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Jamie E. Bloss

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AT WATER'S EDGE: AN INTRODUCTION

Writers try, through their experiences, to relate to the “big questions” in life. On the back of any novel praise is given to authors for their discussion of life, death and love. This body of work is my contribution to this discussion, laid out as anecdotes telling of small ordinary events I have experienced. There are four themes in the book that I try to address: memory and dreams, language, the Confucian idea of Ren, and maturity. The poems are autobiographical in nature, but they address themes to which anyone can relate. I think my biggest fear in showing this work to others is that the reader will not be able to relate, or will think that what I have set out to do is self-indulgent because these are poems about my life. But in my work, the best material comes from what I know. The biggest compliment I receive about my work is that the poems are memorable. By adding my stories and memories to the poetic collective, it is my hope that the reader can easily hear my voice as it contributes to answering some of the big questions about love and life.

Autobiography

The first writing assignment I ever had during my college career was to write a poem about “where I’m from,” which is so easy to do. The poetry of Charles Bukowski taught me it was okay to write about yourself in the first person. Lyn Hejinian’s prose pieces in My Life profoundly affected my writing as well in that she writes about experiences anyone could have. Her book is autobiographical and yet it remains the biography of a collective group of people. Although it is called My Life, it becomes an anti-autobiography because the situations she writes about could apply to anyone. Everyone wants to share who they are and place the mark of identity on themselves, but what most people do not think is that they are constantly reinventing themselves over again. Every seven years our cells have replaced
themselves and we are not the same people anymore. Thomas Pynchon sums up perfectly how I feel about using autobiographical material: “somewhere I had come up with the notion that one’s personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite. Moreover, contrary evidence was all around me…for in fact the fiction…that moved and pleased me…was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live.” These shared levels of life hold true in Lyn Hejinian’s prose, and I hope will serve the same function in my work.

A Brief Discussion of Style

As I was writing, the poems fell easily into sections, with some of the poems more concerned with past memories, and others more preoccupied with coming to conclusions about the “big topics” – death, love, and beauty. Thus, I divided the book into three parts based on past, present and future categories. As far as the forms of the pieces, I used various styles. I enjoy long poems with no stanza breaks like Dean Young’s poems, and also formed two or three-line stanza poems in a style Billy Collins might employ. Prose blocks are also present to convey a sense of the blending together of thoughts, mental images, or just a chaotic evening. As long as the manuscript stays cohesive in some ways, I like to use different forms. Titles are always important. Poems like “Leopold Auer’s Student” are named to give the reader the theme of the poem from the start, in this case alluding to the relationship between teacher and student.

The Main Ideas

Initially, the title that came to me for the book was Dreaming of Water. After all, the themes of memory and dreams that appear throughout the poems relate to the fluid movement of water. My poems are also steeped in a longing for change, a need to go to water when you live in a land-locked city. For a time period, all I dreamt of was water, coursing through my hair and over my body, and drinking huge amounts of it. I took this to mean an
intense desire for change, for the source of creative power that so often escapes me. Metaphors should always be fluid, never stagnant, for the reader. These poems come together into a cohesive body as a narrative emerges, much like the collection of memories that a person accumulates over the years and assimilates into their identity. As I graduated high school and moved through my college career, I was struck that none of the things that were supposed to be important milestones stayed stuck in my mind whereas certain small images stayed. Snow on a bench, light across the living room floor – these things stayed ingrained easily in my mind. Yet events such as graduating high school, orchestra concerts, or my most fun nights, either blurred together, flowed into one collective mess of images, or ceased to be in my memory at all. Because there is little that is concrete in our lives, poetry allows me to grasp at memory. I think these poems also attest to the mutable nature of memory.

Many of the poems also include dream imagery. For me, dreams can be just as realistic as, if not more real and vivid than, my waking reality. In “Any Afternoon,” I talk about experiencing an incredibly realistic dream and how a singer can describe a place that I’ve never been, yet it feels like I’ve been there my whole life. “Pavos Reales,” “While you were at work,” “Love/sick” and “Night of Shattered Glass” all deal with intensely realistic dreams that have stayed wedged in my psyche for some time now.

All poets like to comment on language in their writing. A poem’s success can be judged on how well it conveys to the reader what the author intended, but also if it conveys other things the poet never intended. You don’t want to beat readers over the head with your meaning, but you also want them to get a feel or sense of what you were thinking. This theme of effective communication emerges in the poems. I do use Spanish when I write; that expression comes from my experiences learning the language. A poem like “Pavos Reales” tries to get at the oddities of language and the difficulties it presents. This attempt is also found in other poems, like “Intent,” which shows how the English language can fall
short of describing emotions. That's where the Spanish comes into my writing; sometimes a
title of a poem seems much more suitable in another tongue.

Ren is the Confucian idea of the togetherness of humans – that your sense of self
comes from good acts to other humans, and that the meaning of your life stems from these
acts. I have been leaning towards this philosophy for years, but never had a word for it
until recently. Many of my poems express a strong religious aspect. They reveal a belief in
the sacredness of life – human life especially. This was surprising to me as I read over the
manuscript. I was startled and pleased to see myself growing more spiritual and accepting.
Spiders appear frequently because of my phobia and this theme shows me growing as a per-
son as I learned to accept them in the natural world. Religious themes occur in poems such
as “Heaven's Dome,” “Rituals,” “Designed to Thrill” and “Ren.” Where poems like “Teatro”
question God, the other poems accept easily that such a presence is not only possible, but
realistic. Thus, in some poems the word “god” is not capitalized and in others it is. In “De-
signed to Thrill,” the line “God is surely home by now, sleeping on the couch,” is meant to
convey the everyday aspect of religion, not to insult people's belief in a higher power. The
poems try to speak to the awe that I feel in the presence of another human sleeping, or the
way non-religious people can have their own last supper together on Maundy Thursday. A
poem like “Cloisters” speaks of religious objects used in death rituals to unify old and new.
Like many world philosophies, poems help to unify the “sacred and profane” as well as lend
understanding to death.

Influences

This work includes a bibliography of authors and poets that have, over the years,
contributed to my writing style. The poetry that is the most attractive to me is written by
poets who know that simplicity is the greatest beauty that is possible, poets such as Stephen
Dunn, Billy Collins and Li-Young Lee. I try to blend their composure with the excitement
of poetry like that of Dean Young, a master of combining seemingly unrelated things and
incidents to give you a general idea of what he means. My prose blocks spring from my ad-
miration of Dean Young and Lyn Hejinian. In the poems themselves, I allude to Li-Young
Lee and also Wallace Stevens’ poem “Sunday Morning.” The elegant way Lee writes about
his family is something I have tried to emulate in poems like “Home.” Wallace Stevens dem-
onstrates a form of longing that I could never portray as accurately as he does in “Sunday
Morning.” Jason Floyd William’s kitten’s heart, “a dying alarm clock,” is another moment
in which language can triumph. In that small phrase Williams manages to capture life and
death, something I am still striving to do. I will be happy if I can write something half as
elloquent as that someday. There are many others who I’m sure have influenced me; the way
Thomas Pynchon writes about crazy adventures in his novels is similar to the way I like to
write about things that have happened to me. Embellishment never hurts, but what is really
there in our lives provides the most material for each of us. Books on writing, like those of
Dorothea Brande and Natalie Goldberg, have also been instrumental in providing me with
advice and inspiration.

Maturity: Standing on the Shore Looking Back

Much of what I’ve written comes at a crossroads in my life; it is a summation of what
I’ve learned about writing and living in my four years of undergraduate work. Of course
there are no concrete answers to abstract questions about life, love and death, but poems
can put the questions or answers into words in ways other writing cannot. Here I touch on
memory, dreams, desire, and language’s ability to convey these ideas to other people.
The last thing I want to say is how astonished I am at my own work and how it came to be.
I always try to keep in mind, when I am writing, what Federico García Lorca told us: “intel-
ligence is often the enemy of poetry, because it limits too much, and it elevates the poet to a
sharp-edged throne where he forgets that ants could eat him or that a great arsenic lobster
could fall suddenly on his head.” There are so many things about life that are still new to
me, but I have come to understand that the job of any artist, especially one who has tried
her hand at photography, is to be amazed and to open windows to things that people don't ordinarily notice. I say this in the least pretentious way possible, as an introduction to the spiders my mother and I have watched hatch in the garden, to the crazy dreams from which I awaken in the mornings.
“The obvious analogy is with music. It was a mountain creek, running over little pebbles of white quartz and mica. Let’s say that every possibility waits. In raga time is added to measure, which expands. A deep thirst, faintly smelling of artichoke hearts, and resembling the sleepiness of childhood.”

–Lyn Hejinian

“No hay en el mundo arbitrariedad mayor ni injusticia más atroz que la del sentimiento.”

–Rosa Montero
Any Afternoon

She dreamt she was dead, sat up in the coffin among mourners and flowers and thanked everyone she ever knew “for being so cool.”

Once an 8-year-old girl, I saw my friend behind the utility shed, her father’s hands inside the pink dress after her birthday party. The guests were gone. He said if I ever told, they would euthanize my dog.

I woke up crying and very warm. I’ve never had a dog. Nothing ever felt that real. Crocodiles walking along the banks of the river behind my grandparents’ house seemed real. I went to a party on that lawn. Everyone accused me of being a drunk after I had one beer.

Later, splayed in front of the stereo, a man sings *I’m addicted to the slow, slow South* and even though I’ve never been further than Kentucky, I know exactly what he means.
Saturday Morning

She says, “But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss.”
– Wallace Stevens

We woke up with headaches
brassy and banging around
punk music on the stereo
Ira Glass speaking softly.

They were vacuuming
and cleaning the bathroom.
A toilet flushed,
not a pink flush like cheeks
after drinks in the cold
walking on streets
past smiling men at night.

Intimations in the car.
She wishes for gloves
made of kidskin or felt
for big boots to stomp
down the street so men
wouldn't look at her.

Burnt orange leaves
melting in a tunnel
hips pressed low in the seat
hand out the window strays
her hair waves and air smells
like fall, hay harvested,
horses running to the barn.

Yellow leaves blend,
thinking of their death –
poems and stories told
lack of chlorophyll
clean air holding still
she keeps the pen upright
while kids shout outside.

Western shirts and boots
on the rug, boots in line
boots made of leather
pacing to the Chinese food
handing out the credit card
taking the bag to the car.

Waiting for them to call,
expectant knowing
the fridge is full,
beer on the bottom shelf
shrimp lo mein
too much to eat.
Grocery list finished
feasting toward famine.
She had too much cake
too much to drink.
Headaches – we hear you
loud and clear. She
hadn't written it down.
The bars closed at two
fridge empty again.
Nights full of smoke
and telescopes, full moons.
Vacationing in Ohio

Flea markets and cemeteries, unusual places to make an old love new again.

Whistling in cars can become annoying quickly, or always turning the music up too loud.

But days come and lakes fill their shores with smiling people and the car seems an escape when you’re not listening to NPR and the wind runs its hand through my chlorinated hair.

And I feel sort of dumb when I fashion love poems but really is there any better occasion to write? We take old things from flea markets and fresh blueberries from Georgia, mix them in our arms and in the back of your car. Make sure the fruit doesn’t get squished and the classical records don’t get scratched. Later, I hear the ageless passion of Brahms.
Plum

Sodden purple, pungent with desire
of rain, the smell of summer, the curves,
the juice running down your chin,
gold flesh revealed within the crease.
Your eyes, pale as a whale's belly,
legs, the crease behind your knee.
Your straight spine, you shudder
from my cold fingers −
porcelain, blue fingernails.
I thought his eyes were lukewarm tea,
but now they are warm syrup.
Yours, so enraptured
with the cause and effect,
the ebb and flow of my tides.
His with the plum tree crowning
the dewy grass, the production
of tears, a release from pain.
Teatro

Stale rice cakes for dinner,
Los soles troncos from the 70's in my bag,
the cover ocean water blue and faded,
pages falling out, Teatro written in gold.

Inside rested a 2002 Kent State calendar.
Morose and amazed to know
no one had touched it in eight years
its worn pages, holiness found in old books.

Francoise Hardy croons to me God knows what.
I don't speak French. I don't know God
except in the faces of people I see on the street.

Pretentious me carrying this book of plays
around all week, filled with pride
at knowing another language, at owning,
for these three weeks, something old.

A butter-colored, half-eaten rice cake
against the blue fabric of the cover.
I'll interpret plays tonight on paper.
I'll forget the meaning, not the color.
While you were at work

I ate Cool Whip
out of the tub
with a spatula
and played ragtime
on the piano.

I could hear my violin
teacher whispering
to make it more schmaltzy,
less careful.

I decided the whisk was
the most useful kitchen tool.

Cigarettes were smoked
in the house
crushed out
on table tops.

The piano bench legs
did not wear skirts.

He and I exchanged
thought-filled glances
across the table
like we had seen
the same person walk by.

He drank
amber ales
whereupon
I remarked
that the cider
was the color
of his eyes
in the light.

Whereupon we put
Cool Whip on my nose,
breasts and chupee chu.

Afterwards, his bubbly
cider eyes turned back
to their sluggish
syrup ways.

I had only
blinking once.

I shuffled off
to the kitchen
to bake a strawberry
pie and save my
breath for tomorrow.
White Memory

Talking through letters,
I was learning a foreign tongue.

On Monday we held each other,
although I cannot recall how close.

In my mind, unwittingly,
I ignored that you kissed me.
I pushed your hand away
from my hair.

Tonight,
seven years,
a lifetime
to hold onto
benches with snow
built up to our feet, fences
that we could not climb
back over, once
they were jumped.
Number your page 1-25 for the Spelling Test

We fold our notebook paper without those scraggly edges, hot-dog-style and mark down the numbers.

The teacher has us set our folders so no one can peek at our answers. I’m especially adamant about this.

I still enjoy the quiet of the cubicles in the library and reading about who loves whom carved in the laminate.

Some kids have folders with fluffy cats or Lisa Frank rainbow animals, sunglasses, lipsticks, sports, colors.

I’ve got the plain red one, and I’m crying behind it because I couldn’t control the urge to talk to my neighbor one desk over.

I’ve gotten three check marks on the blackboard after my name, I’m bringing home a monkey certificate to my mom today. Normally this just means that I don’t get to play the Magic School Bus human body computer game. Today, the tears of disappointment –

I won’t be putting on my red, white and blue one-piece or grabbing my towel, no jackknives and cannonballs for me at the swim party.

The girl’s name was Cheryl and she had the butchest haircut I ever saw, pierced ears, tiny gold balls.

I got all the words right on the test from practicing with my mom. I can remember the kitchen chairs, the dark wood and sitting on my hands so I couldn’t cheat at flashcards, the big fluorescent numbers in green and orange, counting on your fingers would only slow you down.

Now I’m glad to be done with math, and I can swim at the Y whenever. I am a damn good speller but I don’t attempt cannonballs often.

The diving boards have been taken down at the local pool, but at times there are tears when I can’t control my tongue.
Leopold Auer's Student

Last night we made strawberry shortcake
the way both of our mothers do:
biscuits, no extra-sweet cake here,
and if it were my mom, I bragged,
the biscuits would’ve been homemade.

Watching a rocket launch
in Florida, one that never came back.
The shuttle appeared to move close
along the horizon going straight up,
the pieces of it unneeded, falling back
to Earth. I proudly said my dad
used to work at NASA, brought us
astronaut ice cream home some nights.

I cringe at the story of your younger sister
wearing see-through dresses to a wake,
thinking how one tries so hard to distance
oneself from the family, wanting to go
so much farther, then one day you wake up,
put on some Schumann, sip coffee,
lean over to your boyfriend, and whisper
Traumerei means 'Dreaming.'
I think of the violin teacher who related
that to me, and the nuthatch who visits
our feeder every night at five-thirty.

Return to the meat and potatoes we
had the night before, the dream right there:
the replicated shortcake, a little sugar
sprinkled over the berries. That night I heard
the Tchaikovsky violin concerto played
by Jascha Heifetz, the one written for Auer
who refused to play it. He said it was impossible.
Pavos reales

As if the word ‘turkey’
were not good enough

or the bird with copper-
green plumes could

cease to exist, although
it gobbles its presence.

If you add a ‘real’
it becomes a royal turkey,

namely, its splendid
cousin peacock. And if

that’s not symbolism
enough for you, last night

I dreamt I cut off
my hands and ate them.
Green Islands

You turn off the headlights as we pull in the driveway to my parents’ house.
In the amount of light that is left you turn to me. I can see the shiny part
of your right eye. That’s when you say you don’t want to see me anymore.

When I got back from Europe you were growing your first moustache.
We met again and kissed on the back of your car behind the Mexican restaurant.
It was warm. The best part of summer was that it didn’t get dark so fast. The numbers
on the back of your shirt looked freshly-printed and your mouth tasted familiar and new.

We were sitting under a tree in the middle of a lightning storm,
water dripping from the end of my nose. I had freshly-dyed bleached-blond
hair that looked more orange than white, but you liked the different colors.

On Thanksgiving, my sister sat in the November wind on the back
of her ex-boyfriend’s car. They talked for an hour or more.
My parents wanted me to tell her to put on a coat. I told them to let her be.

This morning my mom goes upstairs to see if I’ve come home
and finds my bed still made, the sheets unwrinkled. After apologizing
for not calling I sit down and actually think about what I’ve done.

I think that the two weeks I sat listening to Our Lady Peace in my headphones
and crying after you let me down easy in high school is nothing compared to
what happened later, but I don’t like to use the phrase what I’ve done to you.

It was so easy to feel the dull panic of sitting in a car
after being driven home and the current love of your life telling you
he didn’t want to see you anymore. And every night I didn’t call
my parents and tell them where I was, I felt that, too.

To every car with damp air inside and two kids breaking up, I want to say,
I get it. It is a big deal. Those are the things you’ll keep thinking about
while you’re trying to fall asleep alone for years to come.

Three things like a green island chain in the center of a creased map:
a tree in a rainstorm on the big concert’s lawn, your car behind the Mexican restaurant,
a bench in the cemetery near snow piled up on only one side of the fence.
Sparks from the Transformer across the Street

The night before I failed my driving test
the transformer shattered into sparks.
The lights blipped off. We laughed
as I went to find candles, you fighting
the way with your cell phone, staying close
so I wouldn't run into the furniture.

We'd been to the shows,
had beers at the bar, me spilling
half of mine down my sleeve.
I don't know what makes me so clumsy.
It had to do with looks or
the way your arm slipped
around me, but that sounds sinister.
It was like natural warmth
after drinking beer.

We'd talked about Sparks,
drinking it in high school,
our sheltered lives.
I asked my parents why I never
got to have any fun in high school
and my sister got to go out. They said
you weren't friends with the right people.
We'd get Sparks from their older brothers,
drink it before going to shows. The sign
for Sparks Moving and Storage
by the railroad tracks, we'd call it out,
mention it every time we drove past.

So the lights went out, and there we are
in the dark, faces lit up by candles,
there is no way to describe your green eyes.
Just-cooked asparagus or
cop cars' silent lights burning,
or tossing an orange upwards to the ceiling.

I thought of your arms and the way you play banjo.
It took seconds to decide to sleep with you.
The lights flicked back on.
If it ain’t Baroque, don’t fix it.

You enter my bedroom
holding a box of Kleenex,
a Dove bar, and some orange pills,
I smile weakly.

Simón Bolívar’s triumphant
frame, a flag behind
his arched back.

Your brother’s lanky body
matched with thin moustache
imagining him going bald soon,
old camefa hung around his neck.

Three green glass bottles
on a round oak table,
deck of cards and some “kitchen,”
matches written on in Sharpie,
become bitchin’.

Lank damp hair around her face,
red spots underneath the nose,
this woman at Wal-mart.
Who does she go home to?

Baroque art and music,
a shower of gold like the one
that came to Danaë,
a sleep-walking dream.

Taking out recycling wearing
a brown corduroy trench coat,
maybe a flasher, maybe just lazy.
My hair still wet, I might catch cold.

The axis of this story is him
handing me a purple piece of paper
upon which was written
hi jamie in dwarvish.

You are on the stage playing bass,
your fingers pressed down,
delicately they hold a kiss
for me when you finish playing.
Who was King Tut’s wife?

The smell of the house warming
and waking always made me homesick.
We’d shave our legs in a bucket of water
outside at camp. The showers were too cold
and you’d be cutting your goose bumps.
I hate the York Peppermint Patties commercials;
I never want to see that woman’s green eyes
and gooseflesh again. I don’t like color contacts.
Before we leave to see Yes today I think,
is there anything more taboo than listening
to a band in the car right before you see their show?
Yes, there is: King Tutankhamen and his wife
Ankhesenpaaten, the Incas, the Hapsburgs
with their lower jaws jutting out.
I couldn’t get rid of the thought of women,
their servants holding lacy umbrellas to keep
the water out of their mouths when it rained.
It rained last night, icing over our snow castle.
I had a persistent headache. Honey Bunches of Oats
were on sale at Wal-Mart. There was broken glass
on the floor. I gave up on the persistence of identity.
What should I do about this rash? Cover it up,
put a band-aid on it, it’s no big deal. I wore only
your old basketball shirts for weeks.
Yellow light filled the room. I had this cough
that would not go away. Memory stayed
persistent, not letting me forget you.
Clouds touch your car near the radio towers.

In poems you can hide behind vague adjectives, covering up the story. It started in a field sitting on the back of his car. Near the radio towers he loves, cropping up in dreams. He’d bought me an album. I was sleeping in one bed, waking up in another. They’re human beings, not a choice between the red or the blue dress. My heart had been breaking for two solid months. Constant fear of losing what I had for six years, like I hadn’t when I said yes, let’s drive out to the lake, let’s get grilled cheese. I had wanted to make it home. Keep talking to yourself: “shut up brain, shut up!” Shake your head. We walk through the fields near the road, watch the sunrise over lakes like mirrors lying in the grass. Sometimes I’m so indecisive I can’t move, the pens as anchors, the computer screen. You dream about one boy’s teeth and hair, and then find there is a set of rules no one told you about. Emotions can sink in through gifts of ice cream to prove he doesn’t think you’re fat or a text that says I really shouldn’t say this, but you looked beautiful tonight. I cannot tell a lie. I’m never going to have fun again. Walking on a piece of string, strung between your house and mine. I cross again, fall down into the safety of your double bed and we entwine our legs and dream.
TWO

“The paws of our great source
touch us in our sleep.”

−Dean Young

“I could feel the day offering itself to me,
and I wanted nothing more
than to be in the moment—but which moment?”

−Billy Collins
Steve Howe

The sleeves of the shirt were too big, too blue. The words on the page brought me to my knees. I loved the gooseflesh on my arms. And if she were to play a scale on my violin, I’d hold her hands, guide them along the notes using masking tape so she could see the places. The feeling comes later. The ice outside my apartment made me fall to my knees in front of the busy street. I must’ve looked the strange pilgrim. The gold ring I bought at a vintage store meant more to me than anything you’d ever bought. My hands were cracked and dry. The TV kept making a noise like it was turning on, but it wasn’t. If I have to wait any longer for my boyfriend to return from bowling, I may just start to play the violin drunk. The last concert I went to was filled with people forty or older, but in the midst of a woman’s coat swinging near my behind, I watched the sixty-three year old guitarist press his fingers down and sway like I swayed. My hands looked old already.
Designed to Thrill

At the party in Little Italy I was finally feeling better. After two beers I was able to calmly stare at a silverfish and later, climb to the flat rooftop from a wobbling ladder that was always too intimidating to me after three steps off the ground. I sat in a folding chair and wrote down conversations in my small notebook that was already full – finding space next to yoga routines and names of Delta blues bands to look up, while our friends peed off the roof. The fortune cookie told me the universe does not have laws, it has habits. And habits can be broken. I’ll read all day today. Earlier at a Friedlander exhibition there was a photograph of a peacock that made me want to stroke its breast, smooth like shaved legs. Our friend thought I wanted to pet the bushes of his nudes. Drea with her blonde, many-colored hair was telling us about Catholic school – those plaid skirts, designed to thrill! Kelly lets us know that God is surely home by now, sleeping on the couch.
Caleb Followill

104 degrees, not fucking around.
Get to the hospital now. She filled
the bathtub with ice for my sister.
And in the dream last night
she was lying on the floor,
pink bubbles at her lips,
her face silent and still
manipulated like make-up
for a horror movie.
Then I dreamt my nose ring
had fallen out, causing me
worse fear than when she
had a tonic-clonic seizure.
Turned out part of the dream
was true. I woke panicking
Friday night at the loud bar.

This morning I found
your arms around my waist
patting my stomach. I was reminded
of Bruce Willis and the woman
saying she would like a “pot.”
I’d like a more distinguished belly.
When you rolled over
I was astonished by the muscles
of your back, the whiteness of it.
I saw your face freshly like I had
at the bar on Friday night, when
a drunken man referred to you
as the lead singer of the Kings of Leon.

I noticed your eyes, wet again.
The coveted wristband made you seem
so much older than me, separate
although we stood a foot away,
you surrounded by your attractive,
musical friends. I saw you –
the goateed boy of high school
I kissed behind the stage,
musty smell from the curtains,
your mouth tasting of cigarettes
because I hadn’t started yet.
So I clung to your back this morning
afraid that some girl would see you
as the lead singer of the Kings of Leon
at the bar again next Friday, and enjoy
your full moustache.
How to Stay Healthy in Winter Times

The zucchini in my fridge were ridiculous, lined up with yellow squash and cucumber. A ghost was drumming on my leg. The only time I ever read a poem to one person was to him, and it was the Clam Ode that I loved. How I bared myself to him, even though it was another's poem. I loved that nervousness, stumbling over words. It doesn't happen much anymore. It was too hot to sleep. My life has been pretty cool thus far. You read to me from the Foghorn, or East of Eden. We talked about Steinbeck and crying, watched zucchini porn. There's the warm comfort of slipping into bed beside you at night after having smoked a bowl. The smile couldn't be kept off my face when we played guitars on the porch together, your classical style with my clumsy finger-picking. She had my poem about the baby spiders read at a book guild meeting. My grandma certainly is a neat lady. We spoke of the Soviet Union over tea. I sketched plans for a headboard that would look like clouds with a fake light bulb sun rising behind them. I wiped my nose on napkins and drank a beer every day. It kept me healthy. We listened to the band play Star Eyes while we drank Irish coffees. The sex is still astonishing.
Home

From the basement – the sound
of a lone violin beating
its way through the stormy sea
of the washer finishing its cycle.

A narrator’s voice speaks
fighting the shrill timbre
my dad watching
a Civil War documentary.

My mother walks from room to room
holding clothes and suitcases,
but it is not an excitement of moving,
it is not anything to disturb me
from reading Li-Young Lee’s Roses.

Lee tells me of his father, moles on his back
shown gracefully. Of his mother he states
how she wore her hair, what it smelled
like. My mom is moving anxiously
upstairs now, pulling more suitcases
from the attic. My dad is listening
to Civil War folksongs and the lives
of young soldiers who died alone.

I read of another man’s family and think
of my dad’s moles, my mother’s cropped
hair, and realize this poet has done something
for me, creating his parents into demigods,
the ones who paint, like my mother,
whose hair falls out as they study history,
like my father. The hum of the washer
as I wait for dinner and reviewing
portions of our packed dreams.
The Amazon

I remember everything,
your long hair and nails.
There was that film
on the Amazon rainforest
at the IMAX and we sat
in the top row.
This giant lung fish swam
on the screen and a boy
was floating near it.
It dwarfed the boy’s size,
the fish twice in length,
his feet kicked near its eye.
I vowed never to travel there.

Last night on 480
we were heading to Aladdin’s
to meet your parents.
Your black car moved up
to pass a semi. We overtook
him like a blue whale caught
by a dark fish shining
in the depths, a boy
swimming in the parasites
by the gentle lung fish.
Sweetheart

I shouldn’t fear to grow old
because yesterday two women
called me sweetie or doll.
I think it was just a habit
for them to say that to other
women, but I was wearing
a flowery dress, and a necklace
with a locket with my
sweetheart’s initials inside.
He never lets me call him
babe, but I can call him dear.
At work my new boss calls me
sweetie and reassures me
the job is easier than I think.
At the Euro Gyro the waitress
calls me sweetheart and asks
what I want, motioning me
to speak up over the heavily-
grained counter covered in beer.
People like her are always
trying to guilt me out of buying
my smokes or having a drink.
Like my mom saying when I
come home for a weekend,
why do you need to go out
and “check the weather” when
you’re not even stressed right now?
But I’ve been drinking, the night
is vast and dark. A woman calls me
sweetie and I stammer out my order
repeating just a gyro and water.
Love/sick

We were watching the Discovery Health channel, some show about sex robots. A woman was being hypnotized to think she was a cyborg. She raised her head and spoke affirmative, garnering laughs and shock from the room.

I thought of a friend's obsession with tickling. He worries that he'll never find a nice girl to settle down with, one willing to tie him up. Will he go on T.V. and talk or like the people with latent latex fetishes who sit in dark rooms of their homes, faces lit by computer screens?

It's like scratching yourself in public or when at a Bob Evans establishment my dad was embarrassed because I said booger. My sister laughs as I knock a purse off the shelf at the mall. I try to right it as she says she likes shopping with me because I have no shame. Because we've been talking about the ethics of shame a lot in school. Because I've been dreaming of giving my friend blow jobs on my boyfriend's bed.

I crawl over to him in the middle of the night drunk off champagne bubbles and cling to him, my fingers scratching his back, my lips touching his neck but not forming a shape.

My friend tells me to go sleep in my boyfriend's bed but I complain that he's mad and asleep and I just want to have fun and dance and he won't do those things.

I open the door to the bedroom and his sleeping body with hair that smells like fries. His hands are damp as I proclaim my love, terrified of returning dreams.
Night of Shattered Glass

I dreamt that you gave birth
   to piglets from a widened mouth
while I strained your lips open
   to keep you from choking.

When I came downstairs
the cats had knocked over
an empty tallboy in the kitchen,
green shards on the floor.

I remember the taste of kiwis
when you lost your job.

How would one describe a kiwi
without using the word gem?

I hear through the bathroom wall
the muffled clink of the toilet seat.

I remember kiwis and ripe peaches
and the cut glass feel of sunlight
as it hovers intent on your bare skin.
I can't begin to imagine anything green

now; not like kiwis, not like grass,
just glass pieces glinting on the tile.
Lacrimation

There are all these places where people have kicked the doors in. Kids, or cats scratching to come inside. We felt it on this bed last night, warm drops over the duvet cover. I felt the guilt of you buying me a drink last Wednesday, but you smile your rare smile and say it was worth it. The quadruple whiskey and ginger. I never know what drink to ask for at a bar, or how to approach it. Like the neighbor’s small scruffy dog. My eyes throb in the dark. The chemical makeup of emotional tears is different than a secretion of the eye. There’s a spot in the dirt that the toe of my foot marked, a touch of arthritis in the hands. Things people made that leave a sparkle in one’s eye: a postcard or a turkey sandwich on a plate. You must’ve drunk a lot of coffee to gain that much chest hair. These pink nails know things yours will never know: perineum and cups of wine after communion. A gaudy diamond ring on the hardwood floor that has gems missing that the owner left behind. I broke all the mirrors in the house when we moved out. Your brain has a map on it. You head downstairs to ask what the medical term for crying is.
She dreams

she's a hermaphrodite she
can pleasure herself between
her own legs the way
she dreamed it would be
when she lost her virginity
in another room while her
friends were watching Disney
films about goodnight kisses
and impending marriages.
She dreams an old man comes
to her and she must hug him
must pretend he is as she imagined
when she wrote those letters
to the prisoner in California who
calls himself her Romeo in a box.
But all he wants is to get off
between her legs and she fears
he will kill her so she doesn't say no.
She tells her boyfriend these dreams.
He says she has to see a psychologist
or stop watching so much porn.
Do you wanna dance and hold my hand?

Do you ever feel you were born wrong?
That you are more suited for the formalities of XVI-century gilded era Spain than this XXI one where people won't look you in the eyes and harpsichords are few and far between?

As I lie on my green lawn chair in the humid air, I feel that I should've been born in the South to young soldiers asking me to dance at the plantation's ball, me only getting up to go with the best one, whispering in his ear, *spin me now,* until I laugh and our eyes meet, the night is full of big dresses and magnolia blossoms. Mint juleps and toddies were only half of it: wives cheating with the Mandingos and husbands creeping out to the cabins, performing their unspoken duties.

If not the South, then the West, surfers plunging into the water, tight wetsuits, skateboards under their arms. I'd still be a girl with little balance, too shy to skate down the street. The boys would not be nearly as polite as the Southern ones, despite underlying guilt, and probably would not dance at all.

Marie Antoinette has been my hero. You can pity her for being thrown out there into a court of snobs, powdered faces and wigs with a husband more interested in the workings of locks than how their bodies felt together under the white curtains of their bed. So she partied and carried out her champagne dreams every day. When I paint my nails, I remember her.
Golpe de estado

Instead of sitting on the riverbank using sticks to poke holes in tins of condensed milk, you were driving down the highway trying to see through the tears of realizing you would never get to see him in the red superhero underwear. He gave you a pair of tinted glasses to hide behind when his mom asked what you kids were up to. Later, you walked up the stairs and cried on his bed for four hours. After that it was over, like a nurse going to a patient’s wake, the family not acknowledging. You paid your respects and walked out.
Suburban Afternoon

As I sit in a lawn chair reading Rimbaud and O’Neill, my family life seems idyllic.

My father changes the oil in the old lawn mower.

My mother walks with me and tells me the names of plants like Echinacea and Russian Sage, while I trim the long grasses near the bases of the planters.

I try not to jump too much when I see a daddy-long-legs or a piece of grass tickles me.

I develop a blister on my thumb which calls for crouching down watching garden spiders hatch, one leaving to spin its web between two blades of grass.
Diesel Engine Starting

It was simple. Workmen come in and tell me where they think the best bars are in town. They think that's what I want to hear. I want to point to my new globe and show them the places I've been, but my finger always lands on the Soviet Union. I'm drinking coffee Robert E. Lee style, camped among my belongings on a rainy morning. Done planning battles, I eat breakfast. Four trips to the kitchen sink later, I'm starting to feel okay. A spider lives in the radiator, I wonder where his giant peach is located, James aboard already. When my phone broke, the mechanical alarm clock kept me up, the old things I bought for decoration work and keep time. I was winding watches as the neighbors made love through the walls. There were books on the coffee table about covered bridges and dusty farmhouses. My cheekbones looked more mature in the mirror, my eyes bluer as if coffee could make them so. Here, I'm a modern day Juliet, sitting on a purple milk crate on the patio reading and smoking. She'll drive with him in the morning, in a rusting Honda across the country. She won't take no for an answer.
After trying not to sob at the poetry reading
where I heard the poet-nurse read, I told her
I take my nursing friend’s words, make them
into poems, I’ve even reconstructed a birth.

She read about her great-grandmother,
and why letters are better than emails,
reminding me of my own grandmother who
refuses to touch a computer, not from ignorance
or disdain, but for the reason I write to a prisoner
in California who started in Ohio wanting change.

He’s amazed I’d want to be pen pals, I explain
that I need a change in perspective, by getting
to know someone through his handwriting.

He sold drugs, with and without bad intentions.
That’s just what one does in California.
So I’m here, thinking of my grandma’s letters.

She’s currently out West, heads south
crossing Wyoming, headed to Colorado.
And my mom’s in the hospital getting tested,

watched Jeopardy with my dad and dreaming
of homemade mashed potatoes. She complains
about the food and the bed inflating.

My neighbor is already scattered from me,
but my poem was read at her funeral,
and bookmarks were printed with her name
commanding that we never stop reading.
So I’ll search out the names of my great-great-
great-grandparents, the fathers and mothers

of Luella Louise and Floy, partly because Jeanne
and my teachers told me to, mostly because
I have to keep singing their song.
Lleno de agua

I.

I could never spell the word definitely. It took some courage to sit down in the latrine. When given a game to build amusement parks, kids find delight in picking up sick patrons and drowning them in man-made lakes. I hated chamomile tea until you told me they drink it in Peru. It’s called manzanilla there. Like manila envelopes that always made me think they should have vanilla wafers inside. Good things come out of Peru but not from those envelopes usually. It seems like such a broad term for a thing to hold papers. I love licking them, they remind me of communion wafers. The finality, the act of sending a letter is a dead man’s body melting away on your tongue. Bland like manila. Last night we acted religious. We drank some merlot and did snow dances before bed. I eat grilled cheese. I get scared of the dark. I still can’t spell definitely.

II.

My love is like a little kid trying to touch the deepest part of the twelve-foot end of the pool. Twelve is my favorite number. Alton Brown has a wife and a daughter named Zoey. He has a dog named Matilda and an iguana called Spike. When I looked this up I felt horribly creepy and prayed a little that no one ever knows my name.

III.

Ask some high schoolers for their favorite book of the Aeneid. I’d answer four, Dido’s story. I relate to her a lot. I think when she burned herself on that pyre she was showing her passive aggressive tendencies. Her story is a tragedy because she could not make Aeneas love her enough to make him stay.

IV.

The comforting sound of snow blowers was always present in my life. More pleasing are the trains that pass by Main Street. When we were young we’d go to the tracks and take the big smooth rocks to be our dinosaur eggs. We understood the importance of reproduction by some weird knowledge of it. I always thought it strange that they give baby dolls to little girls for Christmas, then a few years later tell them they’ll be in trouble if they have a real one.
V.

The only way I can characterize these times is through tiredness. There is little more that I love than sitting in Chaucer class and realizing similarities between Middle English and what we speak today, my head is always nodding off or falling forward. I stopped being a vegetarian with one small shrimp, ending the time period where all I did was nap. I started drinking a lot of coffee. Now I feel productive if not slightly more paranoid. Industrious as a penguin standing at a bus stop trying to keep its egg warm.

VI.

I always thought photographs were to help you happily remember good times but they make me feel the same as when I was little and slept at my Grandma’s house. I knew that things were fine, that my parents were not far away, but fear still came roaring up in my ears. The word nostalgia comes from the Greek base alge which means pain.

VII.

Nurses must have heavy spirits knowing how much is out there that can kill you. There used to be nothing hazardous in the study of language, the way words fit together was harmless. But once you read poems you never feel that way again.

VIII.

If all the songs and poems I’ve ever loved came blowing in the windows like the four winds chanting and humming simultaneously I’d hold my breath for three seconds trying to get them all in and reaping their most potent effect.

IX.

In Latin-American culture there are many legends about twins or an equal counterpart coming down from heaven or the sun to build the first cities. It makes Romulus and Remus’ childhood look rough.
X.

The gods made the first humans from mud but the men fell apart. They could not speak the names of the gods nor see, hear, or reproduce until the creators remade them from corn and gave them speech.

XI.

When you take the pressure off the words, they come. Still they can be heavy like an ocean rolling around on your chest, snow banks that make it hard to walk, kids tugging at your hair that don’t stop asking why. If I stop thinking so hard about how to spell the word definitely, it surfaces.
THREE

“Can you give me a new soul,’
asked a guy on Telegraph Avenue.
Yeah, right, another nutcase
but then he started to cry.
Big sober kid in expensive thug regalia.
‘What happened to your first one?’
'Defiled.’
‘Him, I liked.’”

−Dean Young

“The song of the heavens, the procession of peoples!
Slaves, let us not blaspheme life.”

−Arthur Rimbaud
Heaven’s Dome

As a child I used to think
that the sky was a blue dome
over top of us, like we
were in a sports arena,
and I was right.
The atmosphere is like
a protective shield, although it is
made of chemicals, it was a place
I could neither see nor understand.
And when I read Lorca’s poem,
with his trees shot from the sky
like arrows, I imagine
the huge sky dome again
and it’s possible the trees
do fall to us, shuddering
as they join the ground.
When I was small we drove
home from the baseball game.
In the dusky heat of the car
the moon always followed us.
Also, when a shaft of light
poured out of the clouds,
it resembled heaven.
The moon looks
the size of a quarter in my hand tonight.
The sound of a guitar plucked softly near a river
holds me in the space between our green pastures
and the barn across the road with its decrepit siding
and paint, waiting to be burned to the ground.
Murmured lyrics and soft voices pull at me
and work in like a tired memory that wants to be put down
like the bull that broke its leg last month – its virility
left there across the yard, unable to pick itself up.
These voices are like a horse's muzzle or your cat's belly
on the futon near the sliding patio door when you left.
The grass prickles your feet like guitar licks, there's half a lime
on the kitchen counter, half moon of salt left on the rim
of a glass near your hand. Your feet in a half shadow near the door,
speckled eggshells halved on the sidewalk where you cried as a child
about the dead baby bird while your mother prayed to cancel this omen,
one hand cupped to receive help above the sight, her lamp held gingerly
in a man's hand, its ring of light expelled from a candle flame like
a saucer of milk left outside, or coffee stains on your antique desk.
The Spider on the Sidewalk

On the sidewalk there was a spider moving, missing one leg. We need to be adaptable, humans cannot grow back limbs. Nor can spiders when a child plucks off the legs and watches them twitch. When I read magazines or watch t.v. the anxiety of buying things comes over my mind. The solution lies in being alone in your room with a decent guitar. Even then the guitar has a label, a kind. Cars have makes and models that I don't recognize. A sandwich has a specific type of bread, the peanut butter, another name. Some would sneer at your brand of vodka when you order at the bar. In the bed you and I share there are the thread counts of sheets, it takes a week's work to make the one hundred dollars that I used as payment for them. I'm a firm believer in surrounding myself with beautiful things – an old photograph, a blue alarm clock – but it helps one to remember that out there are spiders returning home, missing limbs.
Memento Mori

I didn't understand death, 
not the way you did, 
nor the way the nurse did. 
I'd never watched a woman die 
for three years of stomach cancer. 
I'd never washed a body 
after the energy had just left 
like an awkward silence in a room 
dissipating into laughter.

I'd get a tattoo of a memento mori 
skeleton, for my unawareness of death, 
my face held still in awe 
when she says her mother was Buddhist 
and she watched the cremation.

There was something so normal about it 
for one girl, me jealous that I didn't gain 
that acceptance from a young age; 
yet something so abnormal about an 18- 
year-old girl looking on as her mother 
burned from disease, then from fire.

She tells me of her favorite photograph − 
hers mother sitting in a pile of yellow leaves 
in the Metroparks, her head cocked to one side 
as she holds up a brilliant maple specimen. 
The leaf was already dead, the beauty 
left in the irony her daughter finds amusing.

I was three as they held me up to my great- 
grandfather, and I remarked, *he must be 
very, very tired* − as bodies must be 
to release all their energy and pain 
at once, filling the room.
Rituals

Inside my parents’ house,
I lick the hole in my gums
where my wisdom was taken
in the form of small bones,
run my tongue over my teeth.
Last night in Little Italy, I bought
beer at the convenience store
next to the Falafel Café. A woman
was working, she was tan
and had thick hair. She barely
checked my I.D., smiling at me
and my Hoegaarden six-pack.
We went up the street
past the Catholic church and I
murmured to you that it was
Maundy Thursday and I felt
ashamed carrying beer
while the parishioners were filing
from the church, old men
holding candles. Of my five friends
that gathered, no one knew
what Maundy Thursday meant.
We had our last supper outside
in the damp air. She offered me
the water cup, and I drank.
They Poured more Drinks and went on a Burn Run

When the bridal party entered, the DJ played the Beastie Boys and my mother pulled a face. After several glasses of wine and some whiskey I was ready to mingle, texting my Spanish friend and asking an old lover to come over the following week. In the past I’ve pitied those who think sex is gross. But after opening my mind with liquor I realized maybe it’s a positive mental state to have some sort of boundaries or standards when it comes to sex. If the cautious drank too many whiskeys on the rocks at the last wedding they went to, they never thought would it be too wrong to sleep with my third cousin? Most people wouldn’t go there, but him being an avid stoner and raver at that, I think we would’ve both found it rather funny instead of anything to feel guilty about. I talked to these RN’s all night. One was drinking a tequila sunrise, the other, vodka and soda, and we danced. Tequila Sunrise gave me the sound advice that I could get any man I wanted with my looks, and I half-lied and told her I would never have known she was fifty-one. She also told me she had been married twice and bankrupt because of it. She said that everyone wants to marry for love, but that it is entirely possible to love a man with money. She dates a guy from Atlanta and they take vacations to Vegas together (going to New York next week!) and he probably has a wife and kids at home and thus it continues. Vodka and Soda just got back from spending six months in the African bush living in a hut telling a tribe about things like oceans and the moon landing. The kids were sick from malaria and people were crawling on the ground because they wouldn’t use the polio vaccines. The tribesmen believe that vaccines cause impotence. But Vodka and Soda did have a lot of compassion for these people, despite what she couldn’t do with a map and Tylenol. I imagined her working at the emergency room, with all those pre-med students who are just in it for the money, and in my fatigued alcohol-driven state, I saw her throw up her hands over a bleeding man’s body and declare – I’d give up all the money I will ever make if I could just save his life.
Salmon Belly Sky

The sky is washed with pink near the horizon like the belly of a salmon filleted on its side. The time it takes for the sunset to hold off until 9:30 p.m. seems so much shorter than all the other movements of our years.

That's just Ohio, where the sports fans of Cleveland prompted stadium chairs to be not bolted down but fixed into the cement, and plastic bottles were invented for beer. We need something to look forward to. In Cleveland, the grey salmon's belly rarely opens to reveal its flesh.

A popped yellow balloon tied with a blue ribbon lies on the sidewalk. My sister asks why I stand so rigidly in photographs, my arms straight at my sides. It has to do with being thirsty, too much sun on my face, the drawn corners of my lips are not supported by merry thoughts.

Because mother is never merry unless she's taking nips out of the bottle of Black Velvet, and it took me a long time to learn to dance without a whiskey sour in my hand. When I want variety I get Neapolitan ice cream sandwiches. When I am curious I want to know why chocolate, vanilla and strawberry is called Neapolitan, and if it has to do with Napoleón Bonaparte; I have a feeling it doesn't. Splurging is putting 1.50 in the vending machine. When I am feeling adventurous, I read about designer drugs in Details magazine instead of doing them.

A boy with a face like Sid from Toy Story walks up to my desk. I'm predisposed to dislike him, with his braces and small head, the shaved hair, the round shape. He is polite and I hand him some Gatorade his dad left for him at the desk. I eat Amish cinnamon bread that tastes like the sky looks now, growing orange if that were possible. It's honey in the pink night.
Intent

For the initial giddiness of being in love, when I roll over and hold onto your back like a koala baby, there is the word *periphescence*. Initial is the key, but the feeling comes back to me when you pick me up and we drive around and I feel for a second like we're outlaws. The only ones, when we're on our island of a bed. There are words like *diaphoresis*, *epistaxis*, and *lacrimation*, that I think about when I've an ironic hangover. How we met on a bus, you had a nosebleed and I handed you tissues because I had hay fever. You looked at them like they were used, but accepted. The times we've sweated all night in bed against each other, sleeping in the heat at three a.m. or crying from loss and guilt of innocence or simply because I was mean and struck out in anger, making fun of you gaining weight or saying you were no longer there for me the way I wanted. How can we spell out sweat, nosebleeds, and crying in such defined terms, without causation? Language has good intentions but all it can say: perspiration, a bloody nose, and tears.
If there is a tightness

in the chest on mornings painted thin
and pink at the edges of the grey bowl
it means heartburn from too many
watery beers at the gyro place
where that punk slid his arm around me
so I spoke only Spanish motioning
that I needed to leave, his dull eyes
and coarse mouth saying *this girl's
white as shit* asking for my favorite
*fuibol equipo* with smelly breath.

It could be the sound of sweeping
the floor, a bike tire popping, the metal
touching metal, the loudest sound
at the scene of the accident.
What is truly accidental, that hasn't already
been written by someone's scarred hand?

The desk is orderly, papers stacked evenly.
Someday at my librarian's desk I will
put on my chapstick, holding it carefully
between thumb and forefinger, relish
the smell and waxy feel, small comfort
around pens and hole punches, keys
chattering amongst themselves.

I'll keep my favorite pen,
ever lending it out.
Being so selfless all the time,
directing folks to periodicals
or magazines, you have to keep
something for yourself. Outside,
the smell of damp leaves.
Trick Horse that can Count to Four

If I had a dime for every time I was asked how did a pretty girl like you pick up a bad habit like that when I stop at Valero to buy cigarettes, well, you know how it goes. I guess it's not a bad thing. I guess, as I wipe my eyes with a slice of cucumber, most things we do are based on folly. I realized when I felt sick to my stomach and found a pound of cherry pits in the garbage can, some things can make sense. Others like the endless leg shaving and the times I have suffered through cup after cup of unsweetened tea to ‘cleanse’ myself after a night of drinking – look at me, I’m fit to be tied! Tie me to the bed posts in your room and stroke my knee. It took fifteen minutes to shave without any mishaps. No, it's not going to happen. Yes, I like the white towels over the blue ones, the pink shelves. I pause, swore I saw a spider crossing the floor. A trick of the light (it's living in this poem, you see). Seems like most things now are tricks and the lighting is what confused me.
Order

White mushroom cloud on the horizon
pushed out from the power plant,
like a squid swimming up
through dark water,
joins the other clouds.
Red light in a wineglass
shaken from an earthquake.
Brief spells of wisdom reach us too late,
like the bright pulsations from stars
thousands of years after they've exploded.

My fingernails grow into almond shapes
as I mature, I paint them pink to stave off
nature's encroachment, to exercise free will.
Plate glass shudders, the violin
cracks in the dry season, the coffee
wiggles from one side to the other
in its cup like the girl at the bar
on her twenty-first birthday.

The trees stand in groups over bristling fields
like we stand in ours when we walk
through the plaza at the center
of the university. We imagine we hold order
on our calendars, rule over the ground,
even join sky to it when flying in a plane
over the red sunrise. That's when we see
an arrangement of stars far off,
and their light that often comes too late.
Yard Sale

I made fun of you for not knowing how to eat an ice cream cone.  
I bought you coffee and you looked like you might cry.  
You reassured me you would marry me when you had money.  
My eyes were filled with a friend’s antique diamond ring.  
I wanted to leave and dance with another partner.  
You thought that the sun rising in the morning was enough.  
You were just tired and I was thinking too much.  
I might have paid for the coffee, but you had to sit there  
and listen while I smoothed my dress.

You say you don’t like patterns.  
I scrub away the stickiness of a new coffee table.  
I bought a clock and a globe,  
vying to hold onto time and the places I’ve seen.  
Music hasn’t held me lately; I’ve had too much wine.

A dear friend is leaving at 6 a.m. tomorrow.  
She’ll take off from Cleveland, head to Houston, then Mexico.  
I hope someone calls her gringa, or makes her feel at home.  
At a yard sale I bought a wool sweater to appear scholarly.  
My neighbor asked me if I wore leotards and long skirts.  
She said if someone stole from her garage sale  
they must be in need so she wouldn’t mind.  
I told her people sometimes take what they don’t need.
Self-Portrait of the Artist at Age 3

You made a groaning noise every time you got out of bed. I asked why it is so hard?
The night I spent clipping grasses around a tree bent over, my knees hurting, the slow pain working into my hands – I couldn't stand the repetition which was your bread and butter.

It might've been a good idea to hold you in my hands but I said you smelled like food. I was so hungry last night and your back tasted like sweat and grease, my nose pressed up against you, my fingers combed your hair. Legs wrapped around your body like I could keep you happy and safe.

If you just knew everyday that things grow outside, birds fly quickly in the sun's light and cats chirp at them craftily while sitting in the same sunspots.

I wished for an engagement ring, now only for you to smile when I touch you, and kiss me back. There's my change in thinking through the years, long and tinted purple at the edges like glass.

After we went swimming together I put a ripe plum to my lips and I'm looking at baby pictures of a friend. She had the same bowl-shaped haircut I did in kindergarten, until we grew it out into the side ponytails of first grade.

There are many drawings fading in the photo album, three holes punched on the side, but I notice each figure has pen marks moving down their faces, the drawings signed "Heidi."

The grandma's writing on the back shows the meaning behind the tears: the child is crying in every drawing because the world is so beautiful.
Cloisters

Colossal are the objects used
for funerals, monuments
to passing, the effort spent.

The cloisters filled with relics
crusted over with gold,
the malleable light of glass
frozen in windows,
like immovable religion
while kids and their parents
walk around, holding hands.

The artifacts like poems or old
sayings are silent, almost horrible.
My favorites are Egyptian,
the empty sockets of Horus' eyes
stare out at me just the same
ten years later where rubies the size
of avocado pits used to reside.

In the grand gallery
the drone of bagpipes,
a clink of coins in the center well,
a child rustles her paper bag
from the gift shop as she puts
her change into the opening.

Here each whisper carries
and sounds like my name,
like the monk's lonely
chanting over the speakers
and tapestries of Jesus
after the crucifixion.
The recorded voices of clergy
combine with the dirge of bagpipes
to make a sound holy and new,
DJs have never imagined.

I wish I was religiously
inclined, so I could study here
where my whispers
could also sound mysterious.
I move from the Egyptian room
to the Christian, Roman deities
in between. Their plaques
denote missing gold or emeralds,
these artifacts, halfway points
between sacred and profane.
My Eyebrow

Over a cup of tea I ponder
my friend's double D boobs.
She's from Taiwan, says
everything is one size there.
The clerks in the stores
are not afraid to ask why she
is so big. I try to commiserate
with her, but there are no problems
with my upper body fitting
into sundresses, I get mad
when a store has their sizes
so small that I can't fit into a 2.
I wish I were a little taller,
so clothes would hang nicer
on my frame. I remember
thinking in high school, I'd rather
die than be fat. I remember my sister
lounging next to me at the pool,
unable to relax because of her slight
belly and white skin, although she
has the most gorgeous hair.
The other night at work, a girl
from China came up to me
and told me she liked "my eyebrow."
I was a bit confused, but she pointed
to the appropriate spot on my face
where eyebrows are, and so I
thanked her. She asked me how I
got them to look like that, and I
told her they just kinda grew
in that way. She smiled and said
"ohhh, natural beauty!" I
blushed and said, "yeah, I guess
that's what it is."
Prayer to a Gardener

I grew to like Chaucer more and more.
Anything subtle, hints of blackberry leaves
and safflower in tea. Once I achieved
the age of absolute maturity in humans,
I went to the bar every night
to separate myself, to assert the year
I hold over you. I always talked down
to younger people when I was drunk.
I still hold onto dreams of snowfalls
and shared coffees on benches outside.
Unsuccessful recreations with every person I dated.
So I curled my feet around yours in my bed
and fell asleep that way every night.
I bought expensive four-packs
justified with an ever-present need
to relax. I spelled out surely and maybe to you
on the phone. I held things over your head.
A box filled with my favorite Chuck Taylors
that were stolen while we watched a band in the rain.
The shoes went to Europe and back.
The box stayed in my closet. I filled all the pockets
of your jackets with old notes, then sewed them shut.
Forces known and unknown held our hands.
My chest hurt every day. Notes of peppermint,
bright and true. I jumped into the muddy lake
and tried to touch the bottom, practically drowning
when I had to touch it four times in the same place.
Spots of coffee on my white dress. Making the bed
and doing the dishes rooted themselves between us.
With soil apart from yours I write this in hope
that some other person will mix your dirt in mine
and plant tulip bulbs instead of poppy seeds.
Ren

At the party they laughed when I told them.
I couldn't get this image from my head.
Water rolling through my hair from above
for the first time, faded wasclloth
raised to keep soap from my eyes.
And she was naked, her belly still soft,
skin white under black hair at eye level,
we stood together under the spray.

I remember getting my first coarse hair,
yanking at it with tweezers, scared to death.
One morning my 8-year-old cousin asks
if I have one of those “boob things”
like her mom, if I wear thongs, like the babysitter.

I was jealous of what you saw.
I will never be a spectator at a birth,
see a woman moan fuck under her breath
after every contraction, the nurse saying
the baby's not out yet, you can swear.
But you held the newborn, wiped off the remains
of its middle passage, and laughed with relief
with the mother and father, read her charts,
saw the old addictions and then new life,
felt the tension and release in the room,
more than a spectator, you helped
make nothing ever be the same.

We talk to the man who towed your car,
I offer him a diet soda but he says no.
We gave coffee to the workman
replacing the window at midday last fall.
An employee attempting to help cut down
the atrocious weeds by our patio
had weed-wacked a stone into the glass
terrifying the cats and people inside.
As a secretary I listened to the housekeeper
at my desk tell of her father’s death,
getting scammed out of a horse,
the court fees, and how much it costs
to bury someone you love.

Last night I came to bed at three a.m.
and placed my head against your shoulder,
cheek against your arm, one leg across you,
the night pressed to me on all sides.
I had folded our clothes under the light
from the parking lot, laying my pants
on the ottoman – there was no forgetfulness
after the wine. I soak up more words,
arrange your clothes laid out like a person,
the pants tucked into the shoes,
like your body had released itself
and fallen away to the earth,
converting to sand or rice as it goes.
Dreaming of Water

Last night I was dreaming of water again
pouring down my throat, the sides of my face.

You were snoring next to me when I woke,
your sleep breath a comfort. Even when I felt weak

and drunk, I walked to the bathroom, got the giant mug
to fill from the tap. I felt the warm blackness in our room

and your chest moving near mine, filling me
with awe, as the fan's hum kept me awake.

Earlier, I sat on the beat-up couch, smelled cranberry
scones baking and sewed a button on your jacket.

After pumpkin ales, I'm dreaming of water again,
trying to write. I know I cannot swallow

these words any more than I can sip an ocean,
but I hope that they will quench my thirst.
DEDICATIONS

There are several poems that are specifically dedicated to the people that inspired me and I will name them here. “Leopold Auer’s Student” is for Mr. Bill Fink, my violin teacher. “Green Islands” is for Clayton Young. “Sparks from the Transformer across the Street” and “Love/sick” are for Vic Levand. “Clouds touch your car near the radio towers” is for Connor Johnson. “Designed to Thrill” is for Kelly Tadge and Andrea Meek. “Home” and “Suburban Afternoon” are for my mother and father. “After trying not to sob at the poetry reading” is dedicated to Jeanne Bryner, the “poet-nurse.” “Self-Portrait of the Artist at Age 3” is dedicated to Heidi Rolf, who knew at a young age that there was continual beauty to be found in the world. “Ren” is for my dear friend Leahanna Hall who told me her stories from clinical as she studied to become a nurse, providing me with countless stories about life and death from which I have fashioned poems.
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