Ponies and Rocketships: Poems for America

A Collection of Selected Poems

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
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of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Leslie J. Anderson

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This thesis titled
Ponies and Rocketships: Poems for America
A Collection of Selected Poems

by

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the Department of English
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis consists of a collection of 28 poems by Leslie Anderson. The project includes such diverse topics as space travel, horse training, the romance of lava lamps, the haunting of family dinners, and romantic relationships. The thesis includes a critical introduction placing the author in conversation with such writers as Walt Whitman, Billy Collins, Sylvia Plath, Joy Harjo, Denise Duhamel, and Ron Padgett. The critical introduction also proposes loose unifying themes as well as stylistic patterns within the body of work.

Approved: ______________________________________________________

Jill Allyn Rosser

Associate Professor of English
DEDICATION

To my parents, Martin Anderson and Chris Waters,

and to Jarod Anderson
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Jill Allyn Rosser, Mark Halliday, and Marsha Dutton for their extensive academic and creative mentorship these past two years. Their guidance and encouragement has been exceedingly important to my growth as a writer. In addition, I would like to thank Jarod Anderson, whose support has been indispensable and who has been tireless in helping my editing and mental well-being. Lastly, I would like to thank Captain James Tiberius Kirk for his unparalleled courage and for being a bountiful source of inspiration and motivation. Thank you all. Live long and prosper.
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Whitman was probably the first poet I really understood. I had enjoyed other writers in the past, Pound and Eliot in particular, but I was more in love with the romance of their status as poets than their actual poetry. I was full of childish awe at their flowery images of the inexplicable world that whirled around my adolescent body. More than that, I was impressed by the references, obscure images, and italicized languages they seemed to effortlessly drop like crumbs around their poems. But with Whitman, I could understand both the meaning and the techniques with which they were created. In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman creates a great, sprawling, mythic landscape, as opposed to a mythos spawned through a theme explored in a collection of works, or a mythos that relies on references to past myths. In other words, I was interested in the idea of an intentional oeuvre. The idea of *craft* struck me in Whitman, even though I was in high school the first time I encountered his writing. I felt drawn to the strength of the definite article and the declarative sentence, which contained a finality that created an enduring power and assurance simply by their use. I yearned for the courage to declare, “None has understood you, but I understand you…” (Whitman 196). In my early writing, even addressing the audience with the all-encompassing *you* seemed like it required an unthinkable amount of bravery on the part of the writer.

When I attempted to speak of my own interests with Whitman’s strength, I found I had a problem. Often readers were put off with my confident pronouncement concerning subjects they knew nothing about, such as horses, science, art, or space travel. Instead of taking my assurance as inclusive, they told me they felt barred from what, they felt, was a true understanding of the poem. This was not my intention at all. I had hoped
to communicate that any information that was not included in the poem was therefore irrelevant to its meaning and that I was attempting to put them in conversation with a closed group by speaking to them as an equal member of that group. I wished to create a sense of open communication within a closed subject matter with its own specialized knowledge and terminology. For instance, in the various early versions of “Practical Training Methods For A Modern Heart,” I listed many training techniques and horse facts which were, to me, simply interesting and did not require further knowledge to fit into the poem, hoping that the specificity would bring with it a sense of experience. Some of those things still remain, such as: “You smashed the side of your hand / against the wall when a colt dove into it / like a frightened thief. / In cold weather you undo your fingers like ropes.” This stanza originally included a much longer description of horse training, as well as its difficulty and dangers. However, several readers communicated to me that they wanted either more information about the complex details of training, or none at all. Because the poem’s purpose was not to educate the reader in the training of horses, I reduced it to a portion that might be universally understood – the risk of injury. Even if an audience member had not had a direct experience with a horse, the pain which can linger long after an injury would be an experience they could understand, either because they had personally experienced it, or could empathize. My audience, no longer distracted by the erroneous detail, enjoyed the poem more.

In addition to my horse poems, I also attempt an all-inclusive voice in many of my poems about space travel. In “The Completely Average Voyage of Rocketship 666,” the Sergeant at the end of the poems speaks of disasters, and what he assumes to be the inevitable psychological necessity of turning to a higher power for solace. He says:
“what else are you going to do / when the hull opens like a curtain and your skin is unwinding / and there’s nothing for a billion miles / to catch you? You should immediately find a God.” In this case I did not want the hull, the god, or the danger to be singular. I did not want them to stand as the solitary example of the danger, but aimed for Whitman-esque the and prescriptive statements.

This is not the only time I talk about the dangers inherent in space travel, by which I mean the dangers of space travel is one of my obsessions. The juxtaposition of the courage of exploring the unknown and the innate danger of progress is a major theme in “The Cadet Learns to Sing,” “Abduction,” and to a lesser extent in “Eulogy for Spirit and Opportunity.” These dangers must be faced in order for progress to be possible. Although the Sergeant and the Cadet are speaking of disasters specific to interstellar travel, their fears are the same as those of anyone venturing into the unknown. Specifically, I wanted to isolate the fear of oblivion and the loss of self. This feeling is metaphorically evoked by to the void of space. However, it is also a fear that could easily apply to cowboys wandering into the lonesome prairie or a student wandering into the job market.

These moments of fear and uncertainty, set against a thematic celebration of power and bravery, recall the later sections of Leaves of Grass. Specifically, this intertextual tension is reflected in “Drum Taps.” In many moments in “Drum Taps,” images of the violence of the Civil War overcome the beautiful and confident images of “Song of Myself.” In “The Cadet Learns to Sing,” the Cadet becomes emotional when she remembers a shipmate who was lost in space. This is similar to Whitman’s moments, in the face of violence, in which his confident tone falters. For example, in “The Wound
Dresser,” he says of a dying soldier: “One turns his eyes to me – poor boy! I never knew you, / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you” (260). Whitman celebrates the might of America, and even expresses awe at the power of battle, yet he was keenly aware of the human fragility at odds with the technological and philosophical progress of the nation. Likewise, I want to express these worries as a constant tension between past and future, a continuum between cowboys and space adventurers. It defines our common humanity, and is nowhere more visible than in our grand endeavors of personal bravery. These narratives of heroic effort provide the best opportunities for exploring our shared personal fragility. This is exhibited in many of my poems, such as “Voyage Dans La Lune,” where the speaker’s experiences with failed romantic relationships are metaphorically compared to explorations of the moon.

In addition to humanity, I also celebrate nationhood and America in my writing, though often nation and country refer to the body and the self in addition to geo-political subjects. For instance, in “Memory as Shipwreck,” memory is aligned with place and event as well as mental record. This parallel is fully realized in the closing stanza: “They are the ones that told you / they loved your old country / then filled it with holes.” In this sense the personal becomes political, and the failures of the personal memory are equated with a loss of nationhood and sovereignty. Likewise, a loss of national history is suggestive of a physical death. My poem “America” obviously belongs in this category. The poem describes America as a young man, but also a larger idea of a nation largely disinterested in its admirers. America, in this poem, is a young man who patronizes the speaker and manipulates her, yet she still believes she can change him. The title America creates a nation is imbued with the cocky, controlling qualities of the young man,
conflating the imagined national influence of an artist with the personal influence of a friendship or relationship.

As in *Leaves of Grass*, several poems mention America by name, but there are many more which explore and represent the nation’s hidden imperialism and, at times, self-destructive thirst for progress. In these poems I attempted to capture the nervousness of my generation of Americans, raised with the American dream of progress, growth, and entrepreneurship, but tempered by a distrust of politicians, and troubled by the guilt of a destructive past. Balancing these driving forces (to be heroic and carefree, yet controlled and responsible) can be painful and even impossible.

Mark Halliday once asked me why I was using America and not some arbitrary country. Why not France, or Algeria? The simple answer would be that America is the only country I am able to speak about with any confidence or feeling. Though I have been lucky enough to visit other countries, America raised me, and regardless of how enlightened and learned I become, my experience with the world will always be colored by my American-ness. In addition, as previously discussed, my writing has always been heavily influenced by other poets’ relationships with America, including, obviously, Whitman.

As I said, I am also interested in the unique way America seems to call for progress, personal and national, even at the expense of lives and environment. Yet this drive creates a tension with America’s insistence on accountability. These ideas of ownership can also be seen in the poems about relationships, such as “The Space Cadet Feels Sick” and “The Thing About Horse Sex” in which speakers and characters regret their attachment to their partners, and long for a freedom. This opposition between
ownership and equality is also reflected in “America,” in which America manipulates the speaker, yet she still believes she can have an equal effect on him. In these poems this manipulation and ownership give a false sense of progress. America, for instance, assures the speaker that he can make her a better writer by making her sad. On the other hand, she cannot change him. The imbalance is reflected in “The Thing About Horse Sex,” in which some of the lovers believe they are creating a relationship, while others desire only freedom. In an imperialistic sense, exploration and progress are always concerned with ownership. Putting a flag into the moon is progress in that American has gained something, but there are always losers in this arrangement. My poem “The Captain Speaks” directly reflects his own unease about his role in imperialism. He mourns his realization that the romanticism he imagined around his role is untrue. He is sent to conquer, but is unable to destroy a single, beautiful life form. Here the personal and political are at odds, but the personal is able to triumph. This structure parallels the broader dialectic antagonism of America’s need for both progress and accountability.

I should perhaps take a moment to reflect on my title and epigraph choice. The title, “Ponies and Rocketships,” might immediately strike the reader as immature or disrespectful. However, I hope that the title will reflect the naïve or innocent voice my poems often adopt to analyze the world. For instance, in “My Highschool Boyfriend is Gay,” the speaker is amazed and confounded when her ex-boyfriend is afraid to tell her about his homosexuality, and even more alarmed when an old teacher suggests it may be her fault. Likewise, “The End of the World is Personal” and “New Year’s Resolution” both take an overly simplistic view of the future, hypothesizing either an end of the world which revolves around the speaker or a visit from benevolent aliens. On the other hand,
the dark melancholy of other poems results from the misunderstandings of this naïve viewpoint. The pain of the speaker in “Waiting For a Letter” comes from considering an innocent past in which she was unable to prevent injury. In addition, the trainer’s startling revelation at the end of “Horse Training Demonstration”: “Oh God. Oh God. What have I done?” contrasts with his naivety at the beginning of the poem. The childish sound of *Ponies and Rocketships* reflects this tone as both ponies and rocketships are romantic images for children, but in truth are serious and often dangerous tools of human progress, even horses, which can be dangerous even if one is trained to ride them.

The persona of America, which evolves throughout this collection of poetry, is largely disinterested in the various speakers and, like space, is possibly destructive. Its thirst for progress and power is certainly potentially harmful. Thus, *Ponies and Rocketships: Poems for America* reflects the naïve and hopeful nature of the various lovers, adventurers, and artists within this collection who are producing for a higher power that is, at best, uninterested in their existence, and at worst actively harmful. In addition, the pioneering spirit and urge to explore are found on this naïve optimism. As discussed earlier, this progress is neither malignant nor villainous, but a force of the universe. *Ponies and Rocketships: Poems for America*, both as a title and the collection itself, draws attention to the movement of time, represented by the objects of an adventurous past and a potential bold future. The epigram reflects this tension as well. The quote is taken from “Drum Taps,” specifically “Bivouac on a Mountain Side,” and reads: “The shadowy forms of men and horses, looming large-sized, flickering, / And over all the sky – the sky! far, far out of reach, studded, breaking out, the eternal stars” (252). This scene reflects a heroic past looming against a heroic future. The human
image imposes itself on the natural, primal image of the universe. In these two images, as it applies to my poems, the human thirst for progress through time is compounded into a single moment.

Although Whitman’s grand vision in *Leaves of Grass* was a major influence on my writing, my poems were also influenced in various ways by a number of other modern writers. Often the writers I enjoy challenge me to attempt things in my poems which I otherwise would not have considered. Whitman, of course, challenged me to write about the personal and political with the same honesty, confidence, and reverence. Sylvia Plath and Denise Duhamel taught me opposing lessons. From Plath I learned to use the line as the unit of meaning, leaning on each line to be strange and interesting and not depending on the poem as a whole to carry my only meaning. This can be seen in lines such as, “We girls know these violent and perfect men, / we sidle up close to their blackhole triggers,” from “The Nature of Gunfight.” Although the sexual meaning is important here, the interesting word use is vital for creating a more layered narrative as well as holding the reader’s attention. Duhamel, on the other hand, taught me the power of the easy-to-read, flowing narrative, and was obviously a major influence on my more conversational poems, such as “My High School Boyfriend is Gay.”

Other writers challenged me on word use and theme. Joy Harjo, for example, tends to use highly fanciful and whimsical images. She will often use a single image, such as a horse, ghost, hawk, river, etc. as a metonym for a large set of circumstances or people. Her famous poem “She Had Some Horses,” for instances, contains a long list of the attributes of her horses, including: “She had some horses who were bodies of sand. / She had some horses who were maps drawn of blood” (Harjo 63). Exactly what the
horses are is debatable. They could be women, humans, victims of abuse, Native Americans, the speaker’s family, or perhaps they are just horses. At the same time, the meaning of the horses is not simply capacious. It also provides the potential for specific interpretation.

The wild imagery of these poems inspired me to be more fantastic with my own images. For example, another line from the same poem reads: “She had some horses who screamed out of fear of the silence, who / carried knives to protect themselves from ghosts” (63). Although I did not have this sentence in my mind when I wrote “12 Ghosts of the Family,” it did challenge me to use words such as ghost and horse to represent more than their conventional interpretation. My earlier poetry, which is not included in this collection, was very much tied to the real, the autobiographical, and the confessional. However, Harjo’s poetry suggested a wider possibility of imagination, which intrigued and challenged me. In fact, because of Harjo’s influence, I challenged myself to write a poem that contained a potentially cliché word, ghost.

I think of Billy Collins and Ron Padgett’s influence on my writing as a singular thing, perhaps because I came to love them in the same summer. Additionally, they both also have a talent for poetry which focuses on the minuscule details and items while so many other writers are engaged with scenes, landscapes, time, and grandeur. For instance, in Collins’ poem “The Country” he imagines a mouse stealing a match and, catching it on the edge of a beam, lighting it and catching the house on fire. This thought leads him to a more human meditation on the destruction of innovation, and the fear discovery can bring (Collins 9-10). This theme is common in my own writing, but the approach is also similar to many of my poems, such as “The Night Blooming-Cereus,” in
which the fading light of a single light bulb reminds the speaker of a complex childhood memory, or “Locks,” in which the speaker questions the future because the discovery of a hair tie reminds her of her lover’s past relationships. Padgett also can spiral into philosophical musings triggered by the slightest thing, such as English muffins or The Swiss Family Robinson (Padgett 1,3).

In addition to being susceptible to flights of fancy, both Collins and Padgett cannot seem to resist poking fun at themselves. Often they drop their elevated poetic rhetoric and turn a critical eye inward. In “Death in New Orleans, A Romance,” Collins imagines his own death, and ends with this image: “[...] my empty head in a pool of wine, / the waiter and two customers / bending over me with obvious concern” (Collins 87). This overwrought description of the writer’s death cannot be read as anything but melodramatic. Collins makes fun of himself, and poets in general, for romanticizing themselves, their work, and their deaths. Padgett is well known for his quips and tongue-in-cheek tone. In “The Absolutely Huge and Incredible Injustice in the World,” Padgett meditates for three pages on murder and adultery, when suddenly the lines come: “You can’t say that the people who invented the bedroom were mean, / only a bedroom could say that, if it could say anything. It’s a good thing that bedrooms can’t talk” (Padgett 51)! This lighthearted moment, accentuated by the exclamation point, allows the reader to come up for air for a moment. Thus, the poem resists the urge to dwell on the morbid and sensational.

I am especially fond of this method. For instance, in the most confusing moments of “My High School Boyfriend is Gay,” when the speaker is accused of being untrustworthy or corruptive, the speaker reacts with exclamations, “which never occurred
to me!” This moment can be seen as funny and ironic. Her shock is carries a natural feel and serves to highlight, through contrast, the absurdity of the boyfriend and teacher’s suspicion. It also breaks the sullen tension that threatens to drop the poem into self-pity.

In “Twelve Ghosts of the Family,” I also poke fun at myself as a writer when the speaker observes: “I notice all the streets are named after things / that no longer grow there, / elm, oak, chestnut, cedar, / like my mother and her mother / have the name of a man who no longer lives / anywhere. / That’s very clever, the ghosts agree.” Here I hope to make a potentially overwrought image playful and self-critical. However, this self-reflection does not make the original observation any less true, so it can be sad without being over-romanticized. These light-hearted moments also seek to redeem the naive speaker who is in danger of being lost or jaded by the sadness in the poems. Through humor and lightness, the speaker is able to remain above the morbidity of the poem, instead of a contributor to the negative moments. In “Twelve Ghosts of the Family,” this tone differentiates the speaker from her serious mother or her injured and lost grandmother.

The collection becomes a constant balancing act between moments of triumph, constant fears, and looming insecurities, highlighted by humor and whimsy. These insecurities range from relationships, horses, religious and spiritual questions, my own potential, the consequences of my ambition and our ambition as a nation. Throughout the poems these worries are revised, relieved, conflated, and simplified. In “The Only Love Poem,” the complexities of relationships are reduced to a selfish existence separate from influence, consequence, or expectation. However, “The Night Blooming Cereus” and “Portrait” show love as an ephemeral and potentially painful experience. These relationships are not only personal, however. I have attempted to craft a group of poems
that blend the personal and political. In “The Song of the Mob,” for instance, the personal is lost in the vox populi. Their fight for their individuality is redundant, as is illustrated in the lines: “To defend our parents’ footsteps / we live and die in one moment of violence. / Then we appear again, quieted…..” Likewise, in “An Inheritance of Stone,” the speaker’s father inhabits a personal space, his house, but is lost in contemplation of outside violence, which he could not control, namely a school shooting. Of course this is a metaphor that I have created for myself, but it not the only pattern or metaphor in my work. It is an issue that is present in my mental process when creating a poem. Many of my poems also contain a clear villain and a clear victim. Observation is a clear focus, even though it is often obscured or questionable. I occasionally experiment with fragmentation, especially when discussing memory or history, which are often questionably trustworthy at best. As in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, my personal stories and observations come to stand for the future and past of my nation, its fears, uncertainties, and future. They are poems for America.


“The shadowy forms of men and horses, looming, large-sized, flickering,
And over all the sky – the sky! far, far out of reach, studded,
breaking out, the eternal stars.”

- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
The computer reports the date and fills his glass.
It’s the future, but he’s too tired for it.
*There were hardly any worlds
left to conquer,* he moans. The computer
does not care. *I stabbed flags into empty deserts
all my life. Then they were bulldozed I guess.*
*Become a spaceman! They said. Adventure! Sex!*
*But no one says: oh, there aren’t actually
any alien civilizations to battle, didn’t we tell you?*
*No blue scaled trollops to woo or phosphorescent jaguars to shoot
with a heavy and beautiful laser gun. There is nothing
out here.*

*But once, some little thing
ran out of the sand. It was
clear and impossible, like a ship of glass,
like a hermit crab - that size and
made of a million balanced pieces.*
*It was ornate. It was impossible.*
*I held my pistol over it until I had to yell
and it ran and ran.*
Horse Whispering Demonstration, Columbus Ohio

Everyone try to clap again.
No, see he is still running to the end
of the lead when you do that. Okay so
we show him that that is not what
I want. We drive him in
this little circle. We want
to show him that it is better
to stand still and be quiet.
He doesn’t have to work
as hard when he stops worrying.
See he thinks I control the circles.
The clapping isn’t so bad.
Clap again. See nothing!
I made the clapping not scary. Thank you.
My horses think I can control everything,
the food, water, traffic, barn owls. I can’t
even control my girlfriend! Ha!
They think I can control the sky, weather, thunder
doesn’t bother them. Fire is not
terrifying. They would walk right into it.
They would burst into flame and wait
for me to make it better! Anything I want!
They think I control that! Oh God.
Oh God. What have I done?
Pony Questions The Divine

Here many of Her hairless kind, riders, but at night sing we –
hum we from our poles to our feathers of Her,
Her pockets all full of sugar! Her Never-Pull-On-Bit!
Her sawdust-soft voice.

These children of Her. Riders.
They do not reach my shoulder, Their mane is like hay.
Their carrot hand, I try not to bite!

I am not sure I can believe
in the Her, the Forever Queen of Stall. The Holy –
The Great Do-No-Harm. The Doubtless. The vulnerable, Her god-body.

No if She were true, would she not brush flies from our skin? Would there not
be hay in every field? No broken leg falls? No leg-slice ice puddles?

Maybe They are Her! Or so close! Maybe god bodies
are not so powerful, only a little. How are they so small
and move with such holy forethought! To the mounting block!
To the Ring! To the Jump with kicking sand! Our bodies
are all in mud and flung like stone, But they!

I know: bite, kick, love, food, run. But they!
How moves their body? But oh the why
and the how does their body
move my body?
My mother said I should have known
when he gave me a lava lamp for Christmas.
But I thought that was sweet at the time
because I had mentioned once
that I had a lava lamp as a kid
and it never worked.
I would leave it on all night
and there were never any lights.
No fantastic shapes like everyone said
there would be.

Maybe I should have known
when he didn't kiss me at prom
though I didn’t want him to kiss me,
but knew I was supposed to want him to kiss me.
I had a red dress and my mother’s pearls
and he looked good in a suit.

Instead, I told him secrets.
That sometimes I imagined breaking
the stained glass windows of my church
with paving stones pulled up from the garden path.
That I imagined this in detail every Sunday
sitting in the pews in my stiff shoes and thick socks.
But when he told the truth I heard it
from someone else. He stopped speaking to me.
The messenger said, he was so sure
I’d be upset. Which never occurred to me!

I don’t think I’ve seen a working lava lamp in real life.
I’ve only seen them in movies or cartoons.
Maybe lava lamps are a myth like unicorns
or well-written romantic comedies.

At this point in my life
I have an unrealistic expectation
of lava lamps.

Last Christmas I went back to our hometown.
I met the teacher who set us up at the store,
between shampoo and tissues, and she was confused.
We were such a cute couple, etc.
Well, he’s come out and bakes cakes now.  
*He’s* very happy. I said.  
*Ah.* She answered. *Well I’m sure it’s not your fault.*  
Which also never occurred to me!

His lava lamp never worked either.  
Maybe I’m doing lava lamps wrong,  
or maybe I am lava-lamp-cursed.  
Maybe I insulted a lava-lamp-selling gypsy  
at the side of the road on an especially warm Tuesday  
and she was hot and sweating  
under all her jeweled and coin-studded scarves.  
No lava lamps shall ever work for you!  
No light! No warm movement in the dark!

How do I fix this?  
Shall I lie: I never wished  
for lava lamps?  
I am happy without them.  
Shall I gather them all in a pile  
and set them on fire?
The Thing About Horse Sex

The thing about horse sex is
their whole world is whim and gesture.
Even when they play, it’s only intimidation.
Not harm. In love too – only fleeting.
There are no miserable glances in the morning.
No one spends the next day waiting
for the bars to open.

I try to explain this but,
somehow, when bodies are involved -
when I say I love something about their forms, the immensity
and simplicity - the unapologetic need to be touched –
everyone laughs and I blush,
though I haven’t misspoken.

Homer claimed the Greek mares were impregnated
by the wind. Perhaps Boreas thought they were like him,
full of feral dignity.

I try again. I say, because horses are not smart
the way people are smart. They live in moments.
Their past and history are only sensations,
Like a spur or a soft touch.

Everyone nods.
I’ve said this all before.
Tonight they will whisper to each other
I love you. I will always love you,
but the next day wake up and realize
one of them was a person
and the other a horse
and the wind laughed itself to death
against their window all night.
America

America has strong hands and thin wrists.
America drinks too much.
America doesn’t feel like talking tonight.

America is a boy with long hair
who holds his cigarettes like a burden.
America has shimmery black shoes
with scuffs on the toes. People tell me
stay away from America.

America’s hands are in America’s pockets.
America says, *you can be the best poet in the world
but first you have to be sad for 200 years
like me.*

I lose at cards again. America says
*That’s alright* and I feel alright.
America says *life is too short*
then takes me home with him.

America is good at these sort of games.
America has a sharp mind
that enjoys strategy and opponents.

In the morning America talks
about America’s past. There is a lot
of mourning and romance and starving Indians.

I want to say, *Don’t be sad. I love you, America!*
But I am afraid America would call me naive
and stop speaking to me and I’ll never
be able to change him.
The Nature Of Gunfight

The space rogue measures adventures in proximity instead of time. He meditates on this in the corner of the sand-washed bar. Yes. He’s sure. The closeness to a fatal object is more important than the speed it is maneuvered around. For example, dipping your wings into a supernova - swinging between the clenching teeth of the star beast. These are good, solid adventures.

Half a Nature of Man later he pulls a gun from a holster and shoots!

This Nature is, of course, the measurement of the distance of his finger to the trigger in relation to the distance of the other man’s finger to the other man’s trigger,

or perhaps the total time the other man might have had left had he not seen his shot hit wide, bore a hole black as the space he swung around like girls’ hips, touching gravity here and again like a hand - falling inside it.

We girls know these violent and beautiful men, We sidle up close to their blackhole triggers. We write long poems about them, skirting their edge, holding them a word away, watching them across the bar as they shoot sunsets through each other.

But we don’t interfere. We know our Nature is the distance between us and the day they lie still or rocket off, and who really cares who shot first or best? In the end, we could love the equations of danger too, but there is always the mess to clean up, there is still the body to take care of.
The Space Cadet Feels Sick

She dreams. She dreams.
The concrete basement
of her parents’ home flooded. The wracks
of their old clothes fallen under the water.
The wires fall and the electricity skitters
across the surface like angry white spiders.
There was no way to fix this. No way.
She wakes up and is sick in the clean white bathroom,
the low porcelain bowl. At night she thinks she is bleeding
into the secret caverns of herself.
She tells no one.

She dreams she wrote a book
and the other cadets, her friends
scribble inside of it. Stop! She yells at them.
but they go on and on. Then they show her it was blank
Everything she wrote was gone. She cries Stop!
It still has my name on it! But they do not stop. They tear
the covers off. The books grew new covers like gray scabs.
They tear the covers off. She wakes up
and is sick in the low porcelain bowl.

And when she has cleared the sharp red curtains
of her insides she goes to work.
She stands straight at her station. At his station
the man who must have done this to her pretends
he doesn’t see her. He doesn’t have to deal with this.
They press the buttons their training has taught them to press.

She dreams that she is a space ship tearing through space
like a corkscrew, that the crew moves inside her
like cotton wrapped blood cells, smearing their hands
along her rails, their fingerprints sticking on her windows.
She wakes up and is still a tilting ship. She wakes up
and is sick in the low porcelain bowl. She wants
them out.

The white bathroom. The white shirts soaking
in the cold water. The white pages she neglected to write
or erased before they were real. She loves
the dark alley of space, suddenly, for needing
neither warmth nor duty. For needing nothing,
Memory As Ship Wreck

I
This is my earliest memory.
I was three.
I was wearing my Easter dress,
the little gold cross
my mother lent me, with the pearl at the center.
I wore that dress out of the house.
I walked down the steps and heard a bird,
a baby bird, down in the grass by the lavender,
all down and eyes and a mouth like a yellow petal.
I knelt, my dress was in the dirt and the grass.
I put my hands around the bird because
I wanted to save it but
it was afraid and beat its wings
against the tiny muscles of my hand
like a terrified, ruffled heart.

But that was a dream, wasn’t it? The next day
I wore the pink dress. It held the light
like wrapping paper.
I was afraid I would lose the cross and kept
reaching for it; touching the cold of it.
I walked to the thin purple bushes and
there was a bird,
soft and wood colored, staring at me -
demanding of me,
but I wouldn’t.

2.
A thousand years in the future
The forest of broken glass will fill with water.
Crows call from nests in the mangled masts
of improbable ships, dashing themselves
against the shoals of curling fog, splintering like tree branches,
curving backward like high-note mermaids.
This is the forest where I fell in love, and one day
it will be gone.
3.
He told me, *Your brother bet me I couldn’t kiss you,*
And that was enough, just then,
but now his name resists like the tense white atmosphere
of an egg under my nails.

The snow is melting.
The stray cats stand in packs in my backyard.
I want to call my brother and ask
*Do you remember?*
But it occurs to me that maybe it didn’t happen
like that.

I never shared breakfast with him
or winter, or a spring.
He kissed me, holding the emergency exit
with one hand and no one saw.
Did he lose I wonder?

Did I? - anything?

the cats are tense as highway-side deer,
the cool egg in my hand, and

his name. His name.
It started with
an opening of the mouth –

4.
Daniel was the first idea I fell in love with.
He had dark hair and a scar, already, at 15.
He lived next door. Once I caught him
shooting his rifle at the swallows,
in the forest behind our houses
where 150 years of farm hands
had shattered beers against the trees and grass
for fun. That world was sharp and bright. I loved
the swallows and I cried for them. He stopped
and he took me home. He did not apologize.

When he told me his family was moving
I turned to run into that forest, to cry,
to be sad in the trees and glass.
He caught me by the arm
and called me Miss Scarlet, which was not
my name. He was always playing games.

Ten years later another boy clung to me
and tried to open me like a bottle.
I remembered that name – I don’t know
why – but it filled me
like a revenge of birds
and I was brave and
I left him.

5.
Before the deployment
Ian taped notebook paper to the trees in my backyard,
drew a circle in quick red crayon.
He taught me to hold his heavy, silver ‘45.
He was home for Christmas. He gave me pepper spray.
I wrapped the target around it. I carry it
in my purse to protect me.

Again: that day.
Startled wings exploded into the sky with a crack
like black fireworks.

6.
It is spring and my grandfather is dead.
My grandmother showed me his paintings
In the basement, when we were folding sheets.
They were beautiful and
she wondered what he might have been
if not for the war.

One was a house in an ocean of yellow field.
Thin white M’s hung over it like seagulls.
I wondered if it was near the ocean he crossed
leaving this woman behind.
But that assumes that place was real.

Four years later I wanted to know where the paintings went
I wanted to look at them again.
She was confused. What was I talking about?
When I asked my mother she looked puzzled at her easel.
She doesn’t remember her father painting anything.

7.
How can I trust my memory?
I try not to forget. Especially people,
their faces, their names, the fingers – too tight.
When I see people on the street I want to greet them
like my lost house key, the jacket I didn’t know I owned.
They have rebuilt me again and again.
They are the ones that told me
they loved me, then filled me full of holes.
The Night-Blooming Cereus

Did I tell you my last boyfriend complained on the night I was nominated for a Rhodes scholarship that I was not putting out quite enough?
Or the one who sent me back upstairs because I wasn’t dressed for his parents?

I’m trying to explain. I’m just so confused when I miss a date because I pulled an all-nighter again and you show up with hot chocolate and tell me you’re proud and I should sleep and turn out the light. I am not used to – what is this?

Did you know the new light bulbs glow for awhile after you turn them off.

In bed with my glasses off, they look like exhausted starbursts, like –

One night my mother woke me up and carried me to her studio. One wall was glass windows and hanging flowerpots. One of the flowers had bloomed. It opened white and silken in the dark and followed the moon.

I couldn’t see it. The moon, the flower, the paintings were melted and white. Everything gave off the same light. I didn’t understand, but pretended I was happy for my mother.

The next year my mother figured out I was short sighted, and bought me glasses, and I didn’t trust them. I wandered from room to room taking them on and off. Rain had dimension, stitches were on everything. Flowers were made of so many things.
I dragged my mother
by the hand, demanding of everything – what?
What of this is real? How can I know
what to trust?
We Caught Small Mouth In The Kawigamug River

But sometimes the Pike came,  
huge and toothsome,  
It would dip its fin into the air,  
then dive toward the smaller fish.  
We couldn’t see its body underneath.  
There was no splash, just a sloop –  
a void in the water filling with fish.

And my mother would adjust  
our lifejackets and say *maybe*  
we *should just go home now,*  
and we would.

One day she hooked it.  
Its weight tipped our silver boat  
like a teacup towards the water,  
and her eyes opened round.  
Then it cut to the surface, and down again.  
It tried to hide under the shelf and then swam.  
All this under the black skin of the water,  
and so it could have been anything.

Dad stood like a professional fish-catcher,  
the wind tugged at the corner of his floppy hat until  
he professionally tore it from his head. My mother  
did nothing but hold on, as if this  
was the most important thing.

Then the fish turned just beside us,  
so close. I could have touched the scales.  
It was half the size of our boat, silver and green and old  
like an antique looking glass. Its mouth  
was open and its teeth were like real teeth  
broken sharper, like the flint we smashed with quartz.  
And my brother screamed.

I know Dad was thinking,  
if we get it out of the water I will have to  
hit it with a paddle or my fists until it stops moving and  
trying to bite at my children. Maybe it should have  
rained so we’d stayed in. This woman  
will never let it go.
But the line-knife stayed in his pocket.

And my mother looked terrified
or maybe excited and maybe she was thinking
something similar, or maybe she thought of her trophy
hung over our dining room table.

And I wanted it to end and I wanted my mother
to defeat the lake and all its monsters – but

it took a right-angle turn under the boat.
The line, pulled against a rivet, snapped.
and its violent body was wrapped up in black.
The dark water slooped
and licked the sides of our astonished boat.
I do not remember my mother in motion, but still before her canvas, folding light in wicker baskets of fruit, hands, hips, and thighs. I used to wish she would put me in her paintings with all that skin, those red flowers, but she never did.

Except once, the size of a postcard, in a swirl of blue and black. I was riding on a white horse, a dark coat, a white face in shadow, leaning to the left as if already leaving the frame.

I suppose she could never paint me as I saw her like the queens in the museums, composed and powerful, globes between her fingers, and pearls in her ears.

She saw me surging through her life – an abstract flash of luminescent muscle from infinity, unknown and moving away.
An Inheritance Of Stone

The night of the shooting at his school
my father graded his papers in his study
as if nothing had happened.

I saw him once that night.
He came into the kitchen where I was writing.
He set his hands on the counter,
breathing tentatively the air of his house.

He considered the black pond outside.
The waves rolled over the thin, sandy shore,
unmarking, unprinting, taking
the little golden stones away
one at a time.
Out in the western haunted sand, the exposed heat trembles. Even now they are taking shotguns to the mustangs, rioting against the fences, over the sand. The exposed heat trembles, shocked! They break each other. Bones rioting against the fences, over the death. Trapped, they fall, shocked, they break each other’s bones, the mustang is still. Deathtrapped, they fell. Chiaroscuro gold and cyclone blue, the Mustang is still America. When we rode into the sky, chiaroscuro gold and cyclone blue, it all started from the backs of those horses. America, when we rode into the sky, we looked through the twitching-hot atmosphere at where it all started. From the backs of those horses, who could say it was only dirt?

We looked through the twitching-hot atmosphere at where the earth spun, and that made us gods who could say it was only dirt. But it was America and a billion, billion horses. The earth spun and that made us gods. We were children who did not want to go home but it was America and a billion, billion horses and something had to be done about them. We were children who did not want to go home, (Dust of striving muscle and blood, and something had to be done about them! How? It is a gun. In the here of our history, even now, they are taking shotguns to the mustangs out in the western haunted
dust of striving muscle and blood.
Now it is a gun in the ear of our history.
On Rocketship 666, the crew understands that they are a human number but that doesn’t mean there aren’t shrines to the virgin in the console fuse box, votive offerings under the transporter array.

It doesn’t mean the cadets don’t attribute every single last reactor leak to omens, the navigation errors to devilry. Just because they’re wrapped in science doesn’t mean they are safe from ghosts.

Every single person on board used to read books full of heroics: fights with squids made of lights, sentient air bubbles, planets of infinite, writhing silk worms building fabric cities that rustled in the breeze, but none of these things are true.

The truth is space is boring. Space is terrifying. Space is infinite minuscule calculations of the circumference of dust. Space will ignore you for seven thousand years then slip inside your suit one night and peel your lungs away. The truth is you will wear a gray jumpsuit with a little patch on your shoulder, and clean a lot. It is mostly like every other job.

When the crew gets together, not in the cities or the ship, but sitting on car trunks with beers in the darkness sitting in the mud, or on the flaking rust of the hood, far away from white plastic and fluorescent light, they figure maybe they love their ship for belonging to the devil, or god, or whatever, maybe it’s good to have someone to blame or call.

After all, a Sergeant wonders, what else are you going to do when the hull opens like a curtain and your skin is unwinding and there’s nothing for a billion miles to catch you? You should immediately find a God.
Practical Training Methods For Modern Hearts

Sunday night: rest
on the straw, with your boots on, filthy.
After your riding students have gone home.

The stable hands will laugh and tell old jokes.
Tell them about your lover’s apartment, the clean plates
and clean cupboards and clean bottles. The white bowl of ash,
a single cigarette. You will remember claustrophobia.

So, let the horses free in the barn, to run between
the wheelbarrows and saddleracks. They will rub their faces
against each other’s bodies, sometimes
against your body. The cats will lick the sweat off your face
with mouths of velvet and cactus needles.

For 40 days you had his mouth all around you,
and when you were hungry he said, if you want
anything to eat, go out and get it. There’s
nothing here, even if you wanted you to make it yourself.

He made you leave
your dusty boots by the door. Everything
was so clean. You showered before you touched
anything. Mostly you wanted to empty that bowl
of ash over his head. But you believed
you could make him better. So you stayed.

A pony kicked your knee out when you were 10.
Sometimes it gives with the casual-tragic dip
of a breaking bridge.

The side of your hand was smashed
against the wall when a colt dove sideways
like a frightened thief.
In cold weather you undo your fingers like ropes.

Sometimes in bed
your shoulder twists like a night terror.
He whispers, horses?
in the voice of the question,
that dream again? He feels
he has saved you from that.
But you miss the dirt and the pain. You miss filling carpets with it, flinging it across couches with your body. You miss feeling like the earth was your pain. Was inside you.

Eventually you will want to go home, and do. Wait until everything you own that smelled like his smoke smells like dust. Then Sunday night: rest.
Abduction

Cows have seen more space than us. For generations they were lifted into the delicate, spinning stars, their soft heads raised, loamy eyes watching calmly, not quite curious.

The ships, like ornaments, rocked on their inconspicuous, black hooks. The cows’ hooves left the ground. They were held by light as they remembered being held as calves. Maybe they kicked once, testing for something solid, found nothing; were still.

In the glistening laboratory they ruminated on the last bit of earth in their stomachs, watched out the window. The vastness of space shrieked past like jack rabbits.

As the silver knives grew closer, they probably considered infinity; they thought they might have seen it once before in the black of their mother’s eye, or the cold, damp dirt under the winter ice. They thought, this could be lucky. They thought, maybe it was not a terrible place to go.
The Space Cadet Learns To Sing

They are looking for the other spaceship so they can kill it.

The space cadet watches over her controls and thinks of cowboys. She knows the cowboys never sang to the cows, never mind what the movies say. The cows, after all, were talking and eating - normal procedures.

No. The cowboys sang to themselves because they were afraid and lonely – because there is no light in the desert except the radar blip of a cigarette, and nobody to love or anything. It is like space, an infinite dark where you know your location, precisely, or you are already lost and no one will find you.

She understands, she knows the stars can press like fingernails against the windows like they did when she spilled the captain’s drink, and he looked up at her instead of the constant bright-wood table.

He is a dangerous man because he is a powerful man. He led them out there. He never seems afraid, only sad and now curious, aware that she is alive.

She thinks of the other cadet, the one who was lost, his voiced radioed into the bridge until the end. He tumbled through space, not crying but breathing as if crying, and her captain called him son and wished him Godspeed and the cadet answered with urgency that he saw a rose opening so slowly, only one petal at at time and there must be his mother’s house at the center.
She thinks maybe it was the blood
exploding behind his eyes like faulty engines
or maybe he was really swallowed
by the flower at the center of the universe.

And maybe it was the same for the cowboys
maybe as they died of thirst, miles away from home,
wandering off down some trail that seemed
clean and true and trustworthy, but abandoned them,
their backs against the yellow stones on the yellow floor.
Maybe the stars opened like poppies
and swallowed them home.

They see the other ship and someone screams,

*Fire!*

She just wants to be special
enough to be rescued.
She wants never to be beyond rescue.
She wants to be a hero and yet
she wants the universe to remain unaware
of her presence. She doesn’t know
what she wants.
The Song Of The Mob

There was a rule that we could not gather
in groups greater than two or three.
So, we stood in corners, whispering.

A few walked in between, trading bits of stories,
so our conversations became patchwork quilts
made of our neighbors down the street, around the corner and
(who knows how far we stretch)
up the mountains of legend where fires walk like men,
the temple where people worship the moon,
the towns with men and women the size of children;
to the lands where heroes lead men like us to slay dragons and giants.
I have never seen these things, but I have heard
such stories.

All we know is that we stand here.
Those who have come before us have worn their footprints into the floor.
No matter how we long to be heroes
we are trapped between the unstoppable force of our past,
and the immovable object of our future.

Every generation is the same.
To defend our parents’ footsteps
we live and die in one moment of violence.
Then we appear again, quieted,
continuing the same conversation,
speaking wordless, gesturing to the air,
until we see our brothers have been thrown to the ground
and no one was listening.
Waiting For A Letter

This week I am waiting
for an important letter.
This week I dreamed every night
I tried to save children and failed.
They were shot on a perfect schedule.

When I was a child a man held a lit cigarette to my arm in a crowd
at a state fair. He looked at me while it burned and I said nothing
because I believed in the adult of him, and later
because I knew everyone would be upset
and I feared the uproar. I had a plan
which did not include this. I just wanted
him to finish and move on.

Even now, when I think of the word trauma
I never think of this. Sometimes it is like a curtain
moving in the corner of my eye when I think
waiting. Does he think of me? Is his apartment
gray and lit by a tan lamp in the far corner behind
his small TV, his easy chair upholstered in something like the burlap
my mother put over winter roses? I hate

waiting for an important letter. I hate
thinking there is something out there
connected with me, in some flawed and significant way,
that I do not know.
Eulogy For Spirit And Opportunity

The rovers are dying on Mars.
Their springs and bolts and cogs drop
into the red sand.
Their cameras clog with dirt. Their wheels freeze.
They limp up hills and spread their solar panels
like hospital blankets.
The technicians do not tell them
about the budget cuts, or the questions of purpose.
They say, everything here is fine.
Write if you find water.

That is progress, and progress
isn’t supposed to be sad
or happy.

Progress is a spiral.
It’s the movement around a planet
forward which is also backward.
Progress is Lewis and Clark
who could have died in a ditch
in the forest of Who-Knows-Where
and no one would have ever known.
Progress is my great grandmother
willing the ship to float,
her mother’s silver spoons sewn
into her jacket lining, which hang
over my grandmother’s stove. Progress
is remembering. Progress is being told.

Remember always the Mars rovers.
May we travel so far; as far as we can.
Till our joints fill with the dust of strange places,
and our signals struggle back to our old ruins,
assuring those we left behind,
There is still no end of the world.
Twelve Ghosts Of The Family

1.
We have driven ten hours to my grandmother’s house.
We brought the truck, to pick up the blue chair.
*What chair?* She asks us.
My mother whispers *I wish your grandpa was here,*
but I barely remember him.

2.
In the bedroom my grandmother gave me,
I cannot sleep.
In the corner Easter baskets stuffed in white
trash bags squat at the foot of the rocking chair
like fat and lazy ghosts.
I don’t know why she took them out.
Easter is so far away
and there are no children left in our family.

3.
I always sit between my mother and her mother.
I do not involve them in the same part of the conversation,
like children kept in different rooms.
I chat mindlessly about poetry or boys or television
and no one can get a sharp word in edgewise.
I am careful not to mention my grandfather,
so no one has to sigh about him,
like a practiced benediction.

4.
My grandmother makes me think of death
even if I don’t want to. I think my grandmother
would use arsenic if she had to kill someone.
Something clean and inoffensive to the palate,
my tiny shaking grandmother who still flirts
with waiters and the boy who bags her groceries.
It wouldn’t be in the food. She barely cooks
anymore and when she did it was
a matter of pride. No. It would be in the tea
or the coffee. It would be mixed into the air.
We would never know.
She would hang our bodies in the closet.

5.
The dumpling ghosts wake me, crying,
*The radiator is broken*
*or something. Anyway the air isn’t right.*
*Come fix it.* I answer
*I don’t know how to do that.*
They blink at me with their crinkly eyes.
They ask, *Where is the man who used to sleep here?*
*Dead.* I tell them. *He doesn’t live here anymore.*
*Ahh. We should have known.* Anyway
*you don’t have his eyes, that wet concrete color,*
*And he could fix anything.*

I get out of bed walk around the house.
I open drawers and look in the closets.
my grandfather’s coats are gone
replaced by my grandmother’s coats.
I am glad she has put his things away.
I am glad she is claiming the house as her own.
I am glad she will not let my grandfather stay
like the dust on the bedroom mirror, like a body
in the closets.

6.
I know it is things that keep her here
– the attic ghosts, the basement ghosts –
the needing of things, the holding-on-to-ness.
The green plaid couch, the torn chair, the rusting stove.
There isn’t even food in the cupboards.
I try not to wonder how she takes care of herself,
or even what she does all day, in this creaking house.
She is like a tree, watching over trees.

7.
My grandfather had gray eyes.
My grandfather carried German shrapnel in his left shoulder.
My grandfather looked a little like James Dean.
He sat on the green couch and watched us play.
I can’t remember a single thing
he ever said to me. I remember
he put central air into our farm house
the day before my sixth birthday, by himself
to make us all happy, but maybe
someone just told me that.

8.
The ghosts tell my grandmother stories.
The ghosts rewrite her history.
It drives everybody crazy.
My mother says, *We brought the truck
to take the blue chair,*
and my grandmother says *I want that chair.*
*No, you don’t. You called me and told me to take it away.*
*Oh no say the ghosts. That chair belongs here.*
*Oh no says my grandmother. I don’t remember that.*

9.
We drive to the store
to buy things to put in her kitchen.
We try to buy things that don’t need boiling water
or knives, or won’t go bad, so we don’t have to call
everyday, and ask if she is eating.
I notice all the streets are named after things
that no longer grow there,
elm, oak, chestnut, cedar,
like my mother and her mother
have the name of a man who no longer lives
anywhere.
*That’s very clever* the ghosts agree.

10.
There probably aren’t actually any ghosts here,
I think, when it is late and I am trying to sleep again.
I can hear my mother yelling at my grandmother
because I am not there to stop them.
I know my mother can’t stand her mother’s fragility,
her putzing about. My mother is a strong woman.
My mother raised a strong woman.
We can own trucks and move chairs and write
all about ourselves all by ourselves.
The next morning my grandmother whispers to me
with no ghosts in her voice at all
*Honey, when you love somebody
do not fight about nothing. Never do that.*

11.
I cannot write in my grandmother’s house.
Everyone wants to know what I’m doing.
*Fixing the radiator!* I yell
and then they leave me alone.
Except the ghosts, who won’t stop asking
about the radiator.

12.
At dinner I took his seat at the head of the table on accident. It was empty and my mother turned to me, and my grandmother, and the ghosts, and the curtains and candles and silverware, and waited for me to do what I should do, and I looked at the thing that they were passing around. It was a silver platter full of bricks. I wanted to dump them to the floor and say, *Stop speaking to each other like you’ve swallowed arsenic!* But I passed it on.
Voyage Dans La Lune

The night NASA shot rockets at the moon
some guy dropped his hand against my knee,
just long enough that it couldn’t be an accident,
and went home with someone else.

Poor moon. I can be no comfort at all.
I can’t tell you why some guys move themselves 5.6 million miles
just to kick up dust.

Moon, when I was younger I thought
you were like a beautiful woman
with light under your skin.

When I was older I understood
that rockets have things they want too
They say: If I was a nuke baby
I’d tear you apart and let you see
the universe, but I’m not so maybe
I’ll just shake you up.

Maybe you just miss the lunar landing.
That was nice, wasn’t it?
To be touched by something
that wanted to know you? I grew up
hearing about it, like a fairy tale
which happened because everyone believed.

It must have been so much better than
being wounded and cold and stuck
orbiting this same – this beautiful planet,
its countries, full of aspirations
that keeps shaking us to pieces.

Just the other night
one of them said to me, if I was younger, darling,
I would break your heart. And I
wanted him to. How stupid is that?
Today the news told me that 26% of Americans believe the world would end in 2012. I’ve known since I was six, sharing the living room with my father’s collection of Mayan antiquities. Sometimes he would wander in and tell me 
the Mayans made circle calendars – the last one ended in 2012. Why then? I don’t know sweetie. You can only plan so far. Maybe they didn’t know what was going to happen next.

Also, their gods have pointed teeth, Women wore tiny vials of mercury around their necks to cure syphilis? What’s syphilis? A disease you get when you’re naughty. Naughty? Um. Orange fiesta-ware is ever-so-slightly radioactive. The Mayans had radioactive pots? No. No. This was much later.

And in that living room, instead of my algebra I discovered that I could spell my name in a calculator; that the numbers added to 26. And that number plus the year equaled 2012 And who wouldn’t be a little bit concerned?

In high school my friends read palms. I have a tiny lifeline, which forks oddly, like a snake tongue. What does it mean? I asked. Mostly they thought I would die, early, sometime in my twenties. I hadn’t given up religion yet, but who wouldn’t be a little bit concerned?

I would like someone to tell me everything or something – even a little something. I would like to see no evil in tea leaves or the way I drop a coke bottle into the street on my birthday and it is crushed to a corpse by tires. And who wouldn’t… just a little bit…? Is it so bad to want to know, even if knowing is terrible? 2012 sits on my table like a fiesta-ware bowl.
The Only Love Poem

My priest used to tell me, when you are in love, you will understand everything. You will be transubstantiated and be one with a golden power, shot through with a holy matrix of blood and sound! Or something like that. And he was probably talking about god and saints, but I listened because I wanted to be a saint!

When love finally came it was more selfish – more everyday. One day my love came home with a newspaper. There was a story on the cover about a private business that was building a tourism industry for space travel and I smiled. Another time with a gold necklace in the shape of a leaf. For no reason! This was the sort of thing I thought happened only in love poems.

And in that moment I thought about this girl I knew who slept with this boy I liked with piano player hands, though she loved the Spanish-eyed waiter. Though none of those things was really love, she assured me. We only use each other. Love was so bourgeois, anyway.

And I thought about my mother who arched eyebrows at love, who said protect that heart, kiddo. Tie cinderblocks around your neck so you don’t get carried away. Tie your love in bags full of elephant teeth to keep it company, and bury it in the sands of Neptune, which are deep and blue. Or something like that.

I will never go to space, don’t like gold jewelry, He only wanted to make me smile, and I did.
New Years Resolution

Surely this year the space ships will come,
and I resolve that I will be the first in the glaring light and danger.

I will not cry and stare at the cosmic dinnerplates - No!
I will stand as the door opens like a silver tongue

and the aliens will walk out like frightened deer,
and reach out to me, a strange creature, as we would to a cat

or anything with teeth, and they will love me
because I was the first to touch them, though my hands were shaking.

And in biographies and history books there will be nothing
about learning to cook, or vacuuming, or jogging every other Tuesday.
Locks

When we moved the bed
I found the hair tie underneath. And I knew
who it might belong to.
They all have nice smiles and long hair.

There is at least one man I will never
tell him about, not to keep that man
like a chest buried in a field,
but because he might think
he is equally replaceable,
or that the silver growing in his hair
like weeds, or a careless word, or an unkept floor
might trigger a similar revolution.

I want to believe he keeps his past lovers too
starving in some oubliette of his mind,
and the kingdom is safe.

But I found this - the black roots
snarled around the dark elastic loop,
like a sign at the edge of the forest,
*I came here before you,
and I cannot tell you what is ahead.*