ABSTRACT

WHAT’S MISSED: POEMS

by Erin Louise Shaffer

This collection of poems attempts to illustrate that despite the possible pain of an examined life, through it, greater levels of meaning can be revealed. They tend towards a narrative mode, but are also interested in lyric methods of presenting the small agonies and joys of human existence. The poems are attuned to presenting the beauty and meaning of the everyday with a voice of humor, wit and sincerity, and are deeply concerned with character. They reflect attention to the accretion of detail. It is important that they be morning glories and hyacinths, not just flowers. The reader is invited to the same level of conscientiousness with which the speakers in these poems experience the world. These works aspire to help others see mirrors of their own experience and motivate them to create their own paths to understanding.
Contents

I. Damselfly Wings

Noon 2
Lake Nakuru 3
Watamu, Kenya 4
Angel 5
Almost to Anger 6
Not Postmarked Diani Beach 7
Scrapbook 8
After the Tornado 9
Mean 11
Unpacking 12
Cinderella After Midnight 13
Refrain 14
For Ralph, on the Other Side of the Duplex 15
After Dinner 16

II. Popsicles

Red 18
Crabapple 19
The Billy Graham Crusade 20
Lookout 21
Neighborhood Gossip 22
Qualifying Time 24
Decoration Day 25
Goodbye, Neighbor 26

III. Chalk Dust

Academic Team Practice 28
Backstage 29
What’s Missed 30
Jesus Playboy 31
Revisiting a Former Life 32
Thirsty 33
Lies Teachers Tell 34
IV. Blooms

Solace  
Life Without Benefits  
Thank You, Mr. Nelson  
Mellencholy  
Love Poem, Attempt #5  
Moving Day  
Other Men  
Portrait  
Occasional Gift  
Process  
Gas Station Evening  
Little Swords  
Cape Cod Morning

Notes
For my family and for Jim:
reasons to keeping looking out, not down or in
I. Damselfly Wings
Noon

Because there is no one to see,  
she has left her dress unbuttoned,  
little more than a scarf  
to wind about your neck to keep you warm,  
and waits in the sharp angle  
of sun and shadow  
at the open front door.  
Outside, hot glow;  
nothing but darkness behind her.  
The house floats on a sea of crisp grass,  
and its gables point upward  
into bright empty sky.  
The one uncurtained window  
frames a table she has yet to set.
Lake Nakuru

We came for flamingos.
Broken of migratory habit,
what once were millions, now are thousands.
Freshwater flooding forced
their numbers to other sources
of brine and shrimp.

From baboon cliffs,
pinwheel patterns impinge on blue—
We can’t get close enough to see
what we want of pink,
no eyes, single legs, or beaks.
Salt and excrement-crusted rock
offer only trails of feathers to follow
in the wake of their remaining waves.
White pelicans—late retorts
to missing colored plumage.

So soon from so much on the Mara:
elephant, buffalo, lion, hyena,
dikdik, topi, eland, impala, hartebeest, Thomson gazelle,
zebra, zebra, zebra, zebra, zebra, zebra, zebra, zebra
what’s left
(baboon, lounging on the beach,
skinning a rabbit for a snack;
wildebeest, croaking like frogs;
rock hyrax, elephant cousins,
peering from gopher holes;
buffalo carcass hung from acacia branch;
giraffe batting long eyelashes,
would blush if they could;
and finally, rhino!)
seems underwhelming.
In the café, four cinderblock walls and two tables, the flies hover, undisturbed by waving of hands or any breeze. Abdul, self-appointed tour guide, arrives, sits at our table, orders chai, and waits for us to pay. We try to chat, but Abdul wants to discuss business. *You like the snorkel? I know glass bottom boat. Matatu ride to Mombasa? No problems, no hassle. I found you good hotel, yes?*

There is a laminated paper menu. I request the chicken. “It is not there,” the server says. I ask for beef. “It is not there.” As I hunt for further options, you order the fish. “It is not there.”

Later we will go ahead and give three shillings to Abdul, enough for a day without him at the beach. We won’t pick up the menu, will ask “What is there,” and dutifully drink the warm orange Fanta from the grocery next door that the young boy will fetch us along with whatever the cook has decided we should eat.

Today, we are still trying to make it on our own.
Angel

“You told me you were an angel: I believed. Imagining I could fly with you, I leapt, imagining an angel I believed could fly.

My sheets remember the pulse I still find, I remember the pulse of your still wings and find feathers in my sheets.

I live between pulses; I find in you my angels. Your wings can’t still earth. Were I imagining, an angel, remember, leapt, and I could fly. We came. Wings and feathers.

Angels can’t live trapped between worlds. Angels can’t live. Trapped between worlds, we fell back to the earth we soon came to. We soon came to.

“The golden moments in the stream of life rush past us, and we see nothing but sand; the angels come to visit us, and we only know them when they are gone”

George Eliot
Almost to Anger

*Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido*

-Pablo Neruda

If you had died when you said you would,
the stories you wrote would be true,
not just lines on the edges of pillows.

Together we were always trapped
in a space between ground and sky,
tantalized by heaven,
nostalgic for earth.
I believed when you said
you were an angel who would leave soon.

I should flake like mica
the dried-up damselfly wings
that clot old neural pathways
where we still imagine
you can cushion me with feathers—
and do.

Synapses don’t cooperate
with my destructive wishes.
They keep dropping
limp-wristed roses
yellow highland gorse
and crushed jasmine blossoms
for me to find inside my eyelids.
Coffee and your acrid body smell,
it seems, are all that evaporated with you.

Sometimes I tell your story to others,
feel it begin to dissolve in my mouth,
imagine cracking it loud between my teeth.
Instead, I swallow what remains of your myth.
Not Postmarked Diani Beach

...because what if the angel came, and I wasn’t there?

-Gail Godwin

Dear Angel,

Someday, you say, I’ll forget to look up. You’ll be there, shimmering above me, holding a monkey under your arm and grinning, ‘See? I told you I’m always right.’ Perhaps then, I’ll feel bad for frowning at your impossibilities. But today, there are a few things left to say.

You will not find potato crisps for me in this hotel; I’ve already looked everywhere. Yes, that is the only thing that will satisfy me, so don’t try to bring ice cream. You won’t climb Kilimanjaro after I leave to go home, so you won’t make the summit at Aconcagua. Pakistan is going to be tough without me around to translate body language for you. You’ll never get a sponsor for Antarctica, so you’ll have only six continents down when you come back home. Why not stop right now? Who do you think you’re fooling with all this volunteerism anyway? It’s starting to feel a lot like that crucifix around your neck – a little saintliness to dangle above those you convince to let you sin.

You are not an angel, and your death premonition doesn’t fit that script anyway. You’re not soon going to find someone else with ojos infinitos, and if so, she won’t cut your hair with a Swiss Army knife, or remind you of the names of each kind of antelope. And no, I don’t believe you’ll ever regret you didn’t find a way to keep me.

Love,

E...

P.S. Even if they are like squirrels here, monkeys will not come to be your pets if you leave soap out in the bathroom for them.
Scrapbook

Acrid burn of garbage, woven trinkets held aloft,
the sense traces of Kenya rot in my memory.

Each track in the sand, each mark of a slug,
another stop in a Darwinian journey toward words.

You hold them like treasures, or pieces of meaning:
these jewel-colored baubles not in my memory.

In closed-windowed buses, we rolled past wonders,
our versions of places only scripted tour words.

In flight, clouds divide above from below;
one self left behind, a dot in my memory.
After the Tornado
--Cincinnati, 1999

There is nowhere
that looks inviting
from the cramped quarters
of this repossessed two-seater.
A string of red lights stretches
all the way home,
and TJ Maxx and Stein Mart
still show tornado-trashed facades.

The car itself
is still littered
with the remains of a life
he attempted to assemble
while mine went crumbly
at the edges.

Little white receipt squares
crumpled and stuffed
in seat crevices, unreturned
video tapes, unopened mail, three White Castle
refillable plastic cups
stacked up on the coffee-marred
steel blue carpet.
He ruined it.
It won’t even drive fast anymore,
only creeps between red lights.

The sunroof
is now just a portal
to the much too open world,
which would suck me into it
if left open too long.

My hands stick to the steering wheel
each time I smack it.
From the stuck radio
the beat of classic rock I hate
does not drown
the scream
of unhinged exhaust.

The gum in my mouth
has long lost its flavor.
I spit it into my hand
to stuff in the ashtray,
expecting it to be crammed
full of receipts,
like the floor and seats.

Empty.
Except for the gold glint
of his wedding band,
left there long before
I stole the car back
from her parking space.

I lean against the horn.
Mean

1. to have in the mind, as a purpose, intention: *I mean to marry you some day. I’ve been meaning to ask your father for his permission. I meant to go to that interview.*

2. to signify; to indicate; to import; to denote: *This ring means I love you, and I mean to honor you all the days of my life.*

3. destitute of distinction or eminence; common: *You picked up the dry cleaning, paid the electric bill, and cleaned the toilet? I didn’t mean for you to do all that.*

4. wanting dignity of mind; low minded; base; spiritless: *On Friday, I promise. I mean it, this time. I’ll deposit my check into our account.*

5. of little value or account; worthy of little or no regard, of poor quality: *What do you mean, I was supposed to call?*

6. cruel, spiteful, malicious: *Lately you’re so damn mean. Do you mean to sound like such a bitch?*

7. penurious, stingy, close-fisted: *I’ve been meaning to tell you about that new guitar I bought last week. You know, I did mean to tell you before your check bounced.*

8. occupying a middle position; midway between extremes, intermediate in excellence of any kind: *Those vows—yeah, I’m pretty sure I meant them; what do you mean?*

9. resources; property, revenue, or the like, considered as the condition of easy livelihood: *Do you really mean to kick me out with nothing? How do you expect me to have the means to live?*

10. a simple average, formed by adding quantities together and dividing their number: *Do you mean to enter into this covenant of marriage, freely, and of your own accord? I now pronounce you man and wife. And now, by the means of my power as judge in this county, I do hereby witness this order of dissolution.*
Unpacking

I find
a brass jumping dolphin figurine,
a woven blanket from Tucson,
a small box of paperback thrillers,
an autumn leaves-scented candle,
my diary from sixth grade,
an unopened crystal picture frame,
and the photographs from my wedding
I thought my mother had.

I no longer fit inside images
of open convertible waves,
sprays of gladiolus,
huge tulle bows,
bagpipers on the lawn,
and silk roses, chosen because
they wouldn't fade.

Since then, they were replaced
by hands that stroked only guitar strings,
folders stuffed with bad credit reports,
silent pot roast dinners,
a still-cold-at-four-A.M. other side of the sheets,
and a scar on the coffee table
left by a brass candlestick.
Cinderella After Midnight

At three o'clock, I finally woke him up,
tired of watching beauty sleeping,
finished with shifts of red lines on the clock radio.

The speech I'd been writing on the ceiling gone,
I quoted memorized vows instead,
though even I didn’t trust the spell anymore.

This time he had the excuse of half-sleep
for stumbling through them; this time I didn’t correct him.
Wanted the shoe to slip on by itself.

_I don’t know, I guess I love you_
_more than I’m in love with you._
_I said them so you wouldn’t leave._

In the bathroom, he didn’t smooth hair back off my forehead,
didn’t offer me a glass of water,
didn’t hand me a towel or washcloth.

He did reach over to flush.
I watched everything spin in messy circles,
wondered what would be left to clean from the sides of the bowl.
Refrain

Acoustic capo’ed chords
and smoky after-concert clothes
sometimes make me wish
you hadn’t taken accordion
or mandolin with you.
Yes, the china is useful;
I love the flatware’s heft.
Life after you, thankfully,
has required little ironing.
But three years later, the way
we solved cruel word-problems
alongside boxes at the door
(mostly by subtraction),
pains me less than thoughts
of you playing covers
—hopeful giant nightlight odes—
on someone else’s unmade bed.
For Ralph, On the Other Side of the Duplex

Thank you for taking my garbage can to the curb last night, but isn’t one person’s trash sad enough to save it for bi-weekly? You didn’t have to move the plastic swimming pool. There isn’t any car to park on that part of the driveway anymore. The grass will die on your side of the yard. Don’t be embarrassed that I took your mother to get cigarettes last night. I know she doesn’t drive, and you’ve been working late. It gave me an excuse to buy an Icee and the Cosmo with Gwyneth on the cover. Besides, we got to know each other pretty well that time you had to spend weekends in jail and Mikayla still dropped the three year old off. He wouldn’t hush unless they did laps around the house in the stroller, so we’d meet when I watered my snapdragons. Thank you for avoiding those with the lawnmower lately, even though they’ve gone a little crazy. Aren’t there five of you now since the fifteen year old moved back in? I try to picture where everyone sleeps over there on your side. I know there must be other things I should thank you for, but I do still wish you hadn’t fixed you-know-who’s brakes for him before he left. And you really shouldn’t have accepted the beer he offered, if it meant you had to go to a meeting after. But good for you, asking him to tie your tie before the custody appearance. At least someone got something out of him. Did you know that I was watching through the blinds the night you got dropped off by the police cruiser at 4AM? I have to tell you, I was relieved and a little smug that it was you, rather than my own bad news. But those were nights I still waited up, before I had to change the locks, when I still wondered how I’d ended up in this trailer park with foundations. Yesterday, you held your brand-new daughter up so she could see the setting sun from our shared front porch. So today I wanted to tell you, I know I got rid of a lesser man than you.
After Dinner

Woods threaten to engulf us,
branches reaching out
into the distances we’ve let grow
between us in the backyard.

You stand apart, on a backdrop
of siding I meant to paint,
just on the edge of a tangle
I knew better than to ignore.

I call the dog, but she doesn’t listen,
entranced by bats gulping insects overhead.
I know I’m not welcome
in the crossing of your arms.
II. Popsicles
Red

Red is popsicles, starlets, bright and flashy.
I was more books, shade, meek and blushing.

Red is for harlots, Hesters, blood.
I became flannel, valentines and anger.

Red is lipstick, henna, laser light.
I’m more cranberry, sprawling tulip, tongue.
Crabapple

I wanted to tell her:
it's not just you that made me bite into it.
I didn't believe a crab lived in there.
It was the red fading to yellow,
the shine when rubbed,
the idea that all the wonder
of an apple could fit into such a small thing.
I wouldn't have to ask my mom
to peel it; the skin that makes me cough
would be only paper thin.
It couldn't get brown
while I took the time to eat it,
I'd have it all in my mouth.

I read that seeds were poison in big apples;
so there'd be no need to worry about accidents
of swallowing; there'd have to be a lot
of seeds that small to kill you.
Sure, I wouldn't get to see my teeth
imprints, but each bite would be
like a visit to Uncle Allen's orchard,
picking them myself off the tree,
and I'd get to do it every time
I walked out to my swingset.

Mean laughter in the eyes of the ten-year-old girl
with long beach-colored hair
filled my head faster than bitterness
of apple filled my mouth.
She did cartwheels across my yard,
(she knew I always fell over)
then sat on top of her jungle gym
brushing her hair.

I just stood there with a handful
of hard disappointments.
The Billy Graham Crusade

I don't know what I expected. Foisted testimonials, speaking in tongues, dripping stigmata blood, or a Christians vs. Lions reenactment on the football field? I forgot this was Cincinnati-brand Protestantism, a brass-and-oak chain-restaurant-variety God-meeting.

The lone man outside holding his cardboard sign proclaiming the end of the world and the teens wearing t-shirts shouting, “Sorry, Satan, I’m Taken!” were outnumbered by Golden Buckeye cardholders, silverhaired and Reeboked, and a mass of polyester, pushing walkers.

Sure, some raised their right hands and waved at God when a sea of red polo shirts gathered in the endzone to become a choir. Thousands responded, when Rev. Graham made his call to gather on the field and pray, and then leaned heavily on the podium. I almost joined them, until I saw how calmly they queued, not wanting to disturb the elder’s bowed head.

Committing oneself fully to Christ on a playing field was routine, like singing along with each verse of “How Great Thou Art.”
Lookout

Backing out of my driveway, I feel his gaze:
he is polite and moves from his post
at the wall of bricks by his front door to face
the inside back wall of his garage whenever
a neighbor passes, so no one has to meet
his eyes.

He keeps his hands on his knees to support
the back he's ruined. He doesn't sit:
his own form of torture, his own way
of keeping watch, though there's nothing to see
on our dead end street.

He finally sold the van that sagged on the street
in front of the house after the last DUI
called in by a neighbor, so no one has to look
at its hasty paint job not quite covering
the logo of the heating and air company
he sold as well.

He doesn't even leave to walk
to the drive-thru, and return with brown paper bag –
his sentinels are now full eight-hour shifts.

I think I should feel safe, but wonder
if he watches the news now; if the reports
of bombs and war and hate bring back any more
of Vietnam.

His wife still pulls in the garage
at 6:30 every evening. He's always gone
inside by then, and sometimes even plays
the violin with the windows open.
For her, or us, I don't know.
But we all have to listen.
Neighborhood Gossip

The sharp edges of a vivid stack of shirts
draw my fingers across them
in the shop where I am browsing.
I see my best friend from sixth-grade
at the other end of the display
artfully creasing and folding.

I remembered the trail of origami notes
we hid from our other friends.
Inside we folded neighborhood secrets
into stories passed during homeroom.

She always wanted exotic details
from my house on Curry Drive,
around the block from Caraway Lane
and yes, Sesame Street,
even though, I was convinced,
its green-shuttered blandness
was much more East Main Street
than her two bedroom apartment's
hippie-curtained windows.

Her eyes quick blink-squinted
reading my latest sighting
of her brother's new girlfriend
sneaking out a basement bedroom
from my neighborhood to hers.
And I pictured skull-faced
figured posters leering down
from the sibling-shared bedroom wall
opposite Cat Fancy pictures
the afternoons they rolled around
on his bed and she had
to wait in the bathroom.

She told me of slave ghosts
in Underground Railroad spaces of houses
on her street that whispered names at night,
after I described the fight between
the school board president and his wife
in their pajamas on their front lawn.
We both quoted dirty parts of books.

I claimed allergy attacks
from cigarette smoke and cats,
while she complained
about my mother's strict rules
any time we felt the impulse

to move our friendship to places

other than our morning paper trading.

But, she taught me

what cramps would feel like,

how to flush a broken toilet,

how to stripe your hair with peroxide,

and where to put the accents on French words;

while she learned from me

where it was best to catch tadpoles,

what dance moves were newest on MTV,

why we shouldn’t ever eat veal,

and how to speak Pig Latin.

I know she could show me how

to fold those shirts into swans.

Though my time is now spent teaching,

I can’t think of anything

I know to say about the last fifteen years,

and buy the shirt instead of talking.
Qualifying Time

His handing me this box
leaves me half-expecting
a tiara inside.
Just like the unscheduled
three o'clock calls
he sometimes makes
from his cell phone outside Knoxville,
no Mom on the other extension.
That's how it is
to be in the intensity
of his quiet attention…

Instead, it is shoes.
Race cars of shoes,
with logos and fast stripes.
_You said you needed new sneakers._
I wanted shoes to wear with jeans,
he pegs me for Pegasus.
He wants me to fly
in ways he no longer can,
tied to his company car
and his cancer. I put them on,
reminded of how many ways
I'll fail him in my distance.
Decoration Day

Flags stuck in grass
along curbs on suburban drives,
scotch-taped to storefront windows,
and flying from pickup antennas
are intended to inspire,
but remind me of collect calls
punctuated by the announcement
“This call originated from
the Cambria County Incarceration Center”
every fifteen seconds
when my uncle calls
that place his temporary home,
before the next girlfriend,
who won’t know not to answer.

I’d rather remember him
as the man who cut beef for a living,
smiling as he held up perfect steaks
for inspection to women in high heels and pearls.
Rather remember Saturday visits
with the revolving silver Christmas tree
and sharing his lap with a pug named Rags.
Like to believe in his secret assignment
with the CIA, which kept him away
on important business.

Sometimes, I think he returned from war too early.
In his conversion van with disabled vet plates
and flags on every surface,
he’d be just the sort of guy
that newspapers would like to feature right now.
And as long as he could turn down the voices
that talk to him through his rings,
these days I’m sure no one would mind
when he put paper flag stickers on every
grave in the cemetery,
and then began flinging
folded full size nylon versions
from his open van door
as he drove through town.
Goodbye, Neighbor

“It’s wonderful to be able to just be yourself.”

Fred Rogers (1928-2003)

It’s a meow-meow day of meowness, everything that Picture-Picture distance where everything is seen as if in film; the recorded voice of my mother breaks the news.

There is a crack running through her voice and it’s too late to call her back. I’m pulling the chain of my own toy horse: “I don’t know” the only phrase that sounds.

He sent me out into the world of make believe. It is surreal here. There’s trampling in the sacred space he made between children and the screen.

We forget those bluegreenbrown tones that are always childhood’s and a kitchen where the dusty light is even more like home than home.

Funny the way I never believed it, could see the scuff marks on the floor and imagine the hand inside Daniel Tiger, but still longed for the nose kisses.

We need more platypuses to help us find our own real and fantastic in-between. I’m left alone without a piano to teach me it’s okay to be…
III. Chalk Dust
Academic Team Practice

Allison stands shyly, waits to be acknowledged before she'll wave hello and smile.
Ben has a beard, he's playing Orsino, wants to make sure that I'll see *Twelfth Night*.
Colin won't talk to me, but sends Derek over to ask me twenty questions about 'college.'
Erin hugs me round the waist, like a five year old fearing maternal separation.
Fred is memorizing "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," I think partly to impress me, the other part for a bet.
Greta, frantic at her Fiber Arts, cannot stop to talk.
Heidi bounces over and burbles about her new! English teacher! and the book! they’re writing!
Ilsa is at swim team, but leaves a cryptic spy note to warn when she will kidnap next.
Joachim needs help filling out his application: will I send him an email later?
Kevin saunters, ever the politician, nodding at each person in passing before extending a hand for me to shake.
Luke has taken to introducing everyone as John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt (which is his name too).
Molly wears mascara now, though when she laughs it runs.
Nancy had her jaw fixed, but doesn't want me to notice.
Oliver hasn't been suspended for weeks, well, not until today, anyway.
Penny forgot her poems in her locker, but she can't wait till I read the one about her cat.
Quentin has a new squirrel joke: he promises it isn't gross.
Rick sticks to the bookshelves, pretending interest in all the titles next to Sarah.
Tommy found a new shade of blue dye to go with his punk rock plaid.
U won't Bee-leave it! says the note that Violet stuffs in my hand.
Will just recites the amendments, articles XY&Z till no one wants him on the team anymore.
Backstage
--after watching my student play the Duke--

Heathcliff-browed handsome,
he twists between fingers of clumsy knuckles
a length of rawhide shoestring.
An attempt to calm and strengthen,
it stays always within pocket’s reach.
His Lautrec-limping approach of me,
ironic against the grace he shows on stage.

Because he knows success
with pencil to paper,
gesture of fingers,
purposeful stride,
it’s been difficult to see him
recognize failure
in grade-school-sized scribbled answers to tests,
his date’s deep drink of punch when beckoned to dance,
and listings in playbills, in the role of elder uncle.

He thinks I only remember the sound
of a cheap bookshelf breaking
when he leaned across its shelves to chat;
the sight of his body made taller and straighter
by standing on a desk to recite Coleridge;
or the clumsiness of his hug
when I named him quiz team MVP.

But I have received as precious each gift
he has given to me in black type.
I’ve read between
misspellings and missed keystrokes
to hear the sounds of his deaf brother's world,
see the glow that arises from an audience,
and feel the sting that accompanies
the unwelcome truths he knows how to tell.

So as I hug him
through the crowded cast,
I want to snatch the rawhide away
and tell him to read his own words
instead of the script.
What’s Missed

Once, you crawled crying under the desk to hide. I guessed then, when answering that call, poems weren’t enough to release the voice inside.

Does it sound like an excuse: at least I tried? Fought the angry hair curtains keeping you small, once you crawled crying under the desk to hide.

You hand-delivered pages, and though I sighed, I read them, and passed you my own in the hall. Poems weren’t enough to release the voice inside.

A trained teacher, yes, but still I let you slide. I didn’t know that you so soon would fall once you crawled crying under the desk to hide.

Lately news of you and from you collide; hospital details either vividly or scarcely recalled—poems weren’t enough to release the voice inside.

Weren’t there others in whom you could confide? And though you are right, I should return calls, once you crawled crying under the desk to hide, poems weren’t enough to release the voice inside.
Jesus Playboy

He walks into my classroom,
wooden cross loud at his neck
despite the graphics of his
“Life’s Short, Pray Hard” t-shirt.

Girls clutching
Teen Bibles
gather around his desk
to hear the gospel
before my class discussion.
Small gold crucifixes
point to cleavage
as they bend
to catch his words.

He tells them
of his struggles--
how hard it is
to be the guy
in the locker room
planning to save
himself for marriage.

He describes mission work
that distracts him from temptation.
Asks who among them will
join him for a weekend
of devotion and reward.

They fall prostrate at his feet.
Revisiting a Former Life

Speak with cynical syllables, shrug as if uninterested, and shuffle—this has to be the agreement, ever since I left them there.
We talk of trivia competition victories,
avoid questions of plot resolution.

This has to be the agreement, ever since I left them there,
pretend I’ve never participated in their stories.
Avoid questions of plot resolution
with the quick laughter I used to quiet.

Pretend I’ve never participated in their stories:
the incredulous sarcasm, wide-open fury, and pain
with quick laughter. That I used to quiet
this makes the best parts of me crumble away.

The incredulous sarcasm, wide-open fury, and pain
rush up to greet me, then shyly withdraw.
This makes the best parts of me crumble away
as I return to the hallway filled with trapped noise.

Rush up to greet me, then shyly withdraw.
Speak with cynical syllables, shrug as if uninterested, and shuffle—
In the hallway filled with trapped noise,
we talk of victories in competitions of trivia.
Thirsty

The plant on my new front porch
is glossy and green.
(It always is in summer
after months of rest outdoors)

An old friend bought it,
to celebrate my first year of teaching.
Tied with a bright bow,
it sat perky in the front of class the first day.

The plant and I both almost died that year:
I consumed mostly piles of papers and scraps of my pride
while the plant shriveled in dust
blown from the heater on the wall.

Once, the plant drank only coffee.
A scientific experiment, I said.
It ran brown water for two months
when we summered on the porch.

So, thinking I was smart, I put kids in charge of watering—
I had to rescue yellow leaves from drowning,
clean candy wrapper mulch from soil,
and lecture students and myself on responsibility.

Today, there are no blinds to break its branches
nor shield me from brightness.
No classroom windowsill—
however narrow, it was a place for us to perch.

Pretty soon we’ll both have to come in
from our time of rest outside,
find new forms of indoor danger,
new ways to soak up food and light.
Lies Teachers Tell

Retirement features in the local paper
ask what the lovely peach faced ladies
loved the most. They always say the students.

What else would keep them breathing
chalk dust motes, bending to drink
from dirty fountains, or standing on desks
to become Julius Caesar’s soothsayer
thirty years in a row?

But is this what they love the most?
Yesterday on the radio, The Soup Dragons
reminded me that they are free
to do what they want, any old time.

Through my rolled down window,
I could hear summer singing
to me in the distance.

And because summer still does mean freedom,
what would we do, those lovely ladies
and I, if a kitchen filled
with the perfume of burned toast
did not remind us of the luxury
of mornings spent in pursuit of golden tones
on both bread and skin?
IV. Blooms
Solace

On days when no one’s coming home, it’s cold, even with the thermostat five degrees warmer. Spend whole half hours weighing whether it’s too early to go to bed for good.

On days when pages become too deep to plumb, practice by seeking wineglass bottoms.

On days when forced hyacinths bloom, imagine baseball and backyard grills, but know that they come later, after winter when even fireplace ashes are old.

On days when you answer only sales recordings, begin conversations with the dog.

On days when you tell one detail too many, you are naked, even with all his clothes unpacked in piles on the floor. Save yourself by reading in the bathroom—It’s enough there’s someone on the other side of the door.

On days when you find his socks in the bottom of the bed, wear them on your hands to keep you warm.
Life Without Benefits

This morning I counted
the green ones:
the pills that led the way
out of months spent in fog.
Still too many pink ones
(they help the acid
side effects of stress)
to start worrying yet.

I've gotten used to
preppy-feeling hot pink
next to kelly green –
a pretty little pick-me-up
of color each morning
before they get to work
in the bloodstream.

One more week
of every other day,
then two more
of every third…

Tapering off, the doctor called it,
Making me think
of pant hems in the 80's,
or voices at the end
of a too-long phone call,
the stretching cool down
of a workout routine.
I wouldn't know about that,
but I guess I'll have to learn:
exercise creates endorphins too.
I liked the chemical ease.

So little is easy anymore
in a life without benefits.
House without air conditioner,
Jeep overheating,
the only sign of coolness some days
the snow on my TV.

I've taken to re-using paper towels
eating Frooty Rings,
and calcium infused orange juice.

These are grandma ways of living,
and I started taking
green pills so I
wouldn't be like mine.
She takes the green ones now:
she's still crazy.

I count them out again –
so little weight in my hand
that I've taken to wondering
if there is anything but
sugar inside:

An elegant pharmaceutical farce.
Millions swallowing
soluble plastic and powder for
nothing more than
pleasing pairings of color
next to the morning fiber.
Thank You, Mr. Nelson

Some days, she pushes the buttons
at the far ends of the radio memory recall,
indulges in steel guitar
and allows herself to cry.
She wonders how many
verses of songs she’s never heard
she can sing along with before
she has to become a fan.
She’s got bluegrass CDs
to tide her over, a more respectable fix—
but sometimes she needs the dying mommas,
silent daddies, and the girls that don’t grow up,
to keep her company in the front seat
on an Ohio morning highway.
Mellencholy

I always thought I wanted to live
in Mellencamp America.
Find a pink house
in a small town;
be Jack’s Diane
on a lonely old night.

But a rained-on scarecrow
doesn’t help, when my truck
stalls near his field,
and if the checkout girl
has never heard of cilantro,
much less where to find it,
_all I can do is sit and smile._

I can’t go to the “Cherry Bomb”
without seeing one of my students
who might catch me smoking up the alleyway,
and my mom still hears when
I don’t come home at night,
though I live on the outskirts of town.
Love Poem, Attempt #5

The moon
makes me think
of you.
I want it to be
something else,
anything but the moon.

You’d think
a pretender to poems
could create metaphor
from the sulfur smell
of your spent match
hiccups cure,
or the tense fragility
of the place on your head
where my razor always catches
and you stop breathing
for a second but say
nothing.

But no,
it’s the moon,
the obvious, ridiculous moon,
hanging in the sky
like a disposable plate
above the highway when I’m driving
home to you
that reminds me to breathe
and to remember
to say something
loving to you.
Moving Day

He’s helping her settle in her new apartment. So far, he’s dusted off the television. Embarrassing, to have tracked old dirt here, where dog hair gifts are not yet piled under the ficus—

“What you need are some banana ears.”

She’s under sweaters—they keep falling from the closet shelf, even after giving in to his free throw shot advice—doesn’t think she heard right through the walls and boxes.

“Banana ears. Which box are they in?”

She’s trying to figure out if he’s decided to stage Halloween early this year, is imagining her as Carmen Miranda. But he’s pointing at the snowy screen.

“Banana ears?”

Now she’s lost the actual name, has resurrected that old joke—“sorry, can’t hear you…”—collapses into airless giggling amid sweaters and sheets on the floor.


He looks on, wild gestures with hands, pointing at his own body parts to illustrate shape and function, convince her such things exist.

“BAH-NAN-AH. I know you have them.”

Finally, she holds up bunny fingers. He thinks she’s asking for peace, surrenders to her mess, until they resemble a heap on the floor as well.

Weeks later in bed, “Who’s going to adjust the banana ears?”
Other Men

Why so many other men caught in my memory,
since you are the punch line I sought in my memory?

I tell you our souls connected, that I fell for your words,
but it is the curve of your cranium that keeps me looking forwards.
Portrait

The morning glories
have grown black on the chain link.
Blue and white trumpets
tired of waiting for warm breath
turned in on themselves—
dry echoes of summer songs
mock the Miracle-Gro blue
of your fingers on humid afternoons.

Wait for me before you pull them from the fence.
I want to watch your hands at work again.
Occasional Gift

“A poem is a version of a moment”
Annie Helwig

I have found a way
to give you my liver without dying.
But only just.

A glistening offering,
hopeful shared epiphany;
you are looking at my insides.

Too raw and tender to look
while you examine it on the table,
I hear only your talk of onions.
Process

It’s the same old landscape—
dragged down from the shelf
and dumped out in pieces on the table.

Sometimes I like the colors,
and stack them up in separate piles.
Tulip red turns out to be
different from crabapple,
but I keep trying to connect them.

Other times it is shapes:
the bumps and loops I try to fit inside
the straight-edged frame,
or else craft ragged chunks
to help make sense of fragments.

Segmented, they suggest
possible scenery renovation.
Patch of blue as ocean glimpse, not puddle;
textured brown as exotic furniture,
not crumbly farmhouse shingle.

Behind the bookshelf, softened by dog saliva,
pieces will disappear, leaving holes
where there weren’t before.
I lay it out on the table, for you to see—
knowing what you won’t.
Gas Station, Evening

An attendant to the rituals of closing
stands in the beckoning darkness alone;
no children to alert an arrival
with jumping on the rubber tube
threaded across the pavement.

Everything is settling down:
like the cattle he once ministered
in their sleepy straw,
cars in the distance
exchange their muted sounds.

Once he has straightened
each oilcan, adjusted each pump,
the light spilling out from the doorway
will welcome him
into the steepled warmth.
Little Swords

It is hard to see my ancestors as warriors, since mostly they are memorialized as gardeners with the battered metal urns passed down for sprays of gladiolus at weddings, or trays of slides full of two-dimensional fields of vibrant spikes, armfuls gathered for delivery to florists.

Demeter grew those too, in memory of he who protected her sacred grove from infidels: Small swords arching up out of soil finally fertile once famine had eaten itself, red blossom beads of blood along blades.

Perhaps they, two who lost a son so early to the sky and sea of war, who did not have a body to return to the earth, used sword lilies as those entering the coliseum did—for strength of spirit, corroboration of since-regretted generosity.

I do not blame them for giving up the fields, the armfuls of swords, when the offerings began to appear only on funeral altars; their own labor and memorial turned cheap, readily available stock. They found solace in a screened-in porch greenhouse, their own artful arrangements and garden show ribbons.

I am glad to remember them this way, at weddings, or in smiles for slide film, as if those were the momentous times. Glad to think of them as lilies in the field.
Cape Cod Morning

Perhaps the shadow falling
on the bay window is just
the sun behind a narrow cloud.
On mornings when she lights
a lamp to drink her tea,
green blinds glow
against yellow walls,
and birds leave wispy trees
to alight and sing
in grass gone waist-high and golden.
She has been called lonely,
but someone must keep
the clapboard white—
her pink dressed cleavage
and such a blue sky
call for sharing.
Anyway, she’s looking out,
not down or in.
Notes

Almost to Anger: The English translation of the epigraph is “Love is so short, forgetting is so long” and is from Neruda’s “Tonight I Can Write.”

Mellencboly draws liberally from the lyrics of John Mellencamp.

The poems Noon, After Dinner, Gas Station Evening, and Cape Cod Morning owe a debt to paintings by Edward Hopper.