lounge, a small orange box  
of sweets—it bothers you, largely because you're unsure  
how to be grateful, grinning dumb

as a sock monkey at each colleague who walks in to check  
the shelf of cubbies—it unnerves you,  
your tongue pinked with candy, that small light inside you signaling  
more brightly than usual, the last sound of a slow

train, the quick work of *cherish* or *maybe* or *saccharify*. Later, when you  
tell your mother or perhaps your sister, you won't include this part—  
that you left the box sitting under your name six days before opening it  
just in case it was a mistake. Or maybe because

there was something else: in the blank loam of unknowing,

a nugget of fear, a tiny moment opened roughly  
as a stolen purse. Who knew yearning would feel this way, inured  
by a white space, waiting the pen of your gifter?

## ON HALLOWEEN, YOUR FIRST PROFESSION

Though we knew each other  
without overlapping  
our clothes,  
still, with this autumn wind's sound,  
I find myself waiting for you.  
—*Izumi Shikibu (974-1034)*

The night most of America snapped on  
black capes and gauzy era-imitation dresses,  
our hostess bearing her torso-length cleavage in a jumpsuit the color  
of a spinach tortilla, you tell me you love me. You say this leaning  
on the car, two blocks away from the house strumpeting its hours of music,  
  
and though I believe you I can't quite shake my need  
to question where the festivity ends and you begin, so  
  
here I am, quivering in a kimono I actually wear  
all the time, knowing I'm not *that* cold on this empty  
street, where it seems we could stand for the rest of our lives, the stars having  
turned out their porch light—*No more trick-or-treating*  
*here*, they say, *Try the moon*, and me parcing out the beaded length of what  
  
you've just said, calm as a willow in that voice of yours,  
because tonight, for the first time, I saw you dance  
  
wildly, which is the clearest example yet of your undeclared love  
since you were not drunk and never dance, since I was failing at  
Pollyanna-does-Zelda Fitzgerald, and you up and decide I need a good  
laugh, no one else dancing, not even the man dressed as a Magic Genie  
who'd gripped my elbow till you came back with your Whiskey Sour  
  
and eventually sauntered away smiling like a wine stain,  
his enormous blue bulb of a hat bumping people  
left and right in the face, and your friends who invited us, the other  
sober couple, telling me how amazing you are, kind, articulate,  
*A catch* is what the woman said and her husband winked at me  
  
as if we'd grown up together, though we'd just met,  
marveling at brocaded pumpkin-paisley wallpaper  
in the master bathroom where we took refuge from the man  
with a foot-long rubber penis on the tray of triangled  
sandwiches and another man with those strap-on hard-nippled boobs looming  
  
over cocktails, a lady in one of those sexy bunny outfits  
offering, *They're fake!*, roaring her laughter  
and stroking the man as her cotton-puffed tail shook and shook

to the music—but when *you* danced, sharper than  
Brando in the only black suit you own, it was the ridiculous

waggle of your neck, your eyes snapping  
open like bean pods, your palms shimmying up  
as if to request all you cannot sound out, what is louder than  
each song pounding its confused *loves* and *wants*, it was then,  
peanut candy dissolving in my mouth and your two hands reaching

for my face, I knew exactly who you were, your whole self,  
stop-sign tall, eyes flecked-green, how your hot spirit

seems to bob each moment like a hard-boiled  
egg. Here, the dark bolder than that costume  
with the crotch cut out, I may finally understand what Anne Morrow  
scrawled in her diary while falling in love with Charles Lindbergh,  
“All my life, in fact, my world—my little embroidery beribboned

world—is smashed,” which might be the least romantic  
of all things to say about a man who truly knew the wind  
from the whirl, but is the most enchanting, too, those other men swept aside,  
“all the pseudointellectuals,” she wrote, “the sophisticates, the posers,”  
this is how it might be with us, our worlds smashed with a clarity we almost

don’t know what to do with, separating simply, the carnival  
of certain human need, that exquisite house and its

exquisite owners and their books and back deck and wet bar  
and costumed Who’s-Who I would have wilted into  
but for you, man who nimbly brushes my hair, who makes paper lanterns,  
who presses against the window of a life that, as Wendell Berry  
has it, *won’t compute*: loving the Lord, loving the world, working for nothing,

spotting the field where we’ll lay down beneath an old tree  
and saying to the most piano part of my ear, *Look, there.*

## THE MENTION OF TOES

*For Ashton, born on my birthday*

You have been ushered through the sacred channel, your hostess  
a woman I love down to my toes. You, as yet, know nothing  
of toes. And could you know the risk I take, you would appreciate  
how aware I am of sounding sentimental here. When you are old enough  
to know me, or to know the presence but not perplexities of pain  
in the body's cavities, a yellow teardrop on the votive, the sore hollow  
upon seeing a man in rags, an enjoyable evening spent with anyone  
first thought unenjoyable, or maybe an evening spent with the dog,  
you will not resist such mention of toes. It's not the mind  
that spills, though the mind's spilling is important enough, in time,  
it's the need for *direction*, which might in fact be *discretion*, or even  
*distraction*, I can rarely keep them straight. It's a good and true thing  
to welcome you, child who arched my sister's back while love flickered  
precariously close to my own body, too far from you for anyone  
to notice, 24 hours by car. At the lookout a man fed me  
from a bowl of quartered fruits he'd hidden in his jacket. It is  
the only birthday I have ever been in love, and it seems  
I, too, was born, so extravagant the blood I beat through my heart  
just for it to be heard. In this way, it was my first  
birthday, though I know it makes little difference to you its sequence,  
his tips of fingers a propos on my mouth, slices of mango slipping  
from tongue to throat, our city catching black sky in its net,  
blinking from all the corners of acuity. Now that I think of it, it's not  
the mention of *toes* so much as *love*. I'm told there are certain moments  
I must avoid, combing over the untouched portions of language  
like those particles of light from every tower-top, every window,  
spouting their soundless malapert to the moon, who lit our way up  
and down, and chauffeured us from the slight clefts to the choice dips  
of rock where we stood, dimly knowing the nothingness of knowing  
waited: to lean, to bend slightly the neck, the hip, an elbow, knee,

and remove the dubiety of incidence from there. For what another  
year yields, or, more, another propinquity, I am as newly

a Something as you, sprouted from that decent heaven,  
divisible from vacancies and spillage at once. Your mother's

womb, scarlet and whole, misses you. Do not doubt this.  
And just to let you know, there is enough in all the heavy words

to keep on teasing them out, a lanate infancy to every mention  
of *love* that I, for one, will not hesitate to tell you of it now,

your slight blue veins already providing apprentice, the precise  
spoons and bowls of the body already stirring, already stirred.

FOR PAPA LAMAR, ON THE VERGE OF DEATH

Ten minutes after I find out you are in a coma  
my best friend in the entire state of Florida spots  
a black widow spider and we squat in the heat,  
scared and awestruck at once, its red hourglass belly-up,  
suspended by eight legs like crooked bobby pins,  
and she says, *Well we can't just leave it here.*

*Oh yes we can*, I think, but instead I say,  
*What should we do?* since she's the kind of woman  
who will know and since I am still baffled that,  
after your doctors predicted by the angiogram  
you'd be good for years, a kidney infection somehow  
sent you straight on your way to buying the farm.

My friend heads across the street into a store where  
some nitwit hands her a bookmark to squash the spider  
and she says, *Lady, it's a Black Widow*, which  
lands her one of those question-marky smiles  
and when she comes out shaking her head we both know  
it's no good, neither of us covered by HMO or given to jolts

of bravery, we'll have to let the spider be, right here  
in the middle of everything, snapdragons,  
border collies, all these oblivious people who might  
stretch out an ankle or set their toes on this gatepost  
and locate, painfully, two tiny pricks for which they'll cuss  
and stamp and find themselves, in an hour or two,

full of pus and hot blood. It's bright as heaven out here  
and we're starting to sweat seriously, weighing  
all this, when my best friend in the entire state of Florida  
takes the apple out of my hand and brings it down, just like that,  
on the black widow spider, spurting it open. It was something to see,  
Papa, our chests heaving and our eyes stuck on that apple,

which I did not eat for lunch, which we left right there  
in the park, wedged in the bars of the gate, covered  
with broke-free pieces of web, and I thought maybe  
you'd like to know of it, hovering as you are, between  
here and there, how what needs to happen will happen,  
even if it surprises the breath right out of you.

## IN THE MIDDLE OF A LONG ILLNESS

Sex, especially, seems stupid, the elaborate writhing, bodies spurting within and without: this, when nauseated, is not even funny, is bright, slick, burnt as the green acid you spit up an hour ago, which at least you can joke about—not *having the guts* to vomit with sincerity these days, eating so little you almost don't remember how lovely the avocado is, diced with boiled egg, set delicately atop a slice of cheese, on bread, with salt. Sometimes, it's true, you dream of food, though instead of smelling or tasting fruits, pastries, legumes, you have emotional encounters with them, they resemble family members, are sweet to you on the phone, chide with livid tones the long, low ache in the center of your kidney. Mostly, you want to read. Mostly, you can't, thanks to vertiginous meds the sentences squirm like sinners in church. To this end, you've taken to watching birds, can now distinguish Nuthatch from Swallow, Merganser from Scoter, but this you don't discuss with anyone but your father, who could tell you color, call, diet, and mating season of every last bird in the northern hemisphere. When you're sick, nobody stops you from exaggeration. On good days your husband takes you for a drive, though not in the manual, which makes you queasy, and only when you can roll the window down, stick a bare foot out. Yesterday you saw a priest at the wheel of a Chevrolet the color of a Band-Aid, a woman dangerously pregnant carrying a sack of grapefruit, and, at the Broken Spoke, someone with a shovel chasing someone with a stick. Besides suppositories, what you hate most is beer commercials. Everybody's so damn radiant. You never say this aloud, though you could, being granted, at present, inordinate rites to bellyache; you know it's a trick, you know it's not radiance you hate, nor the snow-cruled shoulders of the girls who never stop laughing or the boys at their sides having, inevitably, said the right thing: it's you, whole glitches of your heart holding forth, how you've begun to stop yourself from laughing. This evening when your husband rinses your hair with a grace you call *ginger*, he will have a sneezing fit, his body barking round after round of flecked air,

his face a consortium of news, and you will want to snigger, you will want  
to splash him, join him in the only bacchanalia left in your lives. Instead  
you will say, *Salud, Salud, Salud*, as many times as it takes, reaching  
as an indifferent wing for your towel. Later, though, during the particularly endless  
midnight when the people of beer commercials make their handsome march  
across your mind, it's your crow-eyed jealousy will make you smirk, and before  
you know it the smirk will leak into the dark like an unstoppered  
perfume. *You fool*, you don't even like to ski. This is when you'll tilt your head  
toward your husband and make out his mouth by the window's light,  
how the petals of his breath open and close. How he blooms without trying.

LETTER TO KING'S DAUGHTER'S HOSPITAL, ROOM 244

Your kidney is a dream-sac  
of old hurts: in stray electrolytes  
they find Grampa's early death, Lucille's,  
the checks Thom stole from you and his  
third DUI, not to mention the frost  
that took your cherry tree. Soon

you'll sleep, Coleridge will tell you  
to which Imagination the morning mist  
belongs, from how many skies  
your surgeon borrowed blue, and when  
*ache* will ease to *itch*. The body  
lets go its battered wives, its dilapidated

preacher's suits, praise be, but what good  
is hope in these terms? Here, Gran,  
it's raining hard, streets starting to eddy  
at the edges. This morning we sat on the porch,  
kettle of a roof harkening, our neighbor boy  
out walking, shouts up at the porch,

*Look at me, I'm sappy wet!*

TO MICAH, BURGEONING HISTORIAN, AS YOUR APPENDIX IS REMOVED

Which, of all the great names  
of the human story, will prick  
like a vaccination the whole  
sweet mess of your hitherto  
undaunted body? You, sleeping  
as deep as the great black bear  
in December, my dear and youngest  
brother, who will call to you? Not

Napoleon or Stonewall Jackson, not  
Thucydides or Heraclitus, not  
precious Nathan Hale. Come,  
Mechtild of Magdeburg, say  
HOW GOD COMES TO THE SOUL,  
descending on the beloved  
*as dew on a flower*, as even dew  
on the open hand of a flower.

AFTER YOUR FATHER HAS FALLEN FROM THE ROOF AND NOT  
BROKEN A THING

He received the book you sent about Gettysburg and though he does not  
tell you this you know he'll read most of it before bedtime and on the phone

he is grateful, he recalls the family trip to Antietam and how you,  
nine years old, dropped your ice cream cone on someone's grave,

but it's your mother who tells you he's forgotten what to feed the hummingbirds  
and all week long he's called your sister by your name though this

is not the worst of it: the doctor says it's like a bruise on the brain  
and while the aphasia and disorientation will diminish, some things

may be lost forever. What's great, your father tells you, is that he can't  
remember what's lost. *It's that old bliss they tell you about*, he says,

*not knowing what you don't know you knew*. After you hang up, you do not  
cry like you thought you might, instead you get tangled in something

like prayer: what may be gone from him is last summer's drive to Tennessee,  
hiking through white pine to the top of a mist-hung hill or perhaps

the paddy in Vietnam where a bullet struck his hip and flares smoked red  
over the coming boats or perhaps the first time he touched your mother, or Hebrew,

or the color wheel, *Star Wars*, your brother's birth, the day he pulled  
the mower over his foot, stuck in a gopher hole, toes-up. If last week God

held your father's body those twelve unconscious feet, you figure it's your job  
to ask which things are shucked from his mind: only, your mouth

has become a wide place, your tongue a useless oar, and looking down you see  
your hands are the real supplicants, palms up, as if holding cantaloupe on your lap,

and when finally you fall asleep you dream a stretch of dandelions, some  
whispering out thistle-tops in a pattern like rain, some smudging

across your skin that dewy, ocher language you still cannot decipher.

## FINISHING THE HOUSE

My father swallowed a moon back in the 80s and did he ever shine bulb-hot when he was mad and did he ever take his mind to a thing and turn it right-side-yes with his hands: secondhand bikes at Christmas, a nectar perch for Mother's birds, a Slip'N Slide on the hill of our third acre, which was the only apology we got that time he challenged my kid brother to a fight and kicked me, gurgling a contrition he couldn't make out, away from his feet.

Consider this word *irregardless*. I will put up the corner shelves *irregardless* my father's black hair painted into the terracotta wall, though today he's 14 hours away in Indiana, preparing for another day at school, pulling the knot of his tie, unwrapping a lozenge, kissing my mother with a tickle in his throat, nothing on his mind. The week he drove down he painted every room but one, he woke in the dark, made coffee, opened a new package of roller naps.

Consider the subtle mechanism of sorrow: *do*. And now the wall with my father's hair, which will not stop being there, satin latexed to my house, a small lever undoing his hand from my throat, just that once, seven years ago. He is states away, enunciating for the Japanese children who cannot say his name, perfecting a tease and a grimace, turning over a word he loves to use, its useless prefix, its coming press, *Irregardless*, he used to say, *the trouble with you is you*.

*Little one*, he calls me now, though I am grown, *Sweet one*.

## IN THE POCKET OF YOUR WINTER COAT

I've begun to think it's the *celebration* you don't know  
how to handle, all of us standing around, shouting our love because  
we're given the chance, and really, a chance to shout is all  
we need: it frightens you, what you think you don't deserve  
even on this day, or perhaps I'd like to imagine you

plagued with this, a tart humility, since I'm the kind  
who wants everyone in the world to kiss my face, sing, buzz, eat  
their whole hearts out for me, only, that's not altogether  
true: last time I was the center of attention,  
a joke I made too long and had to finish off

with something not originally part of the joke at all,  
I remember being winded with delight to receive their laughter. Around  
the edges, though, it terrified me, their faces saying  
*Thank you*, their hands happily in their laps  
and come to think of it there's something

about admiration that almost hurts, which is to say,  
that joke wasn't some miracle, Dad, it was there, waiting like a wad  
of money in some jacket packed away, like all the capsules  
and nooks of ourselves we don't quite know as extant—  
quirk and dream, flower stems, balustrade. If it

can happen so haphazardly, this may be how we  
spoon the thick soup of our love: one unknown place after another  
shoring up within us, shouldering that which comes, say,  
your child, the one who taunts and charms, raw  
as an artichoke, working her way into jocularity

and your finest rage. When she starts to pull down  
the sky, separating stars like halves of bread, locates her heart and it  
too is a red planet, when the two of you fumble at last  
to a broken knowing of each other, as, perhaps, a father  
and daughter must, she'll recall these things: you

spraying down steel chicken feeders with your thumb  
over the mouth of the hose, you after a drawn-out anecdote flicking  
your wrist and fingers like the Filipinos who taught you  
songs in Ilocano, you cupping Roger's neck in the chapel  
where every week he sobbed, you

bringing bottles of coke to her polished-apple face among  
the junior high cheerleaders who were not washing so much as splashing  
cars, and, that once—you catching her in a strange, crafted lie  
of being unable to see the chalkboard anymore;

she will, in fact, recollect the kerosene stove

sputtering, how you sat her down on the old  
sofa after the optometrist's telling diagnosis  
and showed her with alarming calm the bottom  
of your shoe. If indeed it's *celebration* you're forced  
to reconsider on your 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, let it be

the way a girl will watch your face during thunderstorms  
or veer gleefully from the hallowed punch lines to which neither of you  
can seem to stick: inevitably, the priest and cowboy  
will not misunderstand each other over some  
semantic matter; they will open

an Italian Gelateria in Kansas, one taking confession  
from waffle cones, the other lassoing wayward gallons  
of Tiramisu. Do you remember—on the tatty couch, a sullen  
celery-green; she sat the long while till you said  
softly, *I needed a new pair of shoes,*

your fingers flapping a bald sole, *but you needed  
glasses.* And when you stood and walked away, you left everything,  
simply, her own great, blank, brazen stupidity, the awful  
mercy she could not parse out, and your knowing exactly  
how to love her then was not a miracle, not

a fluke or trick but you, palming something  
staid and weightless in the pocket of your winter coat, probably  
the navy blue one with duct-tape on its sleeve: there  
in the knuckled-soft pouch of corduroy,  
an entire, blooming twenty-six dollars.

## BETHLEHEM, INDIANA

Which glacier faltered in silencing your hills, Bethlehem?  
Which Shawnee woman forged your wild gooseberries? Where  
but a knell of spruce and flowering dogwood, the smallest of starlings  
crossing the Ohio River to a province once known as Ken-tah-ten,  
could we find cascading-haired Mary, whose fingers hover

the unquestionable beauty of her new son's thighs, their tender fat  
rolling, their slight spoonful of tendons kicking with the certainty  
of impulse, unknown to him yet as the body's subtlest joy. No heifer  
lows against her bale, for this is the Midwest, and our cows  
are happy cows. But Mother & child are not in the barn, its rafters

housing a dozen fidgeting pigeons, nor are they in the east shed  
where the combine neighbors the chicken coop. Say we were  
to come upon these two as they share a moment while Joseph, who,  
according to St. Brigit's account, cannot keep their only candle lit  
and so has stepped away to shake his lighter, slap its plastic

shell against his jeans: you would realize, then, from the marquee  
illuminating NO next to VACANCY, visible from the palm-sized window  
eye-high in the custodian's closet, that you've found them in the Motel 6,  
or perhaps its periphery, since there's no faded bedspread here, no bed,  
no lamp, no faucet or sink, no folded white washcloth, the undulating

highway nearer to them than the front desk, whose single geranium  
slouches toward discolor. Yes, it's Mary, and though her belly  
no longer bulges with the full moon, she still shimmers, should you  
look closely. Should you look closely you'd see the gray heads  
of four mops gathered on the cement floor as bedding for this child,

whose mother has swabbed off most of the vernix caseosa covering  
his body, whose firetruck-bespeckled swaddling has come undone,  
and whose tiny fist knocks the mop handles set against the plastic  
yellow placard that reads CUIDADO! PISO MOJADO. Certainly, you think,  
I'll be careful, but what you truly want is *answers*. Why the girl

so placid, soft strains of a Magnificat hushing her infant, why  
her fiancée so stupefied by the brightest star he's ever seen  
as he ashes out his cigarette, and why O why the peacock farm  
two miles south whose caretaker awakened with a sudden urge  
for green bean casserole only to find a heavenly host inside

his refrigerator, which, incidentally, set off the fire alarm  
*and* his wife in her cotton gown and rollers so that at this very minute  
he's tying his boots, urging on her a robe for a trip up the road

to see what can be seen. Don't think the crickets for miles around  
have shushed, or crawdads in their underground warren have ceased

to battle. The deer still turn their umber necks to listen before  
disappearing into a thick of Beech trees and bubbles still rise  
from the creek bed where podgy catfish switch their whiskers over  
pebbles, a trellis of algae, a lost, sunken shoe. At this point, so few  
know the unutterable brilliance of this night, that God would suffuse

the simple, the absolutely ordinary, indeed, the profane, with *the sacred*  
that it's almost as if it hasn't happened. Only, it has, and the complex beauty  
of all this might mean has found its shape, for a moment, in the sharp  
cry let loose from a baby's mouth searching out the air around it  
for his mother's breast. Perhaps the wind knows as it scoops through

the hollows of this place and more thinly matches the high, distant pitch  
of human need and desire. For the wind has been across the river  
into bluegrass country, 40 miles southeast of here to another Bethlehem,  
and to the nineteen other states with at least one town called *Bet lechem*,  
House of Bread—to Connecticut, Georgia, South Dakota, Texas,

New York, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Arizona, Iowa—where someone  
not so long ago figured the final resting place of Rachel, the birthplace  
of David, might make a nice name for their town. And when we,  
who are not as deft or lissom as the wind, get turned around by a similar  
copse of spruce wood, another field of harvested soybean, we'll

pull into the Quick-Mart for directions. The man at the counter  
whose young wife has just brought in her infant son for a visit  
won't look up when the bell over the door jangles our arrival, not  
at least, until he notices our faces, which are either somber or exultant  
as we say, *We're just passin' through* or *We've come to see*—

V.

It's Not Easy to See the Peony Hang Its Scented Head

Then, as Thy self to leapers hast assignd  
With hyssop, Lord, thy Hyssop purg me so  
And that shall cleanse the Leapry of my mind  
Make over me Thy mercys streams to flow  
So shall my whitness scorn the whitest snow  
    To eare and heart send sounds and thoughts of gladness  
    That bruised bones may dance away their sadness.

Psalm 51, *Miserere mei Deus*  
Mary Sidney, *The Sidney Psalter*

AFTER ANDREI RUBLEV'S *THE SAVOIR OF ZVENIGOROD*, 15<sup>TH</sup> C.

I.

And when she wakes up wailing, night after night,  
her mother takes to holding her at dusk, wrists pinched  
with fear, pleading the psalms inside her mouth. Jeremiah

said it first. Spoke straight to her deceitful heart—abrasive  
prophet, incisive and unadorned, great cleft of self, damned  
truth: above all things, that filthy heart. In the night it dreams

for her. By day, it beats and beats and beats, so that when the music  
of years trembles as a human voice, she is no longer afraid  
of those bright, black hours. Her fingers pet the yellow pages

of books, petals against her teeth. It is not the nose of Jesus, set  
like a pencil upon his face in the tradition of the Greeks. It is  
the *muted violet* around his eyes, congealed and weary,

this Jesus. She does not know if he dreamed, who took  
to holding him when he woke, and what if he listened for birds  
in early morning? How did the lapping Galilee sound?

His small lips, barely rose of gold on that old  
parchment, they are closed. Shut lightly, like a pair  
of eyes. Or a hand around a stone.

II.

The psalmist told her she could rest on God's shoulders. She is  
a lamb, flaccid slab of woman, rinsing out the stains  
from her panties in the sink, her body seeping its black scallops

onto strips of fitted cloth. She would tell herself a dream:  
holding the cheeks of the Savior of Zvenigorod. Set her mind  
on disappearance. Tell her, Isaiah, perfume poured

from that sickening alabaster jar, hands on the Savior's  
face, say again, *Comfort, Comfort*. And there is some, shelled out  
of a void. The print gives nothing so nicely: says one Russian

art historian, *There is no trace of Byzantine severity*. . . .

She falls asleep to this, arms tucked around herself, Mary  
of Magdala, widow of Naim. Each night she has waited

for something to fall, and each morning she wakes, heavy  
with mercy, to this damaged fresco of the Christ. A man  
found him in a barn, four hundred years after Rublev set him  
down. Staring up from the step of a barn, O quiet Christ.

### III.

How to unfrighten the most frightening encirclement. Which  
to the small, careening girl, her serpentine heart, her singing mouth,  
each rod of earth slipping from her hands. Which to the breasts

that rounded out like a fish's gill with air, the legs and arms  
grown long, patience that never did, which to the swiveling neck  
on its earnest knots of spine, to this, and to that, bulbs of light

in the belly, tender folds of the genitals, dreams that helix  
hot white: it is not the moustache of Jesus, a line of soil  
running into his beard; it is the turning of his face

toward her. Slightly, like a curtain touched with wind. Or the door  
an inch from closed. She fears nothing as she fears the loss  
of this amity: thank God, his eyes do not search, they do not penetrate.

## SUN BALANCING DARK

The summer I learned what it meant to writhe,  
sent firecracking, spiraling up the human tendril  
but stopping short of penetration, climax dropping  
away like a torch down a well, I also learned

the timely pulse of dawn, tangled in sheets at five am,  
unable to sleep in that state of the body, undiffused,  
the sun balancing dark and streak of light. Somehow  
in the unshattered center a strange satisfaction lifted up—

mute as an early morning on my mother's back porch, shelling peas  
before the heat set in, cows mulling behind the electric fence, hyssop  
and junebugs wet with dew: I had not given yet my gift,  
though even I did not know it as such, could not have guessed

its bright weight, like a burst of carnival sounds, its gaudy strength,  
spun high and sky-stark as a ferris wheel carriage. Of course  
it scared me then, stuck inside as a tree holding back  
its spring leaves. Of course I hit at the moon with my body's  
round fury, those seasonal limbs opening and closing.

Friends said they respected this, my *holding out*,  
but their sidelong glances laughed a little. Summers  
later, it doesn't matter who was right, for I learn  
a lesson to shock the blood and beans of my ridiculous

body, like a sock of marbles sent knocking on a glass bowl. Heavy  
with our dumb, sure love, so rooted by that conifer I tremulously  
climb, *marriage*, having discovered the most arcane part of myself,  
struck flat with its thrashed breaching each time, the bearer

of such largess: delirium, you gifting with me, reckless,  
in and out of the only earth we know for whole minutes—  
—afterwards, as if God himself had named a new day  
and called it good, we are left so small, so shaken.

## THE FIRST FEW WEEKS

When *finally* you'd return  
    from an errand—another book  
of Auden, Derrida, or the small  
    canisters of oatmeal, dried  
apricots, olives—your flat foot sounding down the corridor  
  
was enough to flush my neck  
    with red pendants; you, too, felt it, would skirt  
table and chairs and land, at last,  
    on the divan, where we leaned  
like great brown seals into each other's necks: sun-mottled,  
  
brimming. What did we do  
  
every day? Eat apricots, read  
    out loud, read for hours—  
your gentle throat throbbing,  
    earnest brow dark as a hem—and now,  
after I have sunk full into your charity, is the time  
  
to tell you: I forsook the poems, the essay's  
    bright mien, all that splendid brooding  
which truths be True: I confess,  
    dear heart, I was not listening at all  
but practicing the weightless hum of love, its incandescent  
  
swim. Evenings, I studied  
    light on the side of your face; I wanted,  
in desperate simplicity, to whisper,  
    *Do you know*, the way these slight hairs shine,  
*right here*, you've the subtle halo of a question mark  
  
for an ear? Just beyond our flat,  
    huge heads of blue hydrangea,  
summer-strewn, spilt over the city  
    and someone playing Mendelssohn, God  
love them, with every window thrown open.







## THE HYSSOP TUB

### I.

Great harridan of my heart    who is to say  
you knew anything at all    Once    I bargained  
with a man the whole night long to call    what thing  
hung between us *love*    as though by scraping the rough  
from a coconut    it could be    a carrot    Later    I thought  
I understood how much I hated    myself    It was not  
easy to see the peony hang its scented head    No  
I willed the petals fall    my palm    almost  
full of unassuming    gloaming pink    an occasional  
ant across my stem of a wrist    What  
I could not see    I knew    I could not see    What  
woman    believes she has the turrets    of God  
beneath her rattlebox of skin    The only flag I flew  
for so long read    *I'll erase myself if you want me to*

## II. O Degas

Let them have the dancers            I'm in love    with the woman in *Le Tub*  
her russet sponge and russet hair    Russet jar    delicate as a teapot    filled  
I want to imagine    with the oils of gardenia or some such    flower from the family  
of Rubiaceae    not the bitter    minty leaves of Labiatae    for the russet yarn  
    between her needles on the counter speaks    serenity    You loved her    too  
I can tell    you did not    give her a glistening    It would have been easy with each  
hatchmark to    deliquesce her    body with water    but you've given us the tub  
simple iron sphere    opening not only up    but out    like grace    and the sempiternal  
turning away of her head    her body dry    ginger-ashen    like someone crouching  
to kiss a new land    saying *Praise be*    saying *I believed*    and the crepuscular small  
of her back    knows how what is poured from the mouth    of the splotched pitcher  
over her shoulders will            rivulet    I see the hairbrush within reach    I see the towel  
But later    in bronze    semi-submerged    she practices the Portuguese    she knows  
grips an instep    the tub's rim    O Degas    she asks over            and again *Como ser limpo*

### III. Speaking of A Bath

My father is the woman in the striped dress his hand holding my waist  
tender as a shell My mother is the woman with her right hand  
rinsing my foot in the bowl My husband is the woman leaning into  
the child whose smallness is so small it fits in his lap Their heads  
so circular everything asymmetrical even the cholera they wash away Degas  
befriended Cassatt both who imitated Japanese ukiyo-e prints  
from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts but all of them all these women bathing especially  
one of Cassatt's few nudes is me do you understand I am *Woman Bathing* my  
striped dress unbuttoned to the waist my back etched  
carefully as the pitcher on the roiling carpet yet the tiniest glimpse of water  
in the tub's an avatar She the miraculous drafts(wo)man said the medium  
made her do it said *drawing on a plate requires strict control*  
*as the surface mercilessly retains every mark* See what marks remain  
are the clean lines of my nebbish back the undoing of my stains

#### IV. Speaking of Art

For each of the years I was lost as a pebble in the basalt  
of lithosphere it was not which Caravaggisti I liked best  
but whose brutal themes I could bear Gentileschi's Judith  
Ribera's Bartholomew but for early Velázquez so flagrantly  
entranced was I with his Seville water carrier ripped sleeve swarthy  
forehead Who could save me from loving the droplets of water  
on the earthen jug from saying *Diego* you have given me  
this *genre scene* the plebeian like me O Lord like a whole papaya  
every time the goblet of water the shadowy hand the russet  
poncho How could I have missed the russet  
poncho or his ancient body beside the boy  
who stares at the rend in the sleeve who will take the goblet  
and drink what the carrier brought on his shoulder to them  
like a constellation sloshing toward Bethlehem

V.

It was Bathsheba on the roof in the tub but David who pleaded  
    Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean  
Bathsheba whose name I remembered *because*  
of the tub when I was old enough to understand what things  
the King wanted of her BATHSHEBA I call to you  
from the centuries of women who both knew and didn't know  
better Believe me your voice had you had one to speak  
in holy text is mine is the Black-Throated Green Warbler's  
    whose song even without words sounds wanting  
I know what you wanted I hope as much as the aspergillus twig  
shaken the purification I hope he loved you  
as finally someone has begun to love me When we're apart  
he says *Put your hand close to your face* he says *Your fingers brushing*  
*your forehead Your palm hovering your mouth It's me*

VI.

Countess of Pembroke            sister of the Queen's    fallen poet  
you have proffered this *translation*    this *paraphrase*    these lines that perhaps  
as you had Laura speak through Petrarch    you've given this woman  
something of her own    (the Black-Throated Green Warbler    male species  
has been known to sing    466 songs    in one hour    to call a mate)  
for it is not *let the bones you have crushed rejoice*    but *that bruised bones may*  
*dance away their sadness*    after all it is    to lepers God has been  
assigned    their purging    part cedar wood    part crimson    yarn  
pair of doves    hyssop    Rabbinic commentary offers  
*You were proud like the cedar and the Holy One    Blessed be He    humbled*  
*you like this    hyssop that is crushed    by everyone*    so    too at  
the Crucifixion    vinegared wine    offered on a branch    of hyssop  
O for being crushed like mint    O humility    purity    what's    the chance  
you take    to give    only and not    only    then    we dance



## THE NIGHT YOU BOLT

Mid-argument, leaving the suds and a few  
unwashed plates, I watch the screen door swing  
and then take off after you, barefoot, already feeling  
misunderstanding's ragged instep. You  
seem to disappear, but I won't call for you  
yet. I walk to the park at the end of our street  
in the sopping dark, palms to elbows. My feet  
tread untorn over the chips of glass, black-blue  
pebbles loosed from the tarred edges of the road. Only  
under the lamps of the park do I panic, when  
from a ways off someone comes striding, a man  
too small to be you, though I hope, and can see  
in his gait some purpose I think might be  
forgiveness. I call for you then, but even your name  
comes back to me, sounding from my throat the same  
mulled syllables I speak during sex, not a plea  
exactly: a harkening. Returning  
to our door, still flung wide, I walk the other way  
into deeper dark, gluttoned yards, houses you say to stay  
away from. I am dumbly courageous, finding  
you. It takes years to make the intersection and back  
and still you will not appear. I sit in the grass  
by the mailbox, perk at silhouettes that sling past  
on tree limbs and finally decide to drive the block,  
windows down, accompany the tic-tic-tic  
of cicadas with turn signal. And there you are, lying  
perfectly silent on your back in the driveway hidden between  
house and shed. I could have walked  
right over you. In the kitchen, after you dry each dish,  
I wait for you to speak. Then, without meaning to,  
I do, and cry a little. The only answer I get is you  
clicking a magnetic poem into place on the fridge  
so I leave, cry some more, try to sleep. The next morning  
when I strip the bed to wash the sheets, I find  
blackened spots where my feet, too, offer a few lines—  
*Strange old spirit // Wisdom / haunt me*

FLOATING SPECKS OF ASH EN ROUTE

Say to me *You're welcome*, Lost Temper  
of the Morning. Back Lash of Wakening  
meant only to herald my mouth: names—  
sated, names—bereft. What shall I say  
to your sister, Noon Malcontempt, and second  
cousin, Concupiscent Broken Neck of Day?

Nevermind. It was the matchstick set  
me off, you see. But for its glow  
I hated it: head of fire, happy catch  
with wick. Tell me, Gone *Bonheur*, how  
shall I know Old D when I greet him,  
after all the windows' homely sons?

Let Candle tell them each to hush, all  
to wane, all to peter, and send Love back  
to bed. Send her through the kitchen, send  
her through the hall. Her footsteps cannot  
clock their worth, for I'm Undone Benign  
and this, another day I've ruined. Thank you.





TO MY TALL MAN WHO ALSO LOVES WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Tell me you've found the wind to help  
hear all things loud and beautiful, a line  
that jangles from the mouth that lifts it up,  
or falling from the pigeons, all who sing  
*When you are old and gray and full of sleep. . .*

Tell me you note the fragile, yes,  
the hapless and unyielding things: small  
and stiff, the woman's legs held tight  
together at her bony knees and kept  
together ankle-tight. Tell me up there  
is not an everywhere *the ceremony*  
*of innocence is drowned*, up there you look  
across the earth and see a child or two  
who've hatched and grown from Leda's eggs.

Are you the closer to Byzantium  
than we who walk down here with air  
as dull as breath, as sweet and stale as those  
who now have just deserted it. Tell me  
to seek Athena's eyes of gray. Tell me  
to aim for *femme fatale* and loom as big  
as you, if only in their minds, the dead.

What happens to the girls born of the swan?  
But for those gentle hands, who would you be?

O man who found your body long one day,  
the way I found my body small and knew  
that I should notice all things tall and wild,  
tell me Unleash The Brigand God, held cold  
and endless as the sky, as cold and restless as  
ourselves, all we who seek *the bee-loud glade*:  
it does us good to sleep, to old, to gray.

MAN AS WALNUT, BROKEN OPEN

Head thrown back, he cries  
and cries, is not ashamed, though his people  
are farmers and lawyers. He hollows out  
the nadir for sounds, the spine's delicate  
nuggets, the tiny pear of green gall,  
a miserable wonder locked in his body,  
sent to the throat, that petty thief of the spirit  
hawking its calamities.

Still, he works  
at making what noises he must, stays at it,  
drooping like the sunflower heavy  
with kernels. Here on our made bed  
I have thought to gather what falls,  
antediluvian as a psalm, but all that will emerge  
true as the translucent paper halving  
a small meat is this:

were every man  
to know this crying, and let himself, what  
would not come undone, whole  
as a melon, from the sky?

## HOW TO START A BRUSHFIRE

Without the kindling of staunch idiosyncrasies—  
boho, bon vivant—or the many years we churned alone  
to make a way into ourselves and out

like the ants that channel the front yard's red  
clay, we have still the abiding tremors of darkness  
in our hearts. So the foofaraws of wedlock

have lit our sorry tempers' fuse. Late December  
and homesteads on the outskirts of town burn  
to nothing. We wait for clouds. Under our breaths

we say, *Douse, douse*. With an unforgiving hand we  
chafe our own indiscretion though Oklahoma itself  
has known survival before either one of us squirreled

into being: not yet tornado season and there,  
yellow twine in the jay's nest, spackle securing  
the crumbled edge of the brick walk, dillweed

obnoxiously windward to the dormant rose, her  
sheltered spot. What is rain without the raw, clawing  
want of it? Darling, this is love's excrescence:

it will not shoo, will not be swallowed  
with your tendency to exaggerate, not curl against  
the white heat of my impatience or smoke to ash

in seven sexless nights: O arcanum! Chip has called  
to say he lost both tool shed and east field, and though  
I say, *We'll pray*, what I mean is, *Our beau ideals*

*have just begun to stand on end*, as an egg will at equinox  
—or so your brother told me once. Flummery,  
old friend. This is what we'll do. Take work gloves,

a plastic flask of water, my weak chin and your dilapidated  
torso: our best intentions could hollow out a fire line  
along the south gate. Let's let ourselves smolder there.

## WHEN LOVE FIRST BROUGHT ITS BUMPER CROP

### I. Beloved of the Ground

Start with your brother weeping  
at Eucharist, which itself began  
as a Dark-eyed Junco, into flight,  
not knowing its own beauty  
but flickering up and plunging  
with a surety that frightens  
you and your solid body, stuck  
all those years in shoes and a bloody  
nose. All of us, our quarried years,  
Beloved of the Ground. He didn't

mean to, your brother tells you,  
though he knew it was coming, that dark,  
sweet pressure snaking its way  
from knuckles and beltways of the body  
to a pure burst beneath muscles  
of the face, the kind of cry, you both  
know, the heart alone cannot create. When  
they ask, you should not begin  
with the beginning. It is unwise,  
but mostly, it is untrue,

for who is to say when love  
first brought its bumper crop:  
dried rows of corn shushing  
an August storm, the stream you  
trespassed Fergie Ladd's land to get to,  
its tadpoles billioning in the heat,  
your drawing pad soggy  
at the edges and your sister offering  
the last of the boysenberries  
from the deep red bottom

of her pocket. It must have begun  
here, starlings en masse over  
the soybeans and not even the scarecrow  
willing them *Go*. Which rustle  
opened the speckled egg of your heart?

### II. Half a Wing Yet

The first and only laugh you got  
from the Welch boy, his brown hair

and brown arms: the best part  
of Sunday meetings, you with your body  
half a wing yet, your mouth a gaudy nest,  
wits, insinuations. No, your mouth  
a pardoned bulb, the harvest moon, held  
in place by the seasons and the wrong sun  
turning you slowly, slowly  
to a woman.

### III. Thin Legs of Birds

Here, too, a particular beginning: you kept  
a plum in your hand the whole  
day, pressed it to your mouth, not  
to eat but to smell—to smell! The tight  
somber corm, Lenten round, good as a flower  
to your face: any thing worthwhile in this world  
has taken a patience you didn't know you had, a dare,  
the Western wind in your hair and all the days  
of June between your thighs. You  
and the Red-faced Cormorant

at the playground where you pitched  
a swing in the air and prayed forgiveness  
for last night's kiss. When it came,  
you and the plum rejoiced; only, the plum  
itself was forgiveness, a gift: mouthful,  
rivulets, palm back, pit. He, too, a gift,  
this one you'd marry, and its beginning,  
like the priest intoning, the elements  
in hand, lifted slow and precativ: trees,  
fields, birds, those bowls and bowls

of beans to snap. No wonder  
you don't remember who was there, each opus  
of grin and wink, while clambering back  
to you now, the words of the first hymn you rose  
from your knees to sing—its slow, perfect rhymes  
reaching all, all the way to the stained glass,  
the organ full gold and how, perhaps,  
if you didn't know any better,  
you'd swear with those careful  
particles of light the dusk is itself

Thou Fount of Every Blessing,  
come for you, come for him, richer  
than you've ever been, plumb daft

with joy, your vows sprung from the pulp  
of clouds yet dense as stem and sprout,  
radish-deep in the humus of your love. There  
in the church, silly white dress, you, too,  
cried and knelt and spilt with a great wet  
happiness your promises and your prayers.  
You felt the thin legs of birds atop your ankles.

#### IV. The Sound of Seeds

All those risking wings, their fey, able  
ways, aren't they at least a little like  
ours? No, not us, feet as good as gills  
and certain chambers of the heart  
turkey-waddled, unable to lark from the mount,  
the skiff, from stage or sidewalk, to God,  
from God, or maybe just the sun, for now:  
O Watchful Sky, O Lifted Head—Guineafowl,  
Buttonquail, Oriole, Thrush. Crossbil,  
Siskin, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Rubythroat,

Rubythroat, Wren. Long before you woke  
to the spore-thick air of love, long before  
you spotted the fireflied light of longing—  
or was it peace?—even before  
you listened for the sound of seeds blushing  
open to soil, you in your silent places  
began to shed the fist-sized sac, each month,  
like molting your blood came down, but this  
was only one beginning of many: the straw  
ones, the hollow ones catalogue your fallings

apart: God, sky, grains, loves, each start  
one part ending. This time, holding hands  
taut across their chests like small white fans,  
they ask, *when*, when did it begin. You,  
smaller and whiter still, must know,  
but not for the knowing, must say,  
but not for the saying.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Susanna Childress was born in La Mirada, California, on October 16, 1978. She received her Bachelor's Degree, a double major in Literature and Writing, from Indiana Wesleyan University and her Master's in English/Creative Writing from the University of Texas at Austin. She has been awarded a thesis fellowship from the James Michener Center for Writers and the Kingsbury Fellowship from Florida State University. Her first book of poems, *Jagged with Love*, was selected by Billy Collins for the 2005 Brittingham Poetry Prize as well as by the University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale for the Devil's Kitchen Reading Award.