Rag and Bone: Poems

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This dissertation titled
Rag and Bone: Poems

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ABSTRACT

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Rag and Bone: Poems

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The dissertation is divided into two sections: an essay titled “Lyric Intoxication” and a book manuscript titled Rag and Bone: Poems.

“Lyric Intoxication: An Invitation to Ecstatic Reading” presents an original critical framework that seeks to clarify contemporary usage of the term “lyrical” in poetics. Drawing on Romantic theories of music as that which creates frenzied or intoxicated feelings, this essay posits that conventional definitions of “lyrical” overlook the important role of reader response in the creation of a poem’s meaning. The essay also proposes that elliptical and fragmentary effects are useful methods for cultivating the state of lyric intoxication in readers.

Rag and Bone: Poems is a collection of poetry that explores the themes of ruin and rejuvenation. The poems fluctuate between fabulistic narratives rooted in the folkloric tradition and extended meditations on surprising scientific factoids. They feature speakers in various states of despair who find solace in the wonderous inventions of human imagination, as well as marvelous discoveries from the natural world.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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“Prima Donna in Her Heaven” / *The Literary Review*
“For Emily, Who Came Sometimes to Watch the Rain” / *Conduit*
“Still Life” / *Nimrod*
“The Strange Girl Asks Politely to be Called Princess” / *Burnside Review* and Versedaily.com
“Paul Klee’s Puppet Theater: Mr. Death and Electrical Spook” / *Bat City Review*
“A Nice Girl” / *Willow Springs*
“Other People’s Children” / *Mid-American Review*
“The Fawn” / *Lake Effect*
“Great Aunt Marie Died” / *Smartish Pace*
“The Visible Spectrum” / *The Literary Review*
“You Are Afraid of the Dark” / *Poet Lore*
“Want” / *RHINO*
“In Praise of Attachment” / *Southern Humanities Review*
“Juan Valverde de Amasco” / *Barrelhouse*
“Real as the Panda” / *Florida Review*
“Olm” / *Bateau*
“The Edge of Reason” / *Artful Dodge*
“The Sound of Music” / *Cold Mountain Review*
“Rag and Bone Man” / *Redactions*
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CHAPTER 1:

LYRIC INTOXICATION: AN INVITATION TO ECSTATIC READING

In an MFA seminar somewhere in this country, a group of graduate students has just finished reading “Ladybirds” by Larissa Szporluck.

*Brilliance is a carcass
on a snow-white beach.*

*Envy never sleeps.
I tell my children truthfully:

*a long red beard is breaking
from the darkness scale…*

*He’s chasing you because
you’re new. Because he’s old

and sees the town in dirty tones:
violet sheep and wine-dark…*

Many of the students love this poem and wax rhapsodic. “What an incredible image,” one proclaims of the long red beard breaking. “Such evocative phrasing,” another says about the town’s dirty tones and violet sheep. “I don’t ‘get’ what a ‘darkness scale’ is,” says another, “but I like how it makes me feel. I mean it’s just so *lyrical.*”

*…corn. He burns the evening
rainbow like a wartime bridge

until its charred and charlatans
topple out of robin eggs

and pox your happy window
by capturing the ledge

and chattering like X-rays
that crash into your flesh.*

In another MFA seminar somewhere in this country, a group of graduate students has just finished reading a poem by Larissa Szporluck. They are befuddled and frustrated
by their befuddlement. “What is poxing your window?” one wants to know. “What do the X-rays have to do with charlatans toppling from eggs?” asks another. “And then for no good reason she just starts talking about a rainbow,” a student laments. “I mean, really, a rainbow? This poem is just so lyrical.”

As a student in MFA seminars not unlike these, I was taught that poetry comes in three modes: dramatic, narrative, or lyrical. This kind of categorization is usually dubious, but especially so when it contains a term like lyrical, which mocks lexicographers and spits in the eye of taxonomists. The textbook definition is frustratingly broad. A New Handbook of Literary Terms describes it as “a pure or true poem, one removed from more worldly rhetorical uses,” suggesting a poem is lyric if you think it is a poem. The word can be used in a matter of fact or historical way, hearkening back to poetry’s origins in song but more often, especially in off-the-record conversations about poetics, lyrical is used as a compliment or a nose-wrinkled expression of disdain.

Though critics tend to avoid such vernacular uses of this term in their published writing, Mark Halliday, a writer to be admired for his approachable and feisty essays, provides some good examples of how shifty this word can be. In “The Arrogance of Poetry” he describes a cheesy line in what he considers to be an otherwise good Nick Flynn poem as “suspiciously lyrical.” Elsewhere, without a hint of suspicion, he describes himself as a member of “the lyrical and/or narrative mainstreamy team.” Marjorie Perloff, in her response to New Definitions of the Lyric, an anthology that revels in the maddening proliferation of uses for the word lyric, sums up the situation, writing, “Whatever the word lyric connotes in the late twentieth century, there seems to be a consensus… that the ‘new’ lyric is no longer governed by romantic norms.”

Clearly, lyrical is a big concept, with many definitions, but I think contemplation about how we currently use this word in casual conversation reveals much about what is good in contemporary poetry, regardless of whether you use the word lyrical with a sighing hand on your heart or your finger down your throat. Moreover, I like to compliment (almost as much as I like to disdain), so I would like to use this word, but with a better understanding of what the complimenters are complimenting or the disdainers disdaining when they call a poem lyrical. I would like to compliment
Szporluck’s startling and resonant lines like “wine-dark corn” and “pox your happy window,” as well as her creation of a haunting echo in my belly that I cannot explain, but like the students above, I am also flummoxed by the meaning of these images and question whether that uncertainty is a desirable effect. Though I do not aspire to explicate every elliptical poem that crosses my path, as a member of the tiny sliver of the population who claims to “get” poetry, I would like at least to be able to speak frankly and clearly with my comrades in this sub-sub-culture of people who care enough about poetry to bother with praise or condemnation.

_The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics_ reminds us the Greeks first used _lyrical_ as “a generic term for any poem which was composed to be sung.” Sappho, for example, strummed a lyre in accompaniment to her verses, so we call them _lyrics_. Since her words survive (at least some of them), but not the sounds, we call her lyrics _poetry_. And since it was the case that short songs accompanied by lyres tended also to be intimate confessions of love, for a time the more nuanced definition of lyrical was “a short musical poem containing personal expressions of love.”

Despite the historical significance of those earliest lyrics, very little of Sappho’s work remains. The origins of lyricism are reduced to just two nearly-complete poems and a handful of shreded papyri that for centuries were nothing more than stuffing in the jaws of mummified crocodiles. Longinus and Aristotle, among other Greek scholars, alluded to her talent centuries after her death, which is one reason archaeologists, after spending thirty-five years combing through the buried trash piles of Oxyrhynchus, were ecstatic to find just a few more of her lines.

The text of “Prayer to My Lady of Paphos” is one of Sappho’s lyrics that survives nearly intact. In it we can find an echo those earliest musical stirrings:

_Dapple-throned Aphrodite,_  
_earernal daughter of God,_  
_snare-knitter! Don’t, I beg you,_

cow my heart with grief! Come,  
as once when you heard my far-off cry and, listening, stepped
from your father’s house to your gold car, to yoke the pair whose beautiful thick-feathered wings
doaring down mid-air from heaven carried you to light swiftly on dark earth; then, blissful one,
smiling your immortal smile you asked, What ailed me now that made me call you again? What
was it that my distracted heart most wanted? "Whom has Persuasion to bring round now
"to your love? Who, Sappho, is unfair to you? For, let her run, she will soon run after;
"if she won’t accept gifts, she will one day give them; and if she won’t love you -- she soon will
"love, although unwillingly...." If ever -- come now! Relieve this intolerable pain!
What my heart most hopes will happen, make happen, you yourself join forces on my side!

Though in this translation by Mary Barnard the musical accompaniment has been lost to time and the poem’s formal structure lost to the logistics of translation, the lyrical properties of an intimate voice whispering its passions, as if to herself alone, in the reader’s innermost ear remain. Pleading with the goddess of love to sway the heart of her beloved, Sappho exclaims, “Relieve this intolerable pain!” From the private corners of prayer, the speaker confesses to her capriciousness – more than once her “distracted heart” has called those “beautiful thick-feathered wings… down from heaven.” She does not find meaning in this relentless passion, or relief, or absolution. The poem is not an
occasion to figure out the answer to a problem, it is a cry of pure feeling, intended, it would seem, only for a goddess’s ears, though the audience would have been invited to sing these private words to themselves while weaving or bathing or picking grapes.

In the ensuing centuries, the lyric became increasingly divorced from its origins as music, per se. The Romantics, with their egalitarian interest in capturing the voices of everyday people began to whittle away at the formal conventions of rhyme and meter. Then the modernists blew up what music remained. This is not to say that poems from later periods are without music, but that, relative to other effects like tone, imagery, narrative, etc., sound effects are only a part of a poem and it seems disingenuous to call them *lyrics* and confusing to describe them as *lyrical*. But we continue to do this, even for poems that lean more heavily on the narrative or dramatic pillars of poetry than the lyric.

Consideration of Sappho’s changing influence provides some clues for why we might continue to experience contemporary poetry as *lyrical* when no one, except maybe John Cage, could possibly play an accompaniment to them. The will of the Church combined with the passing of centuries were remarkably effective in reducing Sappho’s poems to objects of myth and dream. Nine volumes of her poems once existed, but, due to the lesbian themes in some of her lyrics, the Church destroyed all copies that could be found and medieval monks did not copy her work for posterity as they did for so many other ancient writers. Sappho’s influence on the poets of the Renaissance came not through her work, even in its fragmented form, but through the portraits the Roman poets painted of her. Ovid, among others, described Sappho as the lyricist who threw herself off the Leucadian cliffs for the love of the ferryman Phaon. Stobaios Florilegium recounted that “Solon of Athens heard his nephew sing a song of Sappho’s over the wine and since he liked the song so much he asked the boy to teach it to him. When someone asked why, he said, *So that I may learn it then die*” (qtd. Carson xiii). It is from this mist of imagined lines, imagined subjects, imagined effects woven into the fragments of extant text that *lyric* is born.

Though contemporary lyrical poetry is an art form without pitch, harmony, syncopation, or melody, it remains connected to the Sapphic tradition via that throw-yourself-from-a-cliff feeling of emotional intensity that has become the definitive thread
that ties lyrics in antiquity to contemporary lyrical poetry today. Nietzsche, in an effort to explain why great music was more than sound, provided a useful and increasingly relevant description of lyric poetry, which proposes lyric poems are more than song lyrics sans music. He argues that the lyric poem allows readers to access the World Will, a noumenal ream beyond the world of appearances. Access to such awareness requires an excess of frenzy, a state of ecstatic intoxication he termed variously as “drunkenness,” “a horrible witches’ brew of sensuality” and “wanton abandon.”

In “A Chapter on Ears,” the nineteenth century essayist Charles Lamb describes himself as a man without ears, because of this wanton, frenzied effect music has on him. He begins by expressing his conviction that music has brought him much more “Pain than pleasure,” before beginning to wax poetic about the musician who:

\[
\text{in his power, to inflict more bliss than lies in her capacity to receive, impatient to overcome her "earthly" with his "heavenly," —still pouring in, for protracted hours, fresh waves and fresh from the sea of sound, or from that inexhausted German ocean, above which, in triumphant progress, dolphin-seated, ride those Arions Haydn and Mozart, with their attendant tritons, Bach, Beethoven, and a countless tribe, whom to attempt to reckon up would but plunge me again in the deeps, I stagger under the weight of harmony, reeling to and fro at my wit's end: —clouds, as of frankincense, oppress me...}
\]

Though he may find music painful, the reader also discovers in Lamb’s overwrought descriptions the deep catharsis such emotional investment in art can provide. This emotional investment is not unlike the intensity of reading and writing, Lamb acknowledges. It is like being asked:

\[
\text{to gaze on empty frames, and be forced to make the pictures for yourself; to read a book, all stops, and be obliged to supply the verbal matter; to invent extempore tragedies to answer to the vague gestures of an inexplicable rambling mime.}
\]

The effort leaves Lamb weary and grateful for the simpler pleasure of the beer his hosts provide at the end of a concert, but his purple prose protests too much, and leaves many readers envious of his capacity for “inexplicable anguish” in response to the art. Because of its potential to push enthralled readers outside the stifling linguistic limitations of laws and mores, Nietzsche suggest lyric poetry provided one of the few
mechanisms aside from instrumental music for entering that transcendent state. “The lyric poet effectively create[s] a musical mood in his audience, inducing an emotional or affective disposition that [is] so all pervasive in its intensity and generality that the poet and his audience become intoxicated, dispossessed” (Allison 50). Unlike other verse forms, whose obvious artifice allows for a veneer of verisimilitude the audience can become lost in, the lyric requires constant critical engagement on the part of the reader. The lyric form invites writers and readers to imagine a language that is not bound by the socio-historical position of the poem’s author, but reveals a reality beyond such semantic limitations.

We have seen how Sappho, in Barnard’s translation of her most narrative and confessional piece, creates a frenzied lyric speaker. However, other fragments reveal how even disjunctive poems without a single psychology narrating events can create that musical mood in a reader. The predominately broken Sappho available to our time is one whose power lies in her perfect incompleteness, in the invitation to imagine the perfect poem beyond the page. The contemporary poet, Anne Carson, who is also a classics scholar and translator of Sappho, has remarked that the brackets, the punctuation marks used to indicate the poem’s missing pieces “are exciting… brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure” (Fragments xi) and adds that the legends surrounding these fragments form “a sort of antipoem that condenses everything you ever wanted her to write” (xiii). Whatever supporting role fragment 38 once played in a greater poem, it comes to us now as a three word expression of pain and ecstasy and, most profoundly, mystery. “[Y]ou burn me” Sappho writes, and we do not know why, but we feel in the silence surrounding these lines the heat of our own desires emanating off the imaginary poem each individual reader invents to surround this fragment.

Conventional wisdom suggests more of a good poem and more context is better, but Carson’s translations demonstrate that lyric fragmentation can allow a piece to provide more of an experience by inviting greater reader participation in the text. Fragment 67A has more text, but is even more disjunctive, because the papyrus was damaged mid-line. What’s left starts each thought, but leaves space for the reader to complete the idea. What “this” has inspired the speaker’s anger towards a “ruinous god”? 
What has the speaker, who foreswore love, now done and why? There’s much room in these brackets for readers to fill in their own faith and heartbreak, and to then feel in the end as if 2500 years ago Sappho knew us and wrote these poems for this moment.

_and this__

ruinous god

_I swear I did not love__

but now because

_and the reason neither__

nothing much

Readers may also choose to read straight down the page, ignoring the brackets, and reveling in the stuttering voice of a postmodern speaker who “did not love” “this ruinous god” “but now because” of some unspoken reason, something ironically described as “nothing much”, the speaker has turned back to faith. In this reading as well it is the effacements of time that create a noumenous, intoxicating silence.

Though Sappho is typically considered the mother of the lyric tradition because of her personal expressions set to music, as evidenced by her few intact poems, the intoxicating effects of her lacunae are much more relevant to the intoxicating lyrical poems that dominate the contemporary poetry landscape. This is not to suggest that disjunction and fragmentation are the only avenues to lyric intoxication, but that the pleasure of reading those contemporary poems that flit between narrative and image, associative logic and logic logic might be compared to the pleasure of experiencing a fragment created entirely by historical accident.

Somewhere in this country a poet is on an airplane and the woman in the seat next to her wants to know why it is that contemporary poems are just a barrage of images. Somewhere in this country a poet’s mother has just finished reading her child’s latest poem and asks with great concern why she can’t ever understand poetry. Somewhere in this country a class of undergraduate poetry students is applauding John Barr’s outrage with contemporary poems that are “neither robust, resonant nor… entertaining,” as well
as his suggestion that “the ubiquity of the lyric poem today… is another sign of poverty in the art form.”

These readers, trained by mass media to receive the art they pay for, have perhaps never experienced lyric poetry’s capacity to evoke what Nietzsche called frenzy and Baudelaire termed intoxication. They have not considered poetry might be an entry point to a Dionysian cult of lyric ecstasy. They might object that a Dionysian cult of lyric ecstasy sounds elitist, needlessly academic, and ecstatically overeager. They would not be wrong. It is absurd to engage with poetry on emotional and intellectual levels that require capitalization and allusions to nineteenth century philosophy. But to suggest that poetry in this time and place is not already an exercise in the absurd is to be naïve.

So let’s throw ourselves off the cliff. What does lyrically intoxicated reading look like? Anne Carson’s poem, “Essay on What I think about Most,” which is as narrative as it is lyric, provides an example of how readers might approach poems that rely on a more fragmented logic. In the first stanza Carson writes, “Realizing you’ve made an error brings shame and remorse./ Or does it?// Let’s look into this.” The speaker goes on to discuss Aristotle’s writings on error, an ancient Chinese proverb, and one of Alkman’s fragments over the course of five pages of grammatically and syntactically standard meditation. Let’s look into her reflections on Alkman fragment 20 as an illustration. She begins by citing the fragment:

[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not.

Carson suggests in this poem a mathematical error can be found that is intended to evoke the hunger pains of a Spartan life. She writes:

*Alkman’s poem breaks off midway through an iambic metron
with no explanation
of where spring came from
or why numbers don’t help us
control reality better.*
Her reading then goes far beyond just this accounting of Alkman’s aesthetic veneer. The title of her poem indicates the presence of psychological interplay between the writer’s private experience of the fragment as it connects to her particular existence and the fragment’s public communication with a general audience. But she also allows Alkman’s poem to work on her, and writes with increasing frenzy:

There are three things I like about Alkman’s poem
First that it is small,
light
and more than perfectly economical.
Second that it seems to suggest colors like pale green
without ever naming them.

She reflects on how Alkman’s fragments have taught her that “poetry is the willful creation of error and even pokes fun at other Classics scholars with lines like “as you know the chief aim of philology/ is to reduce all textual delight/ to an accident of history” and mischievously suggesting that fragments may have been exactly what their authors intended. This poem-essay convincingly argues that “errors” are essential components of a poem that wants to authentically illustrate the human condition. In fact, the poem argues this point so convincingly that readers begin to forget that this poem is not really meant to be about poetry at all — it is meant to be a poem about personal, individual error.

The title, “Essay on What I Think about Most” places the piece firmly in the confessional tradition launched by those intact Sapphic lyrics, though this speaker is quite reluctant to confess the particular error she is obsessed with. It is in this elision that we can find the influence of Sappho’s lacunae. Carson teases the reader with near confessions like “On the brink of error is a condition of fear” and “Realizing you’ve made an error brings shame and remorse”, but just as Alkman’s poem has a question mark where the name of the one who makes seasons and hunger should be, so too does Carson’s poem have an implied set of brackets where the “I” should be. To admit one’s errors causes those painful emotions – fear, shame and remorse – and one common response to error is deflection, which this poem does quite adeptly. This poem’s length is
another clever elision – what could possibly be missing from these five pages? With Sappho, we know the speaker is burning, but we do not know why. With Carson, we know the speaker is red-faced, but again, we do not know why. Instead, we watch the poem dodge and repress, and we experience her subject even more intensely than we would if the context were complete. While Carson’s written words play a prosey symphony for the public’s ear, the reader feels emotional crescendos of guilt and shame mounting in the privacy of her own chest, brain, and spleen. Carson’s poem, like Alkman’s, is *lyrical*, not because it is musical, but because it makes readers feel a truth that is greater than the meaning the words communicate.

We can see further examples of how contemporary poets use the intoxicating silences of associative logic in Mary Ruefle’s lyric poetry. In *A Little White Shadow* Mary Ruefle takes an obscure novel from 1889 and whites out passages of text in much the same way that a drop of water would have eaten the ink off ancient paper. A long paragraph is reduced to:

```
) one in ruins [ ]
) struck [ ] notes [ ] whose sounds [ ] spent a winter here [ ]
```

Though the “real” context for this poem is gone, the missing pieces serve to highlight the sense of loss and alienation the remaining text expresses. Read “one in ruins” and think, “I feel ruined.” Read “struck” and feel “struck.” Read “notes” and hear notes, read “spent a winter here” and hear those notes ringing across the silent, snow-covered page echoing the psychology of “one in ruins” and reminding readers how precious a few bits of authentic expression can be, given how much of what we are ends up buried, muddled, or unexpressed entirely.

But a poem needn’t use the form of fragmentation to invite the reader into its ellipses. In “Permanent Loan” Ruefle writes:
Bring me a coffee mug from a house
where no one has died. Bring me
an eggbeater, the scissors,
and a very ripe plum.
I am going to make you a toy.
When you play with it,
in my heart I open my sad eyes
and stare.

Not much is elided with the statement “Bring me a coffee mug from a house/ where no one has died.” The reader knows that there is no such house and that very likely the speaker sits in a house where someone has died quite recently. But then the speaker asks for an eggbeater, scissors, and a plum. Why these objects? No critic could say with certainty, and that inexplicable particularity is part of the line’s appeal. Its resonance derives from a reader’s willingness to experience in response to such an inexplicable list an upswelling of whimsy and absurdity, a willingness to feel like a child who has just discovered she can open the kitchen cabinets. How appropriate then that Ruefle returns to the more narrative explanation: “I am going to make you a toy.” But why should playing with that toy cause a speaker to “open my sad eyes/ and stare.” There is a chasm of feeling between one line and the next that cannot be explained, a chasm as wide perhaps as the distance between childhood’s makeshift toys and the emptied houses of adulthood, but the intoxicated reader agrees to fall with the poet into that sad-eyed heart and feel in concert with the speaker of the poem.

Such a reader doesn’t read to escape this world, but reads to enter into it more deeply. When faced with an elliptical text, the intoxicated reader allows the language of the piece to trigger their own meditative reflections and subconscious associations. The ellipses in the text are filled in through their own participation, and thus the reader does not escape into the piece, but becomes a co-creator. For this reason lyric intoxication is not only a source of pleasure for those who sing its praises, it is an avenue for the reading public to resist participation in the twenty-first century’s entertainment industrial complex. More than fifty years ago, in their remarkably prescient essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer suggested the market that generates and profits from popular culture has, with typical
capitalist appetite, devoured virtually all forms of artistic expression. By convincing the consumer that all art should be entertainment as well, a tyranny has emerged that leaves the body free, but attacks the soul, with the result that all soulful expression smacks of the hegemonic system. Even efforts to resist such a system still require submission to “purposelessness for the purposes declared by the market” (158).

Because of lyric poetry’s intoxicating effects, it is one of the few art forms that has resisted “the refuges of a mindless artistry” that “loses sight of any goal and is little more than a magic lantern show for those with their backs to reality” (143). Adorno and Horkheimer excoriates the culture industry for its efforts to unite personal desire with public performance, lamenting that such an endeavor can only turn the human being into “a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the culture industry. The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion” (167).

They saw the early stages of a system that would pressure all artists to turn their art to commodity, and reduce genuine expression to pure entertainment. Because the writing of drink poetry requires disengagement from ambition, avarice, and violent passions, Marty Roth suggests in his review of anacreontic or drink poetry, “the burden of anacreontic poetry had always been private pleasure rather than public achievement or duty” (325). John Barr asserts, “The human mind is a marketplace, especially when it comes to selecting one’s entertainment,” but the lyric, with its traditional stance towards an individuated exploration of the outer reaches of consciousness is, by its nature, in a state of tension with the impulse to compete in such a marketplace.

In this age when literature is just one more avenue for escapism, when readers ask that their writers first and foremost entertain them, and treat emotional transport and authentic connection as some kind of bitter pill to be washed down with a spoonful of plotline, it’s understandable that poetry, lyric poetry in particular, has a hard time finding a place in the pop-culture juggernaut. It seems natural to many to insist that writers adapt to the reading public, and while there may be merit in such efforts, there is also merit in
asking readers to let their guard down and be transported by the language of poetry as they allow themselves to be transported by the sounds in music.

*Lyric*, then, though disassociated from its original musical origins, describes poetry that achieves a musical effect on readers through a variety of linguistic techniques. Just as great music provokes an upswelling of ineffable feeling in its listeners, lyric poetry similarly affects its readers. This is not to say that all lyric poetry is good, or that feeling is the only standard we might use to determine that a poem is good. Different readers will have different levels of tolerance for lyrics stripped more or less bare of narrative and dramatic scaffolding, but in using this definition perhaps we can invite our mothers, travelling companions, and students to read poems not for meaning but for intoxicating effects. And though some of us will find some poems to be entirely too reliant on imagistic associative logic and others of us will grow weary of extensive explanations and narrative elaborations, perhaps we could agree to celebrate our shared delight in the narcotic effects of the ubiquitous lyrics that mark this poetic age. Perhaps we could share W. S. Merwin’s poem “On the Subject of Poetry” with the woman next to us on the plane and say, “I do not understand the world, Father.” Perhaps we could say,

*By the millpond at the end of the garden*
*There is a man who slouches listening*
*To the wheel revolving in the stream, only*
*There is no wheel there to revolve.*

We could say, I feel my own childhood in the uncertain sound of the word *Father*. I see the wheel and then I see that there is no wheel, and I feel things are not what they seem. I feel uncomfortable, nervous. Don’t you?

And when the poem ends with the lines:

*I speak of him, Father, because he is*
*There with his hands in his pockets, in the end*
*Of the garden listening to the turning*
*Wheel that is not there, but it is the world,*
*Father, that I do not understand.*
We might add, I don’t know what I don’t understand, but I know that I feel within a burgeoning mystery and faith in that mystery. I’m not sure if there are words for this feeling other than Merwin’s words.

Those who are suspicious of lyricism might point out that celebrating the ineffable and inexplicable means celebrating pretty much anything anyone throws on paper. Who is to say that an image makes any sense at all? Who is to say that an image isn’t utterly cliché? Does it even matter if a lyric poem is senseless or cliché? I would answer simply, yes, it matters. It may not be possible for a critic to do a close reading that effectively explains why a poem makes you feel an emotion you can’t quite name, but that does not negate the pleasure such a poem can offer to a reader who finds he or she is not alone in feeling this way.

Other may feel uncomfortable with the idea of becoming intoxicated. “Isn’t that a poisoned state?” they may ask. While most of us are quite comfortable entering into a frenzied or ecstatic mood while listening to a piece of music, so many years spent reading poems while sitting in straight-backed desks arranged in rows has led us to expect an Apollonian sense of sobriety and order from poetry. But lyric intoxication, for many, serves as a counterpoint or even an antidote to narcotic intoxication. Jacques Derrida has written that writers and addicts alike, weary of the marketplace their minds have been turned into, reject civilization through an insistence on cutting themselves off from objective reality. Both react to insufficient outlets for a need to seek and transcend — “When the sky of transcendence comes to be emptied, a fatal rhetoric fills the void” (19). Lyric intoxication certainly provides a preferable door to the sky, since such engagement allows one to seek transcendence while maintaining one’s participation in the project of civilization.

Merwin’s poem “One of the Lives” illustrates how a poem can provide a way out of civilization, and also simultaneously, back into it. It is a poem that is thick with narrative context and extensive explanations like,

*If I had not met the red-haired boy whose father had broken a leg parachuting into Provence to join the resistance in the final stage of the war*
and so had been killed there as the Germans were moving north
out of Italy and if the friend who was with him
as he was dying had not had an elder brother...

However, at the center of all this context is great silence. If not this, and if not this, and if not this, the poem rambles on until the reader has forgotten that she is reaching for a “then,” and only feels herself reaching for she doesn’t know what. Then she is given a “then”:

...I would not have travelled so far to lie shivering
with fever though I was wrapped in everything in the house
nor have watched the unctuous doctor hold up his needle
at the window in the rain light of October
I would not have seen through the cracked pane the darkening valley with its river sliding past the amber mountains

But the “then” does not really resolve the thought, because the language fragments at the moment of transcendence into the image of a river sliding past the amber mountains, and even more inexplicably into plums that “fall in the small hour / thinking I knew where I was as I heard them fall.” But of course, due to the fever and the war he does not know where he was, just as we do not know where we are in this poem. The sky has opened up and plums have fallen out of it, and we have transcended the fatal rhetoric of war and entered, with the speaker, a state of spiritual communion with a world beyond our fragile bodies and the fragile social systems those bodies seem to require.

Unlike those under the influence of the narcotic intoxications of the entertainment-industrial complex, the lyrically intoxicated reader doesn’t read to escape this world, but reads to enter it more deeply. One of the great pleasures lyric poetry provides readers with is the opportunity to engage in the process of creation with the writer. Just as those long white fields of margin in a fragment invite contemplation, lyric poems, even when they are very narrative, are also fragmented expressions that beg the reader to enter fully and experience deeply the edge of the mind where words fail and emotion takes over.
CHAPTER 2:
RAG AND BONE: POEMS

The Ragged Edge

In 1963 and again in 2001 a scientist attached a monkey’s head to another monkey’s body one blood vessel at a time.

When you get right down to it, the lab assistant says, nothing could be simpler.

The disembodied brain runs on the machine of a decapitated trunk, and if you say

the word awe doesn’t come to mind, you’re a liar.

What was it like? For the monkeys no one can say.
The severed nerves hang loose, resulting in near total paralysis.

But the mouth could still bite the hand that tried to adjust a tube running into its flared nostrils. And it did. Which was evidence of a tremendous success –

one sign of life is the defense of whatever body you have left.

A primatologist finally caught on video a family of chimps swinging in ritualized arcs over a great waterfall.

Her voice wavers in the background as she narrates, “Apparently lost in contemplation, the chimpanzee cries out, runs excitedly back and forth and drums on trees with its fists. Here we see the dawn of awe and wonder.”
Human rituals tend to involve putting things together or taking them apart.

In church I learned that through sacramental sex (married, blessed, sanctioned), you see the face of God. Another thing I learned was the body is a vessel for sin – try to forget you have one.

Once upon a time a severed head was knitted to a ragged neck and the only pictures are in black and white.

You can’t help but recoil, to use the words horror or vulgarity. It’s not unlike staring at pornography –

what you see is never quite what you wanted.
The doctor’s shadow obscures the stitched line where you thought you’d see how one became the other.
Two of the bad girls from the neighborhood got drunk, climbed the fence into the Botanical Garden to skinny dip, and drowned.

My brother said the koi pulled them down. Their funerals were closed casket because of what the fish did to their faces.

This was at the pond with a zigzag bridge where my brother gave a push and said not to cry, to be such a pussy.

The zigzag prevents evil spirits from giving chase. Evil spirits like the kappa, who is the size of a ten-year-old boy.

Sometimes he sucks the flesh of a girl – her shoulder, her wrist – a nip. And sometimes he sucks her whole life out with heaving breaths. Don’t believe? Play a game of pull-finger with the face swimming in the water and just see

if he doesn’t drag you in. For a quarter we could feed the koi bread crumbs, which is how they’d grown to the size of possums.

I threw the pieces quickly and looked away from the clamor of fleshy pink yawns jostled by waves and slick bodies,

but still felt the fish set upon my skin, mouths everywhere, dark water closing in. If the kappa has stolen your daughter, there is little to do. But if she is your precious daughter, your only one, try carving her name into a Yubari melon. The kappa may make the trade,

or he may keep both fruits. According to Freud, the child who wishes to join society must repress the memory of infancy’s
unfettered genitals. The kappa never forgot. When he comes, your only chance is to bow and bow. He cannot resist your manners,

even though the crown of his head is an indented bowl, even though he knows it’s the clear broth of his brain spilling into that cold, dark water and its gathering fish.
Gene-splicing the beetle-resistant Basillus Thuringiensis with a potato sounds surgical, but it’s just a matter of firing a .22 shell dipped in DNA solution at the stem straggling out from the russet eye. If you’re lucky the hybrid sticks. Have you seen what can be done with tobacco and fireflies? Just for the hell of it, whole Virginian fields now glow under the passing planes. Salmon-tomatoes clutch their fishy gloss against the pinch of frost. I think I’ll give it a try. I have the gun you gave me. You said I’d feel better if I held it awhile. I feel better, and I’m not giving it back. I’m firing shrimp into pigeons and dipping the de-veined crescents of their wings in cocktail sauce. Thinking of you, I made peppermint termites to sweeten the swarm, and larynxed the rats with mockingbird calls. I shot scorpion tails into the fighting fish, and now I’ve made a bullet of me to blast into your amber eye. Will you come out simpering like a girl? Eager to perform your vulnerabilities? Will you recoil at the site of a baited hook? Or will I pass right through imploding flowers of viscera without having scratched a rung on your double helix? I’d wager you could arch each disaffected synapse without even noticing me careening through about to hybridize the brick at the other side of your exit wound. Give a stone a language chromosome and it’ll run with words like water. It’ll announce in spray-painted letters that it hearts you, that it can’t live without you. That it would rip out its own mortar just to think you might take a concrete crumb to jingle in your empty pocket as you remember what I used to be.
In the Vegetable Garden

Fence to fence all is pea vines trellising up the walls and pumpkins strewn across the paths. The bountiful grid turned tangle, so lush a small child could be lost in the tomatoes, come out stained red and pulpy a decade later calling me Mom in a new, deep voice, the same rooty timbre used by the carrots who raised him. And I would kiss him all over, remembering too well how his pale little boy legs dangled over my arms, already too big to hold.
Translations

I want to believe we can’t see anything we don’t have a word for.

When I look out the window and say green, I mean sea green, I mean moss green, I mean gray, I mean pale and also electrically flecked with white and I mean green in its damp way of glowing off a leaf.

Schiele’s Green, the green of Renaissance painters, is a sodium carbonate solution heated to ninety degrees as arsenious oxide is stirred in. Sodium displaces copper, resulting in a green precipitate that is sometimes used as insecticide. When I say green I mean a shiny green bug eating a yellow leaf.

Before synthetics, not every painter could afford a swathe of blue. Shocking pink, aka neon aka kinky pink, wasn’t even on the market. I want to believe Andy Warhol invented it in 1967 and ever since no one’s eyes have been the same. There were sunsets before, but without that hot shocking neon Marilyn, a desert sky was just cataract smears. I want to believe this.

The pale green of lichen and half-finished leaves filling my window is a palette very far from carnation or bougainvillea, but to look out is to understand it is not, is to understand what it is not. I stare out the window a lot. Between the beginning and the end the leaves unfolded. I looked out one morning and everything was unfamiliar as if I was looking at the green you could only see if you’d never known synthetic colors existed.

I’ve drawn into myself people say. We understand, they say.

There are people who only have words for red and black and white, and I wonder if they even see
the trees at the edge of the grass
or the green storms coming out of the west.
There are people who use the same word for green
and red and brown, and I wonder if red
seems so urgently bright pouring from the body
when there is no green for it to fall against.

In his treatise on color Wittgenstein asked,
“Can’t we imagine certain people
having a different geometry of colour than we do?”

I want to believe the eye doesn’t see green until it has a name,
because I don’t want anything to look the way it did before.

Van Gogh painted pink flowers, but the pink faded
and curators labeled the work “White Roses” by mistake.

The world in my window is a color the Greeks called chlorol.
When I learned the word I was newly pregnant
and the first pale lichens had just speckled the silver branches.
The pines and the lichens in the chill drizzle were glowing green
and a book in my lap said chlorol was one of the untranslatable
words. The vibrating glow pleased me then, as a finger
dipped in sugar pleased me then. I said the word aloud
for the baby to hear. Chlorol. I imagined the baby
could only see hot pink and crimson inside its tiny universe,
but if you can see what I’m seeing, the word for it
is chlorol. It’s one of the things you’ll like out here.

Nineteenth century critics mocked painters who cast shadows
in unexpected colors. After noticing green cypresses do drop red
shadows, Goethe chastised them. “The eye demands
completeness and seeks to eke out the colorific circle in itself.”
He tells of a trick of light that had him pacing a row of poppies
to see the flaming petals again and figure out why.

Over and over again Wittgenstein frets the problem of translucence.
Why is there no clear white?
He wants to see the world through white-tinted glasses, but all he finds is mist.

At first I felt as if the baby had fallen away like a blue shadow on the snow.

Then I felt like I killed the baby in the way you can be thinking about something else and drop a heavy platter by mistake.

Sometimes I feel like I was stupid to have thought I was pregnant at all.

Color is an illusion, a response to the vibrating universe of electrons. Light strikes a leaf and there’s an explosion where it lands. When colors change, electromagnetic fields are colliding. The wind is not the only thing moving the trees.

Once when I went into those woods I saw a single hot pink orchid on the hillside and I had to keep reminding myself not to tell the baby about the beautiful small things I was seeing. So, hot pink has been here forever and I don’t even care about that color or how Andy Warhol showed me an orchid. I hate pink. It makes my eyes burn.
Once in the trees lived a minotaur
who could not understand the language of leaves,

even though he was an illusion made
of their shadowy green. Even though he spoke
to himself in the broken accent of twigs.

When the wind blew the leaves flailed
their arms against his thatched snorting.

When the wind blew he bent over them,
devoured them, and grew. He grew

over the fire escape and down the brush
alleys, gathering into himself the tree-lined
avenues and boulevards. The minotaur grew

until the leaves’ mercy, their shushing word
please, was forgotten entirely. Silence
and the beast’s creak ragged winds.

He howled for more leaves but he was
the god of them, the body of them.
His broken bellows were unappeasable.
Prima Donna in Her Heaven

For her birthday God’s daughter asked
Him for a mechanical golden bird,
but was given a garden under glass.
Here is some life, He said, for you to cherish
and to teach you responsibility.

Life oozed around on its green island,
smelling like vulture’s breath and waving
billions of fleshy tentacles at the sky.
The birthday girl thought it was a stupid toy
and she tried never to look at it.

Disappointment was a goat’s head hanging
in her stomach. In time politeness passed,
and she put the present out of her room to be
shattered or buried or sold at a tag sale. By then
everyone in the garden had forgotten her face.

A watchmaker steps out into the dawn.
The dome of sky is fogged with dew and in the tree
his nightingale cocks a golden head
with clicking blinks. A tinny aria chirps out
through the plum blossoms, then echoes back.
Beside Herself

The woman who could not pay attention fell in love, but could not remember. Was it with chipping brick or was it wrought iron trellis? And trellis or church bells or perhaps oxidized copper pipes was waiting to love her, waiting through the years she spent studying her fingers through closed eyes thinking only of her love, her overcast sky, her devoted cup of tin coins, darling dearest scarf with lavender fringe. She hardly even stopped to wonder why she could never hold on. It must have been the train schedule she was thinking of, the way every thought flips away before she can say departure or arrival. Or was it the wasp trapped by the glass? She thinks she might be disappearing. Everyone rushing past is careful not to touch eyes. Everyone reminds her of her love, her quartz-flecked concrete glittering like a cold breath rising into the sun, then evaporating into particles of nitrogen, oxygen, argon and the rest, which she can’t see to love, so loves instead their scattered
blue light, a halo fading out
into the vacuum of space.
We were a pair of lonely frogs.

She was afraid
of other children too,
and we were friends

when I could see her,
which was rare –

frogs are such solitary creatures.

Black crows above us settled on the tree.
The only view: night’s wings
endlessly preened. A frog can gulp,
but she cannot scream.

She liked breaks in storm
when light descends like fog
and we are caught

in a strata of sun
compressed by a fist
of ashen clouds, oil-slicked
asphalt shining like stained glass,

when, weary with pale existence,
that sun alights on every leaf.

I should have called them all to see,

but I was not that kind of child,
and she was not that kind of dream.
Still Life

How hard it is to see clearly.

Take this grape. It’s violet, but not quite, magenta, but not quite.

More the amethyst night of a lighted bridge when there’s a bit of dawn and you’ve been out late, lying in the park next to your best friend, and you’ve gotten that rustling feeling out of your chest for a minute.

Only not quite.

More the color of her coffin with its deep-wood shine carried under the stained glass as the choir sings, but no sound, as you sing, but no sound.

More the shade of that perfect quiet.

Only not quite so perfectly round, or perfectly dark, but reflecting the white light of morning on its shriveling skin as one last thing that was hers passes the plum shadow, the wrinkled fig, of your pursed lips.

And now where there was fruit, there are thorns. Not thorns exactly, but woody fingers, green tattered ends without name, more green than yellow, more green than brown, but not green, not exactly green.
The Strange Girl Asks Politely to be Called Princess

When the strange girl skips rope her hair flies
like a porpoise. She collects things that melt
and things that tick, circles and cubes
and checkerboards in a drawer

she can pull out from her navel.
Other children, alerted by the rumble
of marbles in her chest, chase her
across the field. She insists she is only

hungry, but they pin her down and open her
up. Cockroaches rush out and bullies run
and squeal, crushing carapaces underfoot.
She gathers as many as she can,

tells them she’s sorry there is no lock. She’s sorry,
but good children shouldn’t have secrets.
Paul Klee’s Puppet Theater: Mr. Death and Electrical Spook

Mr. Death was a present for Felix at nine. His plaster face is a rough and gauzy spackle, but mostly it is the yawn of black-cavern eyes and etched tread of charcoaled teeth. Mr. Death wears white burlap like a jazz funeral and was the only puppet in his box to survive the bombing, then the fire in 1945.

Ich bin der Tod und ess’ kein Brot
und trink’ kein Bier.
Da nift kein’ Bitt’!

Felix the boy played a game with the lights where he turned them off and turned them on and became happy and delighted.

Electrical Spook came after the war with a fuse for a head like a periscope that rises up to look around and blink its big lid. He also lived in a box and no one can say if his lightning body, yellow and red, turned dark when the top was shut.

Also in the box was Klee’s self-portrait, a puppet with extremely large pupils and a square face carved from a beef bone.

I am death and eat no bread
and drink no beer, Mr. Death used to say.

Electrical Spook would turn the lights off.

You must come with me!
Your pleas are empty, Mr. Death used to say.

Electrical Spook would turn the lights on.
Be willing or I shall use force, Mr. Death used to say, according to Felix, who is very old by now or dead by now, but remembers well the games he played when his father was still around.

Electrical Spook would turn the lights off.
These children who are not my children
smear the microscopic scales of a monarch’s
black eye across the greenhouse glass.
They pinch each other and laugh
when someone cries. The youngest traces
a tiger-striped wing and growls. He wants
to be a predator, wants to hear a story.
His mother wants me to keep him happy,
so I tell the one

where a gnome lived in the forest robber-barons devoured
to fuel their chimneys. Grass turned black and bluebirds
gray. Dewberries tasted like rotten meat and the hungry
gnome had nowhere to go but the city, where a boy he
knew once had grown into a man. But grownups seldom
remember their childhood friends, least of all the ones who
appear in winter smelling like refugees.

This moral makes the children
angry. They jump up to disagree.
They are the uncorrupted innocents
and they will remember everything.
A Nice Girl

I was traveling with a man I wanted
to love. It seemed ethical. When we got high
I promised to love him forever. He said
I was the best thing that ever happened.
He’d quit the cocaine but too late
to straighten a deviated septum. After the surgery,
his face was all bruise. If we’d stayed,
the doctor could have told him the skin graft
in his sinus was dying. Instead, we took off
with the painkillers to see some band in Miami.

Three days sleeping in the Coral Court Motel
and I wondered if love was nothing more
than the strength to be kind. He started
by kissing my ear. I smelled something, dead,
maybe in the furnace, or behind the wall.
I couldn’t concentrate when everything
was so rank, when the stench got worse
each time he leaned for my mouth.
He was tender and devastated,
sitting naked on the end of the bed. “It’s me,”
he said. “It’s me who smells rotten.”

But he couldn’t smell a thing. My cheek
prickled with the small stabs
of loose stitches. He couldn’t feel those either.
This was what I deserved
for following him in the first place.
A nice girl would have kissed him,
straddled him on that stained mattress.
She’d never have left him sitting alone
in a white plastic deck chair watching the tide
dump black seaweed on the shore
as he held a rag filled with ice to his face.
Gleeman

The tiny man in my chest juggles knives.
It’s an impossible situation. His tosses
slide right through my flesh, as if I were
water. I feel every serrated edge, but see –

She unbuttons her shirt to show the penny arcade nestled inside.
Drop a quarter in her palm and the red curtain rises
to reveal a gleeman on the empty stage.

No blood.

The tiny man looks tired. His shirt is wrinkled
and dirty hair hangs over his ears, but he’s very good.
He never takes his eyes off the audience. Never even glances
at the blades. Such balance!

I hate that painted face. And his hair.
I offered to trim it, but…
He pretends he doesn’t understand
his appearance reflects on me.

What a showman! The knives are circling in orbit,
and still he manages to catch one behind his back,
another between the knees.

My shrink says I’m melodramatic.
Mother always said I had a flare.
They think it’d be easy to pluck him out, but he hisses like a geek
and digs in his teeth when I try.

The juggling man smiles a little now,
revealing those chiseled white points,
and he adds an extra spin to knife #3.
She looks away and tries to swallow.

He’s never even dropped one.
I don’t think he’d know how.
He was made with that stainless steel
shine already in hand, already falling
into the white glove of an open palm.

She lowers the curtain and arranges her blouse,
eyes fixed on the audience, who has nothing
to look on now, aside from her face.
The boys in the hotel lobby saw they had black swan arms. Why? Because they were naughty, because they were more cruel than naughty, because they’d never shake such sadness.

Their parents were an unkind king and queen, but flush with devotion for their offspring. Come darlings, their highnesses said, there is a pet swan in the lobby, and if we ping her with quarters, you will see how a pacing bird with clipped feathers remembers her old feral rage. See her rear up from the water to bellow and beat her wings.

So the boys, by virtue of losing all but the meanest sort of wonder from their eyes, grew swan arms and flew through the skylight faraway into the city. Beneath them the glass fell sharp and fast. It’s a sad story, and I am mean for telling it. They were, after all, only children.
Before he became swan or bull
or fish or flesh, the old man
became curious. It was almost pitiable
how he whispered in every ear:
What’s it like, to be only here
and never there, to be one thing
and not everything, alive,
instead of everlasting?

It’s not so different than you’d think –
a clock tower on a hill at dawn,
its face glowing like a separate sun.
Mist smoking up from the river
as rain falls on the bridge, a hundred
statues of martyred saints and fallen
kings. We call ourselves dust,
but you can see we don’t mean it.
At the market they sell tourists streusel
and photos of a local boy eating streusel
on the stoop of an identical market –
a familiar pleasure, no doubt, collecting
postcards in shoeboxes that smell
like basements stacked high
with boxes in a basement
where splintered windows lean
on tarnished hinges. Dry leaves
pile up against the dust-coated view
of green grass and a dog sleeping
belly-faced to the sun, exhausted
from chasing his own tail,
but satisfied not to have caught it.
The Fawn

Because he’d broken out of the body, but still had a body, though the bones were making a kind of antlered arrangement out of it. The skeletal remains of this child, sometimes called the deer child, are troubling because I have an idea in mind for deer that this boy and his pain do not fit inside. Which is one reason to stare – to force the idea into some other shape and then feel it fail.

What I mean is that I picked up this book on deformities and it seemed an acceptable thing to do because they were ancient carvings of conjoined twins on the cathedral, wax models of a woman with a sort of tail growing from her forehead, photographs of a yellowed skeleton from the seventeenth century. The boy curiosity could not rise from a squatting position for two years before his death, his hydrocephelitic skull, the caption says, has opened like a flower, and this opening no doubt killed him.

A fawn lost half its face in our woods and three times I have tried to bring home the jawbone but dropped it in horror, too much like a dead live thing to hold in my live live fingers. As long as I didn’t touch it, I could believe dead and living are arbitrary distinctions.

An image of the body was onscreen again, only now the doctor is pointing at three new white streaks. Just a resident and so unsure, he says out loud to himself, That’s not a heartbeat. That’s just bone. He doesn’t want to tell me. Between the time I saw the heartbeat and now, the baby grew
three ribs and I felt strangely proud,
as if he’d just been given a blue ribbon
at the science fair or called a polite young man
by an old woman on the bus.

In school, the same school that displayed jars
of pickled fetuses from the early days of science,
Sister Leonida showed a documentary
about the Elephant Man. He taught himself
to read using the Bible and screamed
“I am not an animal!” which was why
it was so hard, at times, to look at him.

That classroom also had a skeleton hanging
in a back closet. Hearing it was not made
of plastic, I jumped my finger off the shoulder
like you would an open sore, and squealed.
Sister Leonida was irritated to explain
most skeletons in science classrooms
come from turn-of-the-century India.
How small the bones were, how long
he must have been hungry. Untouchables
often had no choice but to sell the bodies
of their parents and children. Could I imagine
how they might have pushed tears away
with the back of their hands
as a white man handed them money?

The body is not the person, but it so clearly is.
Staring at this boy relic, I want to feel
the calcified echo of his living pain,
but the mind can never hold still.
The irregular heartbeats of thinking: He lived,
he lived. And then I must think it again,
because he keeps turning back into a photograph
of honeysuckled bones. There was a time he lived.
Great-Aunt Marie Died

In her dark box she dreamed her life
over and over again. While we all kneeled
before the splintered wood, she was
turning four and the beach was covered
with shells and desiccated starfish.
Her mother shouted, *Don’t forget
to throw the live ones back.*
It would be seventy dream years
until she remembered gluing seashells
with me, until she’d hold a pink conch
cavern to my ear so I would know
how the spirits call across the waves.
I colored pictures in the pew while
my father prayed. Waiting to be born
back into my aunt’s long dream,
I was an abalone ghost, nothing
but an echo humming from the deep
hollows of a shell in her hand.
Gray is the sky, gray the hawthorn tree,
gray is the moldering of the vole,

the shrike’s face deep in stiffening prey.
Gray was the forest, and gray the sun.

It’s hard to hold it together when it rains
so hard the magnolia blossoms fall

like flayed meat and the phone rings
someone dear trying to rasp a few last words.

When there’s nothing to say.
A static of breathing, gray as the winter.

And it never passed. On a blue morning
the birds sing their rotten feeding.
You are afraid of the dark,
for which you blame the raccoons,
or more to the point, your father,
who took you and your mother
into the night with a flashlight
and shotgun, then left
with both, while you held
her shaking hand. You
would follow your father
to the end of the world,
those distant birch woods
where raccoons rustle
and flash their green eyes.
His gun was firing
into the persimmon trees
and the rain of leaves and ripe fruit
fell farther and farther,
until only the crackle
of his shots and the distant baying
of the hounds could be heard.
The raccoons came then
to hiss all around:
he left you, he left you,
and now you are ours.
I came too from the wine-dark sea, walked naked on the black-ash sand. Who can say how I came to be here where the child-curious wind bruises my fruit-peeled skin? From the thistle-scrub shade I watched myself walk out of the ship-wreck sea. And I was the wine-dark woman walking out of the sea. I had always wanted to be a bruised-fruit woman coming to land, and I was she. Body-locked,

I could not remember my far-off shape, only knew, standing on the black-ash sand, that I could see a woman walking out of the water, wanted to be a woman walking out of the water, did not want to be anymore a pigeon-wrung dove-slut drying in the sun like a thistle-scrub shade, did not want to hang by my neck over the gore-slick grass swaying in the child-curious wind. I did not want to be anymore a fruit rotting over suitors’ graves.
Lunaria

Also called moonwart
because the seed pods
are frail and white like
paper moons. Also called
money plant because
the dry blooms look
like coins hanging from
a tiny tree. It grows wild

near the rotted porch
where a woman comes
to sit and watch leaves
blow through the lunaria

all along the ghost of a blue
house her mother had kept
clean of drifter wildflowers
also called weeds. A woman

whose mother’s garden
has succumbed to the rustle
of brittle moons
has the look of a child

lost at the fair such a long
time she falls asleep on a bench
under her jacket, which is how
she wakes up on the porch

in the lot of lunaria scolding
with dried paper voices,
It’s January! Zip up your coat
before you catch cold.
The Abandoned House

Luck is a mean-hoofed beast,
likes to catch you by surprise.
The lonely girl in the manor began making wishes,
which is how Luck was called down
from the forests of the mountains and into
the geometry of her estate.
He crept to her keyhole and hung
on every whispered word.

If Luck comes to your house,
you must be so careful
never to say the name of what you love,
or he will think you’ve grown attached.
You must never call, even in sleep,
for a quilt or curtain or sagging cellar beam,
or he’ll make certain nothing is left
to name but shingles
and tar buried in the weeds.

I once kneeled at the door
when he was at the other side.
Any lonely girl can tell you
how his eye in the keyhole grows
darker and deeper until it becomes
a thorn in your brain begging Blink!

And then you blink it all: keyhole,
key, brass knob, weathervane,
chiffon skirt, combs of mother-of-pearl,
mother, father, spotless pane of glass,
bluebells in the grass.

The key in your pocket will rattle sirens
as he skips you down
the cracked concrete road.

It’s exactly what you wanted.
You’ll think yourself unfettered,
but Luck has driven one nail
into the sole of your shoe,
hooked the other end of his string
to the broken teeth of the attic window.
He’ll never let go.

Did you think they’d take you back?
Luck will want to know.
Did you think they even could?
In Praise of Attachment

Things to win off the devil include: his charm, his sass, his perfect tan, his fiddling hands, his silver tongue, his tricky cards, his straight face, the thorn in his thumb that never lets him forget, his guppy floating sideways in the bowl with one eye up and one eye down, his tricycle, his bicycle, his crackerjack ring, his Barbie, his prom dress, his ballerina on point atop the number sixteen, his passionate crush on a boy who doesn’t know he exists, his string-tied packet of letters from an ex, his twelve-pack, his six-pack, his hash and his pipe, his lighter, his match, his firebrand eye, his precious things, his cherished things, anything you ever desired, anything that ever turned your head. He’ll put it all in for the chance to cleave your soul – and by yours I mean mine, and by soul I mean you’re not even sure you have one to lose, but when he tells you it’s a bet worth making, that’s the god’s honest truth, because knowing what you had when it’s gone is cold comfort, but comfort nonetheless.
He is the anatomist most mocked by the experts for drawing a vagina that looks like an inverted penis.

It is the perfect example, they say, of cultural conviction triumphing over direct observation.

But I look at these drawings and think, here’s a man who believed in love above all else.

We’re lost for each other and this is how the body should be.

Of course nothing fits together that easily.

In Sex. Ed. our teacher drew on the blackboard a face-shaped uterus with fallopian tubes and ovaries sprouting from it like feelers. She named the creature Peter the Bug.

We were allowed to ask anonymous questions and she felt free to speculate.

A guy who drank enough fruit juice probably would have punchy semen.

Because Catholicism is a religion of mysteries, she was a paraplegic nun who pushed on a joystick to move her wheelchair up and down the aisles.

The hallways of the convent were lined with her paintings of roses in bloom.

When the anonymous question was asked, she told us she had once been able to walk. The homecoming king begged her to marry him.
Why did she become a nun? I simply loved God more, she said but wasn’t ashamed to admit

that once sitting in a pew behind a mother,
a father and their three children, I couldn’t stop crying.
I thought a lot then about leaving the order,

but everyone lives with regrets – you’re wrong
if you think losing your virginities will spare you that fate.
Horror aside, I appreciate your candor. Who could believe in the textbook’s neon liver, its hot pink lung? But your sketch of the hanged man, limp in his noose, holding his own meticulously labeled organs as they spill from his gut like flowers dissecting themselves to death – I can relate. And no one would deny the accuracy of an athletic young soldier gripping with numbered tendons the dagger he has used to flay himself, how he stares into the sheet of his old face. There was a man once, who said he couldn’t bear to love me. I was just one more attachment to grief. He tried to meditate on my decay, to visualize the worms who would carry my skin off one ripening mouthful at a time. He said it as the only way to see through the brain’s vice grip. Is it natural to be so afraid? I wonder, Andreas, what became of you. Dead of shipwreck in 1564, but did they find your body? Did they even try? Are you the curious skeleton holding another man’s skull in your bare-knuckled hand? When you said that genius lives on, could you already feel that alpine wind creaking through the timber of your spine?
My grandmother is a hard woman to love.
She calls my mother a Judas
then cries when we leave so nothing
can be held against her. She was blessed
by the Virgin, so she has to live,
but she does not have to let my mother
roll her wheelchair into the sun.
She does not have to try.

In Portugal, the Virgin appeared
to three children. It was 1917, the Great War
was raging. The children were hungry
that year she came to them in a cave.
My grandmother kept these clippings
wrapped in wax paper under her bed
where my mother and I found them as we
packed up and sold her house against her will.

The villagers did not believe the children
until they went to the mountains
shrouded in mist and saw the sun leaping
“a macabre dance in the sky.” Two years later
two of the children were dead and it was left
to the third to write down the secrets of Fatima.

When she fell, my grandfather couldn’t lift her,
so he lay by her side all night,
then called my mother in the morning.
He hoped it wasn’t too early.

There were three prophesies:
The next war would begin under a banner
of celestial lights. Russia would be consecrated.
A man in white surrounded by throngs
would be shot on a hill.
When the pope was shot and lived,
he went to Russia to give blessing,
to Fatima to give thanks. He left the bullet
cut from his side at the altar. The children
would be saints, Fatima a shrine,
where my grandmother would go on the only
trip of her life. She walked the hill and prayed
to survive the operation. My grandfather
tied pads to his knees and prayed
at her side over sins he wouldn’t want me to say.

The miracle of Fatima is nothing
but cryptic mumbo jumbo. When we visit
my grandmother lies in bed with her face
to the wall. We sit in the dark and I tell her
about the blue bridesmaids’ dresses as my ring
makes a prism across her cheek. She wants
to know why I will not leave her in peace.

Outside, valerium turns brown in the yellow grass
and I think of my mother, a girl once
in leather shoes, kicking leaves and feeling as sad
as she’s always been. When I was young
she could tell me – I wouldn’t understand.
But I knew. I knew about the leaves,
and she didn’t have to say, but I knew too
about the smell on the air as the wind
strips through those fragile, breaking twigs.

Now it is my job to take the girl
who swallowed a box of pink pills to the hospital
and hold her down as the nurse threads
liquid charcoal into her throat. It may or may not
be my job to dial her mother at 2 a.m. because this
is all the girl asks for when she has finished
the vomiting. Mom is high too, and they cry
across the line that they don’t want to do this anymore.
Charlie, who works the night shift, likes to say it doesn’t matter if Mom put a nail up a kid’s nose, if you let her, that kid would drown himself swimming across the river home.

It must be a terrible burden to know however you touched your baby when she screamed, that thread will needle up for eighty years and more.

Before he went to Fatima, the Pope went to a prison to hear the confession of his thwarted assassin. My grandmother saved the picture from *Time.*

The man in white places his trembling palm on the head of a frail man trembling on his knees. A slant of light shines through the barred window onto the intersection of papal hand and sinner’s hair. My mother unfolds the clipping for me to see. She says this is the Calling, the Mystery of Forgiveness. She says even if I don’t believe in miracles, I must believe in this.
My mother was already alive when the panda turned real. It was 1950. They caught that Chinese fairy tale in a net and brought it to the San Francisco zoo where children like her couldn’t help but ask, *Will they find the dragon too?*

And today a scientist on the radio reports that there are lakes and rivers in the ocean, currents of pale blue running their own ecosystems through the dark fathoms. She says, of course, there are sensible explanations for everything, but this is so much like a miracle to see, you must remind yourself it’s all minerals and water. Also, they say, there is the grizzly: never a body found dead in the wild of natural causes. Gunshots and car accidents, sure, but the grizzly who has crawled into the primeval deep to die –

only the strings of sinew are found, which are easily mistaken for spider webs lying in a heap of dew. Things can turn so real, maybe even this is true: the ribbons of the body that tie a gypsy’s soul across heaven and earth are cut beginning with the headstring. But nothing solid is dead. My mother’s cheek is not cold or stiff or sagging. That was just a dream from the bottom of the ocean, where fish glow like lightning bugs, and even this has a scientific explanation.

My mother knew the name of every miracle. Creatures that live in the dark are sometimes filled with bio-luminescence, she said, as she dismembered a firefly and molded the corpse into a ring for my finger that would glow for whole minutes.
The olm, akin to the salamander, can be found deep in Eastern European caves. The olm, akin to the salamander, is pale pink and just long enough to curl around your wrist one time.

Once an olm was mistaken for a baby dragon. Once an olm was put in a jar of water in a cold cellar and left there for 100 years.

An olm can survive in a cold cellar for at least 100 years.

The olm, akin to the salamander, is blind, like so many cave dwellers. If it could see, it would see by the light of the albino crayfish who would see by the light of the pale pink olm,

which we see by the light of our fire’s red sparks and orange glow that send the olm, slick as its kin the salamanders, slipping under the waters of the cave creek, a slipping so smooth and small it sounds like nothing more than one wet drop from a stone.

And the flapping of the olm’s stumpy arms and feet make ripples that brush the cold lime shore, ripples that stretch like one more wet drop falling deep in slow
pursuit of the olm.
The Edge of Reason

The narwhal: Arctic whale with a long narrow tusk extending from its muzzle. Think, if a fish were a unicorn.

Correction: Not a tusk, but a double-helixed tooth protruding through the upper left jaw into the forehead and out for open water.

Hypothesized evolutionary advantage: Offense and defense.
Hypothesized evolutionary advantage: Lick your finger and hold it into the wind, thrust your tusk into the passing current.
Hypothesized evolutionary advantage: Plumage, after a fashion.

Metaphysical consideration: The monoceros is a mythical horned whale monster; the monodon monoceros is a narwhal is real raises the question: Anymore can you believe anything isn’t?

Bagging the narwhal is no mean feat. The first priority is to harpoon it in the brain lest it escape to die with a bellyful of arrow on some other shore. Second priority: harpoon it only after inhalation, lest in death it sink to the ocean floor.

Moral ambiguity: Given the value of their tusks, can you retrieve those filigree teeth from the poached exhales lost and littering the deep to sell on the open market?

Queen Elizabeth I held a narwhal’s tusk for a scepter. One reason: When someone guts a child’s sweet dream that you might have the bone to cherish, you should cherish that bone.

Question for the broken-hearted: Can you transcend these small-minded similes of pity to rejoin that great mind of being? Would it help if you could feel how gently your wet flank would brush the others and then slide away as you dipped and surfaced, surfaced and dipped, that dumb tooth you hardly think about jutted off into who knows where?

View from the port bow: A dozen dark backs undulating wavelessly through the mist. The Queen said poetically: These are the great diving beasts of a deeply held breath.
When I tell you I love the song “Edelweiss” you have to understand that even though I too am a sophisticate who scorns musicals, I was once a little girl who stood in my grandfather’s living room singing, Cuckoo! Cuckoo! while he sipped his scotch and laughed at my preciosity. And when I sing the lyrics in your ear – Small and bright, clean and white, you look happy to meet me – you have to understand my grandfather only ever had one friend, a jeweler who also drank scotch, and left his $10,000 Rolex to my grandfather, who wore it even though it turned his wrist green, wore it to the funeral, where the daughter sang in her ethereal voice. Blossom of snow may you bloom and grow, bloom and grow forever. She couldn’t take her eyes off the casket. You have to understand that my grandfather kept spinning that heavy gold around his wrist, and when he raised
his voice to join in, he cried
to sing it. *Edelweiss, edelweiss,
bless my homeland forever.*
He walks the ornate bridges of your city,
picking up junk from the bins behind
the flea market, reciting to himself
old poems children don’t read anymore.
Even you, who enjoys poetry, haven’t heard these.
It’s enough to make you want to follow him
to a hovel where bowls overflow with brass
doorknobs and rusty keys line the walls.
Roots of a sycamore have buckled
the foundation of his driftwood house.

He will carve that meddlesome tree into a boat.
You can come, but he will be the captain
and steer the trunk through the foaming surf.
It’s a dangerous proposition. His eyes have
faded to the whites and the coin collection
alone would drag his vessel to the bottom
of the sea where pale faces hoard last
desperate breaths. Still, you must never
abandon a ruined thing. Take this dull knife –

Say it’s the one your grandfather used
to cut the twine from winter hay, the knife that fell
to the dirt and the rain, the one you thought
you’d never see again. But here it is,
and all you ever lost is resurrected from rust.
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