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A History of Bones

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL, UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A HISTORY OF BONES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Amanda C. Hosey

2012

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis written by Amanda C. Hosey, and entitled a History of Bones, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Asher Milbauer

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Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 27, 2012

The thesis of Amanda C. Hosey is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2012

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A HISTORY OF BONES

by

Amanda C. Hosey

Florida International University, 2012

Miami, Florida

Professor Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

A HISTORY OF BONES is a collection of lyrical and narrative poems which examines the interconnectedness of humanity through recurrent physical images—bones, blood, hair, etc. These images reflect the commonalities of the human race at the most basic level by pointing to the unavoidable fate all living things share. The poems build on popular culture, politics, world history, and mythology to show the universality of human “baggage”. As the title poem says, “We carry all our histories with us where we go.” Over time, and all over the world, people exist as history collectors amassing experiences, both shared and unique, to which they must surrender and accept as parts of themselves.

The collection is divided into three sections, which move from “local history” to “national history” and, finally, to “global history.” Poems in the first section, “Five Acres,” focus on personal history, including the history of the American South. The section title poem, “Five Acres of Pine Trees,” uses the scenery of the heavily-wooded land of rural Alabama as a means to discuss both the absurdity of invisible boundary lines and the wars which arise in relation to them. Poems in the second section, “Domestic Dream,” examine various ideas associated with the United States, such as modern

politics, the country's history of wars, post-post feminism, domesticity, and identity. The section's title poem is a persona poem which follows the speaker from a kitchen to a fantasy world of fishing on a remote Greek island and back to real life. The collection's final section, "Ode to the Globe" simultaneously pans out to encompass various cultures, languages, world regions, and points in history while pinpointing the emotional strain of carrying one's histories. This section's title poem imagines a character in love with the idea of world cultures, languages and historic places, who obsesses over these things, but views them through books, rather than personally encountering them. All three sections are braided together by the shared emotions of all peoples: nostalgia, regret, anxiety, hatred, passion, and longing.

Thematically A HISTORY OF BONES shares elements with the work of Janet McAdams who often examines a single forgotten moment in history told from the perspective of a semi-removed speaker. The poems within the collection often depend on vivid, carefully attended details reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop and Adrienne Rich. The poems also are influenced by e.e. cumming's frequent word creation. The poems in the collection, however, are most influenced by the work of John Rybicki, specifically his third collection, *We Bed Down into Water* and the oddly juxtaposed images found in his work.

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SECTION ONE:

FIVE ACRES

A HISTORY OF BONES

The sun rose slower behind us because we traveled west,
running from the light, greedy of night seconds,
and let the gas tank go dangerously close to empty
because to stop meant morning finally would catch up to us,
pressing against car windows until it draped us in its heat.

Jefferson Davis Highway spread out far before us
honoring the South's inability to cope with change,
an asphalt knot tying together two states,
and we talked about Davis and whether we should celebrate him.

You thought it moot since it's history
we can't ever live down,
but I couldn't understand how you found irrelevance
in our neighbors binding themselves to a war
lost a century and a half ago.

Quiet found its way into the car as we crossed over
the barrier line into 5 a.m. for the second time,
and I was thinking of secession and time machines

You were beside me picking antebellum houses as we passed,
houses where we might lay out a garden
to fill with fresh peas we'd simmer for hours
only to chase away the earth flavor by burying them in cornbread.
Mouths around the table calling me "Momma."
Saying, "Momma pass the tomatoes; Momma this pork chop is dry;
Momma you look so tired."

And I was admiring the towns that proudly proclaimed "Unincorporated,"
not because I wanted to join in their separation,
but because I knew what it meant to think you deserved autonomy,
to stand outside of something you're so much a part of.

Cotton fields seem dead at the harvest, brittle stems
holding white globes of dark Southern history,
and I know you're right, we can't leave any of it behind,
especially with it bobbing in the surface of our present.
And I imagined myself behind the wheel
on this road hemmed with trash and stray cotton

that grabs onto passing tires to travel away from here.

Pictured myself driving this stretch alone
with that quiet, always so much closer to silence
than the quiet that lives between two people.

Out in the fields I saw irrigation machines for the first time in my life
and knew instantly their purpose, sprayers bent down in prayer to the dry earth.
The long arms of them extending—no, looming over old battle grounds
where Union and Confederate blood mixed
to fertilize the roots of cotton plants.

And inside me now I feel a part of you tying us inseparably
to bones and blood, a heart
binding us to each other as fiercely as we are
bound to this land and the past that stalks us
out into the cotton fields or leaps into our beds
reminding us we carry all our histories with us where we go.

CONVERSATION WITH DEATH AT 26

after Mary Cornish

Again you run your fingers through my hair
to wake me in the middle of the night.

It's 3 a.m., and you're tracing the veins of my skull
with your tongue. You say, "Solve this: 32-26."

When my father was alive, my parents made \$2 dates, played
Galaga, one of them firing while the other worked the joy stick.

I must tell you, your sand in my brain, the spill of it, is too much
rush and fall for my ears to take.

And in sleep, my mother moves her hand to the cadence of spaceship firings,
with the vibrato of imagined quarters following a hollow track.

I hear your voice—it sizzles—says, "Six. Six years remain."

THE PINK POEM

for Vaudry Greene

Sunday:

My mother votes for red—red but not roses—says it again
and again, reverts back to the ignored baby sister.

Brenda wants anything but yellow, yet every time someone points,
she shakes her head: “No. Too fancy. Momma was never fancy.”

And the color argument ensues.

“But pink matches the dress she picked.” “Well she didn’t like pink until she was sixty.”

“All this pink will start to clash.” “Every single thing doesn’t have to be pink.”

“We’ll take this, but with the flowers in pink.”

Judy, always my future mirror, cuts in, takes control.

Monday:

The flowers do just what they’re meant to do—
sit on my grandmother’s casket, fresh and pink, while mourners flit bee-like
around her, talking in whispers.

Until they speak of jobs and money and my flight south,
and I assume everyone has forgotten she's there,
though I still can see that pink-cheeked face from the pew.
But I notice I'm not saying her name now either
because my mouth has said, "enough."

Tuesday:

I can't get even one tear out for her and know I must be damaged.
Selfish emotion comes as I imagine me in my own mother's place.
Before they close the lid on my grandmother's pink dress, I kiss her forehead
to show my youngest cousin and nieces and nephews lined up as steps
that it's okay to love the dead, but secretly her frozen flesh scares me,
"What kind of stone does her head resemble?"
And as they carry her out the side door,
I remember when she took me fishing behind her old house
and the ripples moving across the pond as we skipped rocks, smooth and pink.

VISITING SMITH LAKE, A MANMADE RESERVOIR

The stones deliver a secondhand-sunburn to my feet bottoms,
soldering me to the red rocks here at water's edge.

From this spot the lake spreads like a tear
pulling everything to its liquid mouth.

Soft pink soles urge me towards the water
I'll never allow my skin to skirt because I know
what exists beneath the murk.

Ten years ago, I slipped from a dock into water,
saw the snakes lined up down the shoreline,
saw their tremulous mouths spit and curse.

At my feet I could feel death,
the cold tongue of it on my toes—
could feel it appeal to my sense of sinking.

They say people took clothes and lamps and all the things
they worked their whole lives for.

Say they took government money and drove
as far as it would take them, to Birmingham or Memphis.

But in my mind no one left at all, even as the dam gates opened
on the land below, the residents remained

immersed in daily life—
birds flitted around the yards,
blue collars headed to work,
lovers picked cloud shapes
as the dark water blotted out the sky
when the water devoured Fall City.

When the rain didn't come last summer, I looked out
over treetops with curls and stretches of once-oak fingers
reaching high for old oxygen lives.

And I saw the green cross of a church steeple—
rooftops of two dozen houses all pushing their peaks
from the liquid surface, reminding me
the city still waits where it drowned.

Sometimes I picture residents suspended, cold-preserved.
A wax man holds a hoe to his weedy garden.
A woman forever reaches toward her child's outstretched hand.
A frozen Labrador grimaces at his chain locked to a water oak.

Sometimes I know them in change's grasp,
mutated merpeople at home
in the dirt and float of daily life.

They mow their grassy sludge lawns or
mend shirts using needles threaded with lake grass.
Comment at times on the lack of shadows
in their underwater world.

I see a darkened face drift just under the emerald screen.
Close my eyes and wonder
what chimes sound like submerged in lake water.
What wet cotton smells like ready for harvest.
Fear if I dived down to the houses below,
I never could force myself back to the surface.

WHAT I CARRY TO BED

I hear I was all that kept you
from bridge edges,
but I don't understand
how I could tether you to this world.
If I imagine the mother I know,
imagine you on floors
soaking in vein-burning poisons,
I hang my head low.

I pull covers over my face, and I am my father
in a 1985 morgue. But I smell flesh and breath,
and I wonder how much you know about decay.
Do you know that by now, my father's box is all but empty?
But bones deteriorate more slowly.
I can picture bones now deep
beneath stone and fresh cut grass.
I dream of softening bones locked away for safekeeping.
Dear Mother, you should know: a quarter of a century
can't erase the skeletal calcium.
His bones wait. Wait and ask,
"What of me carries on?"

You claim I carry parts of him in me,
but I know only that he loved you,
that he laid down beside you at each day's end until
late one night he rolled over to kiss your face
then the lines entering his brain broke like dark levees
and covered the back of his bones in blood.

I know only that he loved vegetables
in a garden that now grows brown with crab grass.

I know so little of anything of him,
how can any piece exist within me?

But somehow I'm certain, if I could dig down
into the soil that envelops him, I'd know
his bones the moment I touched them.

GRAVEYARD BLUES

after Natasha Trethewey

The heat forces my pores to drip sweat--
my body with some agenda--from my fingers, drops of sweat.
Parts of me will stay hidden here like secrets.

The heel of my boot pierces the brown of earth--
a curved extension of body planting into the earth.
All the while, the preacher talks of rebirth.

My niece wants to know what I pray to
because she's deciding what there is for her to pray to.
I tell her I pray to myself--my bones, my nails, my sinew.

Men turn the coffin to find the direction for my grandmother's rise,
the right way to God for my grandmother to rise,
while I imagine her sinking, joints that separate, her bones as they slide.

It's lonelier by a grave when you have no God.

Faith is reassuring, even if flawed.

THE BODY

My godson is learning his body, his bones and other parts,
his skin and hair, things to point to, rose-covered cheek bones,
pushing from his mouth his bone-dry tongue, processing how water works,
realizing bones hold in his eyes, knowing water leaves from there too,
and it cleans his feet, his ears, his knees, and funny bones live in elbows,
and when hit, that bone hurts like water up your nose.

The hundred tiny bones in my godson's head dwindle as he plays,
bones melding to protect what's inside, brain and nerves
and functions, while he's wiggling bones in his car seat: "Phalanges!"
why did we teach him the bones' real name? Why not "fingers" and "toes?"

My godson fills chest with air, his rib bones expanding with his lungs
as the car spins out of control, his mother now with bone-white skin
and me translucent as bone china, my mouth a fissure of my face.

Between us we form a wishbone with worthless hands.

WINTER DIVINATION

“I saw a creature...who...held his heart in his hands and ate of it.” –Stephen Crane

I claw the flesh of a day-warmed, persimmon
until the golden core bursts onto my palm.
Clear lava streams into my arm's bend,
and I pack my mouth with the softsweet taste of fall.
Still I know that inside each seed
a winter knife always awaits me.

The Greeks called them *Diospyros*, “fruits of the gods”
and canvassed the earth for each one lost down hills,
craving their juice like thick wine, dreaming of bodies
covered in clear, sticky persimmon liquor.
But I crave the more astringent pucker
from the not-near-ripe summer fruit.

I want to bend my body around branches,
reach out too far for the most ashen offspring,
for the greyest fruit out on a thin branch tip.
To cradle the persimmon, its translucence,
before tearing into the calyx with my teeth
to find a taste not quite ready for this world.

A DIRGE FOR GLOVES

for Agnes Hosey

The gloves my grandmother wore soft
like paper—not construction or newspaper
not lined like her face, but velvety
thin like the pages of the Bible
she kept under her pillow at night,
held with those gloved fingers
to read me words she knew
I neither understood nor wanted.

Gloved hand pulling me
to the altar for the holy water,
for God's grace to save me. Heal
the headaches that crippled the child
I never was. He would free
me from my pain she said,
though He never lifted hers.
She lay alone for twenty years
without my grandfather.

Clogged arteries that forced blood

from her heart to a brain plump
with memories of cold tubes
forcing air to his lungs—
tears coming in her sleep.

And I slept soundly,
only three hundred miles away. Never a visit,
never a phone call, even as she slipped
into ninety and nursing home sheets.
Always about to see her,
about to hold those paper gloves
that were never gloves at all,
but the warmth of her soft skin,
smooth like uncut silver hair
down to her knees. Hand in hand
at the park when I was three
and she was my everything.

THE REVOLUTION OF ANXIETY

“Lump” is almost all consonants
its song to you gushing bass,
its notes born only of the left hand.

“Growth” comes no easier,
the way it disfigures your lips,
the end sound your mouth can’t make.

And the ribbon coiling
from your mind is a gazelle—
knobby horned and black eyed—
curling down to your breast
in a long, uncut helix.

You keep replaying those words
from the *Twilight Zone* movie.
Sweet Helen saying softly,
“Wish it away, wish it away,”
as the world spirals into chaos.

“Wish” leaves you as a whisper,

taking but half a breath to release it,
quieting itself with its own hush.

And the gazelle dives.

It pirouettes and turns,

becomes a whirlwind of thoughts

growing in the air between your palms.

COUNTING STRANDS OF YOUR HAIR IN PLACE OF SHEEP

(one) gamboge leaves at our visit to Orr Park with oaks carved into horses and snakes

(two) bronze feet of a statue and you on top of them learning to dance

(three) vegas gold lights on the trip my daddy never forgave me for

(four) amber spotlight on you telling me a story I know by heart

(five) flax seed cereal at a table I'm tired of sharing with your morning paper

(six) silver anniversary when I start counting down to inevitable instead of up from one

(seven) maize radiance of brushfire, and I plunge deep into a dreamland pyre

(eight) sunglow strands around me shield against throbbing embers

(nine) persimmon skin as I uncurl filaments and welcome the warmth

PICTURES

You're looking into the camera, smiling that way,
the way you do when you're really calling
out a question to the person behind the camera, the way
you smile when you know you'll get your way.
It's your birthday, and the question in your eyes is quiet,
unnoticeable to those unfamiliar with the way
you blink words, who haven't seen you lead the way
to a bathroom stall in the middle of a workday,
who'd never expect to find, on any given day,
your hand down the pants of the girl next to you, way
way down and never quite at total rest.
But who knows you better than me? Better than all the rest?

I know your voice and that you let it rest
so your eyes can do the talking, the way
you would turn to me in the car and let your eyes rest
on my knees—knees! Not my lips or breasts,
but knees, so noncarnal. But your look was a call
to something inside me that would arrest
all of my thoughts, would bury me in a coma's rest.
You made all quiet in my brain unlike other quiet.

But I grew to depend on that stinging, whispered quiet.

It hollowed out my body and found constant rest
within me, came to live there day to day,
making me a weaker person than before the-you-days.

Remember sitting in your driveway until daylight?

The coyotes encircled the car that night. By morning the rest
had disappeared, but that one remained even in the daylight,
like it didn't know it's time to leave had come with daybreak,
and it stared at us through the windshield, three castaways
lost for a moment in the strangeness of the coming day.

And I didn't see you again for five days.

Waited for you to resurface, for you to call—

I hated you for making me a cliché—and I called
your mom for comfort, “she'll be back in a few days.”

Why were you surprised that I grew quieter
each time you disappeared? Surprised I grew quieter

each time you fucked your ex in our bed? The quiet
that lived in me, the slow-burn, fervent quiet turned to Sunday
church quiet, the still, waiting quiet.

So the space between us became a universe of quiet,
became a fissure of my thoughts and not what arrested

them, and poured jealousy into me until I could not rest,
jealousy which I'd always refused to carry, and the quiet
between us became me leaving, the way
I should have long before. You sat down in our driveway
and pulled me down too so that between us we cradled the quiet.
The question in your eyes was one I couldn't agree to, it called
out for the part of me that was dying, the part I could barely recall.

Today I see a picture of you on your thirtieth birthday and call
you, and like always, beneath the chatter lives quiet.
In that quiet is the awareness that we wear each other like a callus,
a defect we don't feel but know is there, and you call
me your friend but mean "I hate that you left." Today
I'm being a bitch to you as usual, I've called
to point out that in this new picture, nothing's changed, called
to say the world changes without you, or at least I do. My finger rests
on your face, and I imagine myself behind the camera, you calling
for me to sit down, but I know it wasn't me. I'm a thousand miles away
from our favorite diner, and we no longer look at each other that way.

In a future picture, you'll be thinking of me but looking away.
Thinking of how my name lives on your tongue, of calling
out for me, but you'll stay unblinking, quiet.

You'll be turning forty or fifty, another March birthday
without me there, another day like all the rest.

TONIGHT I WAS LONELY, SO I MADE THIS POEM

after James Wright

The greedy squirrel gathers all the acorns

he can find

then disappears under the crumbling foundation of the old storage building

where our rabbits used to live.

After Snowflake died, Shadow curled up in a death-shaped ball and stopped eating.

The clouds suddenly clutter the sky until the blue grows

claustrophobic.

Each moment of time is a valley.

The rain taps on rusted barrels in Morse code, dotting and dashing,

“This isn’t what I wanted.”

FIVE ACRES OF PINE TREES

Pines stand at attention; their needles hold back the light.

Burrs, those angry offspring, scatter like land mines

waiting silent as soldiers—determined

to spill blood from our bare soles in the half light.

Do they wish to be armed and feeted, to move from here,

leave inanimacy behind and move freely?

Are they clamoring to escape

to any place but on this rotten bed, any soil but here?

A little long leaf seedling lies low like a weed.

It thrusts its taproot down through the red-orange clay

like a fist. We can tug at the green fingers,

pulling as if at our own fingers to relieve tension,

or drawing a canted bowstring.

But that middle root will remain forever linked to this earth,

the middle root a syringe drinking from a hidden spring—

the taproot anchor searching beyond

through crust and mantle for the lava center.

These green children will grow tall as the hills

while their roots wrap around our bodies buried beneath.

Acred land is counted out in chains and furlongs, a gash
splitting pines from their kin with surveyor marks:
a loblolly stretches its limbs—dark, flaking bark
over the property line; its green tentacle touches a slash pine.
If roots start on a neighbor's land but reach ours, can we claim them?
Surveyors display no favorites. No curves will they misapply.
Clearer than the will of God are the lines they lay.

SECTION TWO:
CENTRALIA

AT THE CONSTRUCTION SITE

after G. Oppen

house—frame empty space
the air the air in my body the air

fresher from a home with a view of

nails that marry board to
board to board to
board to as a priest, eventually
they'll wall this

in so many words
I'm just enjoying
the land ((spiraled)) around
me collecting constellations

waiting for rain when

it strikes me

there's enough room for

the whole of creation

to lay out their bedrolls

on this lot it's a lot a lot

of space

for us all

NEW MIAMI

If I sat here long enough with my back
turned, I would break apart as if shipwrecked.

This wind would unlayer my brittle body,
hum away strata with a breezy melody,

unhinge my skin, erode my bones, and spread even
my thoughts out over tanned arms and gardens

until my ashes buried palms and tenements,
swathing this angry city like sediment

over a derelict at the bottom of the sea
and built atop Miami some place kind but dusty.

LEAVING POEM

The booby-trap syllables that wait in goodbyes
make a town fair of my breathing.

Here is a tent to hide beneath,
and hear the squeak of rusty bolts when my chest rises.

Our bodies still learning each other are cotton candy,
tangled threads of limbs welded by the air.

And in the bed between us is the clock I've won,
its timer ticking down to light. Tonight,

I hope we die poured as we are upon each other,
sticky sugar shell around the apple,
so passersby can see how we loved
when a hawker lures them in with his spell.

“Come see the folded bodies, half humans, half hot-blooded fervent beasts;
fingers woven like the shingled scales of a mermaid tail;
tongues braided like locks of the world's smallest woman's hair.
Like nothing you've ever seen before, folks.”

Come. Bring us your coins.

THOUGHTS

So sometimes you plan on drowning, an idea so swift, coming with the dishwater
and then your new therapist asks the question
and you say, “yes, but never seriously”
and you question what you mean by “seriously” because you’ve certainly wondered
 how long it would take to fill your lungs completely
 how you would hold yourself under

and the thought of drowning squeezes your spine as if it were a dishtowel
and there are so many ways you’d find preferable
 did you just think “preferable”?
but drowning leaves no mess, is so pure
and you’ve always felt sorry for the people who have to clean up after gunshots, etc.
and drowning could always seem like an accident
 they’d say you got tangled in a net
 or that your muscles just gave out
 save your family some pain

but what if someone saved you after you were under too long
and then you’d find yourself a permanent resident in some hospital by an airport

and you guess you should first make a will
but the will should probably happen ahead of time

to avoid suspicions

six months, maybe ten is better

but if you're going to hold off that long, might as well make it a year

for your little sister's wedding

and all the conditions are dizzying like swimming on your back underwater

so you say it aloud again (to reassure who?), "never seriously"

JULIE IN HER HUSBAND'S HOME

Today she pushed her fingers against
the soil surface of her garden.
She arched the dirt into dark letters,
unfinished brown lines breezed away
with the smell of hyacinths in late afternoon air
before she could finish a single couplet.

She washed ground from beneath her nails,
scrubbed cheese hardened from last night's dinner plates.
She spelled words in suds with a dishwatered finger.
But by the stanza's end, the first lines'
foam popped and fizzled to grey liquid,
and she had forgotten her words entirely.

At midnight she lay awake spinning letters
into the dark room around her, each time some trace
of word remained suspended in the dry air above her eyes
the way a bulb still seems lit after lights-out.
In the hazy moments between drifting off to sleep and sleep,
her nail still scratched letters into her pillow.

Later in the corner of a white dream,
she unleashed a flood of ink which washed
an infinite combination of blue vocabulary
over every inch of empty walls surrounding her—
her words finally freed of bindings—
but when she stepped back, each wall read only “silence.”

THE HOME FRONT

All the way from Spokane to Edmonds, Jill was aware the drive put Jack in bad spirits. Though the light from the stars' rays never shown enough for her to see his face, she heard some mental anguish pare his breaths, which became shallower as they neared home.

If he would let her (but he'd never), she would do all she could to help.

Instead, she stared out the car window waiting for the rain to pour.

When they inched into bed, she finally asked, "What's wrong?" But poor poor Jack, was never one for sharing with Jill, no matter how much she tried to drive the conversation in that direction. Jill knew Jack would find whatever help he needed more easily if she left him alone. She also knew she never could raze the wall with which he guarded himself like a fortress, only softer (more like a home). It kept him safe from outsiders, even her, but somehow didn't separate the pair.

The next day Jill woke up early to cook oatmeal in a worn, metal pan, core and pare apples and mix the two together with sugar and cinnamon before pouring the pasty blend into a bowl for Jack who still slept soundly in the homey feel of their down-soft bed. She put the bowl into the warm oven before her drive into town (she never left a sleeping Jack without food). When he arose, a jillmade breakfast would await. This she'd never change, even if they had kitchen help.

On her way in from grocery shopping, she carried all the bags without Jack's help and picked up the mail before she stopped at the tree out front to pick pears for a salad with the taste of rain. From the green shade, she could see the wind raise and release a slip of paper on the door. She never could understand (though she pored over its contents again and again) what the letter said. Some unknown drive pushed her into the house that was now only her temporary home.

Jill railed at Jack, "How could you not tell me we are losing our home?" And somehow she felt the loss was wholly her fault for having no family to help them or for never knowing (anything) about their money or for asking him to drive to Spokane just because she'd never been. She felt terrible, too for thinking, "The pears, now there's no time to make a salad," when there was so many more thoughts to pore over. With only four hours to pick and choose what to take, packing became a race.

Now Jack and Jill walk up and down a hill, each with a sign to raise.

Bold letters in black tell everyone, "We don't have a home ours was government repossessed. Could you please spare some change? We are poor."

Jill wonders why people stare straight ahead and never stop to help

or why they glance quickly over at the broken pair

as they move on, glad the guilt starts to lift as they continue to drive.

MINUTEMAN OUTSIDE LUKEVILLE, ARIZONA

There's a man at the border who waits to cut your mother down. He's counting heads and holding a gun. He's taking the "e" off "vigilante." He's in a high stand. He could be waiting for deer, but he's waiting for your mother. The night sounds are in the sweet peach fuzz of your skin. The man can see you through the green of his goggles. He can see your mother's eyes glow in the sight of his gun. The man licks his lips. He's thinking of peaches on a table when he was eleven.

The peaches are bruised and bleeding juice onto a doily, but it doesn't matter. The tablecloth already shows stains. The man is a boy now 20 years before you were born. He is a boy whose mother cries on a couch in the next room. The boy can see his father holding a Bible, hammering the book with a fist. The boy can see the sun make a mirror of his mother's brown skin. He can hear her say, "Madre de Dios." He can hear his father say, "Come here boy, and tell your momma she ain't nothing' but a goddamn worthless Mexican." The boy can feel his breath turn shallow as he stands and walks, feel his elbow vibrate with his heart as he pulls back his hand. He can see blood in the corner of his mother's mouth, down her chin. The blood is your mother's, too.

The boy can see it pool at her feet as she falls. He is the man again seeing you lift up your mother. He watches as her dress wind-wraps around your body the way a tablecloth hugs to a table. The man can see you, holding your mother, vanish into the desert where you'll rot like peaches.

ANIMALS IN HEADWEAR

The hare killed the Hatter and now takes his place at the table's head. He coughs. He clears his throat. "The Mad Hatter's ideas were mad, no doubt, but his was the mad of the old. We need new mad!"

The flock of pigeons hold their china with shaky hands. They click their tongues. Each sports a doctor's headband. Each tilts his head to the right, tilts the mirror far left. They expect a coyote insurgence from Wonderland's southern hill any moment now. The eagles group together ready to strike the card soldiers approaching with cages. They flaunt top hats in Wonderland colors, and they'll not give them up. An elephant sits quietly humming himself to confusion. He wears a cup like a ball cap, the handle forward like a bill. He tries to choke himself with his trunk.

"How dare the queen charge us for our party drink!" the hare crows. With every strike of his fist onto the table the feathers in his headdress rattle. He shares his salvia with the table. He over enunciates.

The pigeons can hear some creature moving on the Astroturf at the forest's edge. It shuffles like a moose. They can feel its breath on their necks. It breathes like a bull. Somewhere far off an ass brays. His mortarboard slides slowly over his eyes. He's hoping history can repeat.

DOMESTIC DREAM

Sometimes when I'm here seeming to listen to you, I'm in Klima
throwing out lines and nets, bringing back bodies plump and waving,
silver figures drowning in salted air.

Their bodies beat the wet drum of hardwood at my feet,
beat it to the rhythm of a song they lip-sync along to,
their mouths singing soundless pleas.

"Mercy! O, Mercy!" they bob.

"No worries little fishes gawking at the night,
no one knows for whom we die."

Back in our kitchen, you pull me from my watery dreamland with a question.

You survey the table of mackerel and tuna and salmon,
your eyes ochre brown sand
wetted along the edge of the Aegean.

"What's with all the fish?"

"They all looked so fresh at the market.

I couldn't imagine ever eating anything else."

SUNDAY BREAKFAST CHOREOGRAPHY

Curve of her boot heel circle-circles
down to the bottom. Smaller, smaller.
Incredible that it holds her
without shattering like the eggs she cracks
one-handed over a frying pan
coated with aged, caked-on grease.
She lets them drop one at a time-at a time,
never loses a shard of shell.

It's too early for those boots,
too early for the black nylons
with the darker, thicker twin stripes,
which start high beneath red fabric.
Lines meant to follow
the long contours of her legs,
but instead veer off course
near the bend of her knee and move further
east as they disappear behind boot zippers.

It's too early.
Or it's too late.

She's 42, and this is how I find her
dressed just before noon.

This is my mother at her best.

Barely hung over with black beetle legs
growing from her eyes
and strands of amber hair at her temples down her neck.

This is my mother on rare Sunday mornings
with Saturday night a blur
and last night's visitor already out the door.

Whiskey sashays around the room from the notes of her song,
"Ain't no sunshine when she's gone."

My line, "Only darkness every day,"
and I mean each syllable I put breath behind
because I live for these bright days.

TO SAM, THE SOPHOMORE WHO DOESN'T WANT TO BE

at the game where the scent of nachos is the only thing he's into.
Not the girls in short skirts who bend over to offer a peak at blue bloomers,
who shimmy and count to eight in evens.
Not the boys in tight white pants that make sweet hearts
out of the asses of tight ends and full backs.
On the bleachers two rows below him are the chastity cherishers
who guard their hymens like the offensive line against a sack.
They're chatting up the preacher's son, Mac,
who Sam's heard will fuck anything with a hole,
including his own second cousin, Larry, who recently broke his arm in a car accident
and then had nothing else to do but get stoned in the basement with Mac
who suggested they drink whiskey from the bottle,
and Larry doesn't want to try it again,
but he did ask his girlfriend, Jenny, last night
if she'd shove her thumb up his ass, which she did,
all the while imagining shit under her Lee Press-On Nails.
And since she was worried she was supposed to find
some kind of pleasure in this act,
Jenny moaned and whispered, "Oh yeah; that's hot,"
even though she wasn't so sure it was,
and she was so glad she had only paid six dollars at Wal-Mart

(plus two more for a tube of glue—the blue polish she already had)
instead of investing in a mani at the salon like Elena had suggested
since she felt certain she would have to pop that nail off before she felt totally clean.
And Sam notices Jenny right beside him on the bleachers wrapped tight in a blue snuggie.
She's telling Elena, the one who lost her virginity to the girls' softball coach,
that she is worried she might end up with pink eye,
and it sucks so bad since it's right before the homecoming dance.
Sam blames this torture on his mom for forcing him to “socialize,”
for the fact that his chem homework is coming along slowly.
And he can't help thinking he could control the lives of everyone at this school
with the knowledge he's gained by being invisible,
but he'd rather stay invisible
so he can get his work done and get the hell out of this town.

MIANTIS

A hunk of Miami sank into the ocean
weeks ago. It dropped down low
into the Atlantic where it belonged,
and I went with it.
South Beach. So fresh. So hip.
Now under the water it really is new.
We lose facts about land life.
The water above us
clouds our memory.
We're trying to recall the sky—
the sun as it crisps us.
The moon, the beam of it,
never as bright as everywhere else.
I can almost remember
looking up at clouds at midnight,
the way they dangled near that moon,
the way they were and shouldn't have been.
The sky in Miami was no mystery.
Too many of us illuminated the air
with the artificial
so the clouds were there

as in daylight. It always scared me.
I'm forgetting the beat from the club.
Down here, it all sounds so muffled,
like a mouth filled with sand.
And the lights! oh the lights
have misplaced their pierce.
So dull now. A thud in our eyes.
A cotton swab saying, "radiance."
And what of cigarettes?
Their paper doesn't burn
below the surface.
We're forgetting the way
the ember's brilliance moves west
with the wind, taking
the tobacco along with it.
The way the red intensity
traces a line for our eyes to follow.
We're forgetting the feel
of it filling our lungs,
breathing out smoke and watching
it float, float, oh the float, above us.
Here things hover,
but not like in air,

they dance out and return.

They turn palsied.

We're forgetting ourselves.

We search for the land,

the sun, the sensation of death on skin.

The waves bomb overhead.

CENTRALIA

“City Council Chorus, 1976”

We never meant for any harm to come
to the town or to anyone or thing we loved.
We just wanted to keep Odd Fellows free from

the smell of trash on the day we hold above
all others, when we honor our ancestors
and pray to heaven all wars stay resolved.

We didn't know the pile had covered
a hole fifteen feet wide we hadn't seen,
the hole through which escaped fragments of fire.

No, really, we just wanted everything clean—
never thought flames could snake under us for eons.

“Anthracite”

All the world's water sheeted
save for the marsh puddles at land's edges,
dimple valleys and toes of land
where water only flirted with freezing.
Down beneath the aqueous shell
ten million ferns labored for the air above.
Had they found it, they would have disappeared
as most things do, but they found only mire waves
that gorged on them and held tight.
Lands knocked together as if bodies in the dark
until they birthed great chained children
who entombed the ferns, sweet cellulose pharaohs,
and then forgot them,
made them something new and dangerous,
something worth dying for,
some feeling a fern never knows,
some feeling most things never know.
And the ferns grew stony black,
grew hard with the death that lives in fire.

“The Curse”

Half dead and bleeding, Friar McDermott pulled his body onto the steps of St. Ignatius Catholic Church and laid a curse on Centralia for letting the Mollies beat him bloody.

“One day this town will be erased from the face of the earth—only this church will stand.”

A hundred years later, the town has all but been erased; the church too is gone from the earth.

Five years after St. Iggy’s was broken down board by board, the last coal bagging plant came down—five years longer it lasted.

Dear Friar, don’t you know: here *coal* is God.

“Gordon Smith”

Yes, I know—

Mooch Kashner looked over the bank of the trash pit and saw what it would become—that he looked forward and saw a future of fire clawing at Centralia like a dog waiting to get into the house and out of the heat, but we had to wait.

Yes, I know—

Mooch said he could steam shovel it out for little to nothing, but there were proper channels, and I wasn't going to let nothing take that job away from me—I'd worked my whole life to get out of that town. If he wanted to fix it, he needed to fill the papers out.

Yes, I know—

Edward Bridy wanted to drill down into the ground first to see where the fire was, but as far as I was concerned, all he needed to see was the map I had drawn him up of where I knew he should dig. I had the degree, I knew my stuff, no need for a hillbilly miner digging around, wasting time, when I knew exactly how to stay ahead of the fire. So it was a surprise to see in every should-be-empty hole, fire and more fire.

Yes I know—

It really seemed like I wanted to turn things around when I came up with that trench plan to stop the fire once and for all, but I couldn't come up with the money for it no matter how hard I tried, and I swear I did try, but there was that other disaster in Sheppton; plus, no matter how we tried, I was sure my trench would fail like every other plan, so I ran out of Centralia. I ran out like I always did. It was always a dark, burrowing thorn, Centralia. Yes, I know.

“PA 61”

Want to see a place
erased from the map?
Here roads were redirected
so passersby never know
anything different existed.
Try to follow an old map
and the road will just end.
Dirt piled around tall signs,
the death of a highway, a grave.
Road Closed.
Past those signs, a dual dead-end
like a broken landing strip.
Abrupt.
Buckled asphalt letting off
sulfured fumes. Cracks
stuffed with limbs,
with voyeurs’ trash.
Graffitied black top says,
“Welcome to Hell.”
But this isn’t Hell;
this is Limbo. It’s hypnogogic—

the place between awake and asleep,
so wait for it, that shuttered shock,
that will confiscate this half dream town,
erase the warped, ashy road
the one that trips up slapdash feet,
and return 61 to its due place,
winding down, down
into Locust Avenue.

“Sesquehannock Chief, 1560”

When the flax-headed blackbird came down
from the heavens to the newly formed earth,
she found only mud, no solid land to rest on,
so she grew her black arms one thousand fold
and set to beating her wings to dry the land,
but by the time she reached the Susquehanna River,
she was weak and fell into a southern dive.
Her wings against the mud sent mountains into the air.
But as she pulled out of the fall and returned to the sky,
a trail of her own feathers snowed down behind her,
littering the mud at the base of the new mountains,
the mud swallowing them and turning them to stone,
stone that burns in wisps of blackbird feathers.

“Fire Company Chief, 1962”

We were following orders.

It's what we were told to do.

Plus we made six dollars—

How could we refuse?

We each struck a match

then threw it into the pit.

We sat back and watched

as flames arched and spit.

Then we pulled out our cocks,

and started streams of piss.

We watered the flames and smoke,

but were amazed to witness

after two days, plastic and papers

still being devoured by embers.

“How it Happened”

- A group of men sat in a room and decided
on different rules and regulations for trash dumps.
- A group of men sat in a room and decided
our new dump could be in an abandoned strip pit.
- A group of men sat in a room and decided
it was best, if not legal, to set the trash dump afire.
- A group of men sat in a room and decided
three attempts to put out the flames wasn't an issue.
- A group of men sat in a room and decided
the fire they had set wasn't in their jurisdiction.
- A group of men sat in a room and decided
to wait a month before they alerted officials.
- A group of men sat in a room and decided
requests for aid had to go through proper channels.
- A group of men sat in a room and decided
cost analysis proved it better to let Centralia burn.

“Mayor Lamar Mervine”

At first no one cared—they liked ground warm
enough for sweet tomatoes fresh from the garden in late October.
They liked not having to shovel snow,
but then the realization came in with dark smoke and dead canaries,
that tepid grass beneath their feet was a barrier, and a thin one at that.
The only thing between them and a mazed furnace.
So they ran for the hills, literally, up the hill to Aristes, or over to Mt. Carmel.

Me, I never thought much about it. I kind of like the idea
of the fire below me. It reminds me to keep God first,
to remember that one wrong step and that’s where I’ll be,
right down there with the blooming anthracite.

You won’t find another place as beautiful as this one—
I’ve looked. The smoke billowing out of those steam pipes
looks an awful lot like fog. It might as well be San Francisco Bay.

And the sun setting through the haze of methane exhaust
must be closer to the glory of God’s face than the sun over the water in Fiji.

Centralia is the only home I’ve ever known, the only home I ever want to know,
and I’ll tell you now, the last home I’ll ever know
is across the street from here at St. Iggy’s. There’s a plot waiting for me
beside my sweet Irene. Her cherry locks might be singed clean off by now,

but she's waiting for me just the same.

'Til then, I'll stay here with my seven neighbors
who understand how a neighborhood should work.

“City Council Chorus, 1967”

So we waited two whole months before we told
the state about the fire we had made—okay!
so we never actually were so bold

as to tell you it was us though clearly we were betrayed
because now everybody in town seems to know,
but we thought everyone knew anyway.

And yes, we rejected the bid Alonzo
made—his offer to work for free but keep
the coal he brought up with his own backhoe.

We know, it looks bad, but motive wasn't greed.

We always thought we knew what the borough needed.

“Entering the Pit, 1922”

Just so you know,
the elevator becomes palsied shaking
that wakes you in the night from a dream
of earth worms burrowing in the sun-toasted soil
of graves. And this is how you stand—
an arm against the rail,
propped in a taught angle of bones,
feet crossed. Casual.

This is how you stand to show you aren't afraid

of the yawning earth center,
of the long Alice drop,
of bursting clear through to China,
of the cable that sows a whirl in your brain,
of the shadows inviting you to stay,
of the way the ground feels so like home,
feels so like the womb your body won't forget,

and the bed you share with your wife and soft baby son
will never equal the warmth of earth married to carbon,
will never quell your need for the blackened hands of coal.

“Fire Chief, Centralia Hose Company No. 1, 1894”

We made our fire truck from wood—
a truck that’s not even a truck.
We’ve got two horses black as coal
that dance in front of the hose cart,
that balk and shuffle at the sight of flames,
but we still could have snuffed out
those ribbons of fire in a week,
or better still, a day!
Who lets a blaze build that way?
Who lets it stray down
into the city’s livelihood?
What kind of firemen start the fire themselves
and then—insult to injury—don’t put it out?
You say, “We were following orders.
It’s what we were told to do.”
Goddamn it boys,
don’t you have minds of your own?
Starting a fire in a coal pit?
You must have coal
where your brains should be.

“Anthracite”

Hot chorused cinder song
like a deadened limb, waking.
Warm black current
sewn through Pennsylvania hillsides
and my veins and the veins of my father
and his father and tomorrow my son.
And the soot lives brash blue
in my lungs. Beneath each breath,
the tingle of something spiritual
fumbling in the dark for God.

“City Council Chorus Reprise, 1985”

Few of us were on the council back when better choices could
have been made, but still, we’re the ones you hate, the ones
left holding the bag, the ones to make the call no one should

have to make, to leave our homes, to force you from your own,
but townsfolk keep almost dying, John Coddington passed out
in his home, and little Todd dove feet first into the fiery unknown.

That trench has been “happening soon” for so long we doubt
it’ll ever come to pass. Still, you think we’re part of some conspiracy,
some great plot to steal the anthracite no one wants or cares about.

So please tell us, what should we do? Do you see some other way
we bribed can’t, a way to save our lives and keep Centralia from its grave?

“The Relocation, 1987”

A hundred and fifty years
coming down in a spray of splinters,
that dandruff my hair.

Twenty-nine homes
with the wrecking ball
to their faces.

We all, all neighbors
becoming former neighbors,
witnessing family history razed.

Our minds on shuffle:

and this must be
how quadriplegia feels,

and did I leave
a book hidden beneath a floorboard
when I was eight,

and can I say I'm sorry
for hating boards and nails,
for hoping the house would collapse

while I was at the market,

and can I say,

nothing can replace

the feeling of laying coal cold hands

on a broken radiator

and praying for heat.

“Susquehannock Chief, 1700”

The black river beneath the land is frozen
and sometimes catches fire,
blue fire, wispy smokeless fire, new fire.
The visitors have claimed the black river
for themselves; it is not for us to drink from.
They take that dark ice and set it ablaze.
It burns our tongues to taste it.
It tastes of dying flames.
We will make homes for stray black lumps,
vases white as the clouds in the heavens
and mark them in blue-black arches,
in the color of the frozen river.
We will close what we find
of the river up in these pots,
for it must be what is killing us—
surely it is not the visitors’ touch.

“Tom Larkin”

My great great great grandfather sailed
from Ireland with nothing
when Pennsylvania wasn't much
more than a forest polka dotted with coal holes.
When Centralia was squares of laid out roads
where a town hoped it could be.
My great great great grandfather planted roots
in a Centralian coal bed
that burns hot beneath a smoky hillside now.
Centralia's the only home I've ever known.
Yes, I pushed for the relocation, but the town
was dying by then. Almost dead.
I just wanted out
before it took me with it.
Now there's no home to go to—
lots with no homes, sidewalks with no storefronts.
But sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night
to the smell of burning.
It jerks at my stomach; it scorches my throat.
I open my eyes to say,
“Dear God, it's Centralia!”

“Epilogue”

40°48'14.96"N, 76°20'27.17"W, 2161 AD

It's not snow that white weaves Pennsylvania grass
together into dusty steeples on the hillside.

It's cinder and smoke that leaves the earth
whispering flames, greeting night as jasmine does,
moving its leaves together as violins of longing,

and in the ground the wasted bodies of whomever
once laid claim to these overgrown acres must be ash by now,
must have learned cremation from below.

Surely someone once loved this place. From here,

I can see smoke rise like dust from an ancient sofa.

Do the powdered bones of this land's ancestors
still emerge with the smoke on the hill?

The shadows dance in the broken light beneath cypresses,
and I hear their stories circling in the air above me,
voices crackling blue fire born from coal.

SERGEANT STANFORD VISITS BASTOGNE, BELGIUM, 1970

Each day I scour this town that's not my home for bones,
and sometimes I find what I'm looking for--bones

of dead soldiers scattered wide by invasion.

In Bastogne they say that *Piche Caycaye* stole your bones,

but I know they're here somewhere, lost to soil and regrown
grass; somewhere here I'll find white flakes of your bones.

People remember famed regiments, but forget the ones
that fell first, forget you and our brothers left their bones

behind, too. That we were what slowed the hegemon
standing one versus three blocking with our own bones.

I make piles of lovely messes with pieces of unknown
dead that I've collected, pieces I'm certain can't be your bones

because I know I'll learn my lungs again or feel somehow atoned
for not saving you all then if I could only find your bones.

MUCH LATER

I put on your cologne.

A half ounce at most of you
all I have left after five years,
roots deep in my skin.

I imagine your flesh above me

in '99, and you crash soft
onto the floor beside me and laze
warm and drowsy. "Are you still

still breathing?" Now I cut
a square of flesh, cologne-covered,
from my thigh and think of your lips.

Hold the eucharist on my tongue,
the taste of us, dark like ashes.

I wish it were raining. I am here
with dirty nails, my hands cupped
like a glass to drink from, my head in wine.

Today I buried Bruno. Your dog

with cataract eyes left me
to search for you in asphodels.

LEAVING POEM II

I'm a sailor in the forties when I tell you I'm leaving,
tell your body with my body
because your ears have already heard.

My body makes a poem of your body to carry across water,
and the poem of my body will unfold yours at will,
will lay beside it. In hotel rooms and other strange places,
our poems will rhythm to the song in my chest,
the song my body plays only for yours.
Can you hear it when your head knocks against my breast?
Feel it pulse in your brain when our poems meet in the dark?

This room is the pause we share in our mouths.
It tastes of brine and fuel and whispered half-words.
Know that if the tides pull me under,
I'll hold your body beside me on the ocean floor,
and sing for us the song of the carousel.

THREE:
ODE TO THE GLOBE

ODE TO THE GLOBE

I love a map
strategically layered over
cardboard—the fanned wrap
of individual hemispheres,
the flowering outward,
the gluing down where
bits of continents regard
other bits or combine
with coasts that look seaward,
and the thin, tape equator line
also meant to keep the coarse
north edge confined .
It hides that the sphere was
once two pieces.

*

I remember the childhood quick fix that came
with a finger to the glossy surface and a tug,
waiting for the globe to predict what borderlines I would cross,
my finger planted hard on a place name I couldn't pronounce.
An imagined real spot where my feet would someday land.
A globe in place of an 8-ball's magic.

*

The predictions said,
“search your hair for spirits;
soak your knees in God's Aquarium;
see newspapers outnumber television stations;
pick caraway seeds from every dish;
praise a clean Polynesian line;
lay in a nest above the Land of the Dragons;
stumble down terraces;
recoil at the sight of a human fish.”
The predictions said.

*

A globe in place of little girl dress up, tutus and tap shoes.

A globe in place of a childhood now decades past,

and I've never left this country. Money spins the globe, not fingers.

I can point to places I'll never go, and I can name those places in verse—

ode them in *terza rima* and say things like,

terza reminds me of *tierra*, earth.

*

I love a map

with ruttled crests,

globe paper reshaped

to show peaks that coalesce

into mountain chains,

and the sink of deepest

valleys—my fingers entertaining

the naïve belief

that I'll see the real thing.

“That's a relief,”

my mother once told me,

but I never knew if

she meant bumps of land and sea

or my desire to run, my need.

GOD IN THE RHYTHM

Acutest day of the year here in Xalapa, the “Athens of Veracruz”—
“birthplace of the *florecita*” conquistadors said. It’s Virgin of Divine Conception Day.
Chasms of people surround me at Parque Juarez’s apex:
“Divinity is a strange thing,” I think, as I examine the valley below.
Even the Sierra Madres just outside the city are a partitive
fraction of the Xalapan hubbub, their echoes a musical impromptu.

Gibbering people aren’t my problem; the babeldom of voices does not
harm me--it’s the “iiiiii” and “sssss” of high hertz sounds
in my brain that break me down. I’ve somehow learned to hear
jarring notes of a frequency I shouldn’t—supersonic-esque

Kenosis seems impossible. I imagine Christ’s mouth. “Did he have a lisp?
Low like cattle when he ached with heartburn? Why choose imperfection?” In this barrio
monkey-puzzle trees, with their leather tops and fossilized trunks, populate the skyline—
mostly worthless, not even providing shade. A prime example of inadequacies they seem.

Orquesta Sinfonica members warm up then turn the air rhythmical,
pulling bows over some strings and plucking away at others in folk

quodlibets. “Dear Low Bass, I only can feel your surge, like club music from a d.j., reverberate under my skin; my ears hear nothing of you, the sound too low. Though I somehow hear the fountain motor’s high hum, the screaming constancy of it, much to my dismay. God has bent my hearing.”

Unlike Joseph, I need Mary to offer some kind of proof.

Virgin pregnancy seems to me a preplanned excuse.

Who here would believe me if I stood and told

Xalapa that Mary’s story also is mine? Her believers would turn skeptic,

yet I can’t help thinking there’s divinity in this buzzing sub-

zenith the monkey-puzzles--heaven in the sounds under a reptilian umbrella.

TACCA CHANTIERI, THE BAT FLOWER

Sunlight and I have an unspoken agreement.

Now emptiness sustains me in the peace of the dark,

but sometimes I pray to the sun in whispers.

“Burn me into the soil that sustains me.”

Moonlight has become my lover and god,

and I splay my hundred arms wide before her,

letting them drop and sway forever in a cascade down my frame.

A curtain shielding me from everything not blackened as I am.

I am black mushrooms rising from the cave’s center.

I am a spelunker who found the cave but never the entrance.

I am the fire residue, ash abandoned in the cave hollow.

I am fluttering in blueblack flames.

THE PRIMAVALLE FIRE, ROME, 2008

C'era una volta, una famiglia di otto,
but at the end of the stone path
that carried us to and from our apartment,
I watch eight become six
as fate swallows my *bambini*
like a fire breather securing his dinner.
“Steal from me, *Diavolo*,
but I have faith my God will avenge.”

Three decades later, the newspaper
reminds our neighbors
emptiness and misery are all I ever got.
No vengeance.
God sits smug in heaven,
the devil safely by a pool in Brazil,
while I try not to fall with two essential toes
cut from my feet.

Winds have taken all the ashes away by now.

Cypress trees grow
Where Virgilio never did,
in an empty lot where my life was
once upon a time.

DIABOLO RESPONDS, RIO DE JANEIRO, 2008

Children like coal laid heavy
in your home, slow to move,
burning hot under party politics
that promote death—simple
as choosing *vino*. Do you
know they envelope my nights?

Call me *Diavolo*, but I know
the real devil. He whispers in
my ear, tells me of fingers
which cradle arms and backs.

Boy and boy locked in immortal,
charred embrace. Have I not
finished my sentence, paid
for the crime with nights
ravaged by thoughts of flames?

Thirty-five years loneliness
and secret misery are all
I get. Outside I am alive,

a Buddhist monk— prefire.
Inside, I am as dark, as
destroyed, as Virgilio's face
looking through smoke
for a window or a savior.

Despite all regrets,
somehow I still fear home.
Still fear you with somnolent,
ash-dyed eyes that peer
under every hat pulled low
in search of my face.

*O seu diabo não vive na Itália,
muito menos o seu deus.*

Neither are nowhere.

We live,
we die alone.

ÁSATRÚ'S YULE

December 20: Mother Night

The shortest
day of the year
and here
the sun never
touches the sky.

The solstice.

What could be
the laziest day
reels with wishes,
waiting. Prayers
for the day's
return, but here
I gather my
hopes together to
keep the sun
at bay. To hold
the door to

your world open.

The shortest

passage, thinnest

veil between us.

“Walk with recent

dead. Walk with

our ancestors.

Find me

here.”

December 26: Mid Night

Oath-ring in my hands, here

I weave in promises. “I will

hold you tighter, if you

come back to me. I will

sing to you more slowly, if you

come back. I will, if you

come here.”

Weave wishes for the year ahead.

“Come back. Come back.”

HANAKO AT NORIO'S GRAVE

The wind wasn't enough
to unsheathe the body hidden
beneath a short, silken layer.
My fingers did the work.
Pulled away the tie,
opened the fabric
intricated with rope-like
vines and briars—with stones.

Arms and eyes awakened
by the mist settled
on my skin and lashes. Palms
and nipples displayed
for the houses below this hill.

Wives at your windows,
can you imagine the freedom
I feel with a husband
in the ground

and dreams in the air?

With Yoshino petals the color
of my feet. Like snow
in June, they cling to
black hair but nothing else,
for the rest of me is bare.

Petals in my hand opened
wide for the breeze to steal
from me like years pulled,
ripped of me by the dead who
decays beneath the windowsill
from where he rescued
me from my father's tyranny
before he instilled his own.

“Rot for me, my love. Push
hasu flowers up too tall
to remind me of you
in the days before your
hands and eyes grew hard,
before the beard and rage.

Remind me.”

What it felt like to long

for what he put forth.

I have forgotten

his fingers’ tips and lustrous lips,

saliva wet. Now remember

only the ball of his hand as

it forced me down,

the movement of his

lips as they marked their words.

“Stretch your offspring high to me.

Reach out for my throat

with leafy fingers. Reach out

for caresses this time.

Leave the grip

for scarves and necklaces

I will present myself

as the grieving widow.”

KERALAN PRAWN

I only sauté the jagged pieces of yellow onion for a minute before they burn
because I have turned the stove too high.

When I stare at the dark-caked members of this now translucent family,
at what I so quickly destroyed, I can't help thinking, *This is my life in a skillet.*

But no waste will visit my kitchen today. The all-wrapping sting
of chilies, dark as the water pooled at the market, will wipe away any record of burning.

As will the concord of brown and red flavors I toss
in the pan to fill the empty branches of king prawn veins fresh from the ocean.

The turmeric and chili, the ginger, pink as scars, will bury
the taste of dinner devastation for which my husband no doubt would have skewered me.

And it occurs to me just how many terms for violence form from kitchen words,
as I whip the raita to mix in the liquid, make it suitable for his bread.

I fold water and oil into brown flower,
which smoothes into a thick batter.

The steam from the pan gusts up, an invisible nip at my eyes,
but his dinner must be timed perfectly for the moment he arrives.

MIRANDA AFTER THE EPILOGUE

“Thou think’st there is no more such shape as he,/ Having seen but him and Caliban.
Foolish wench./ To the most of men this is a Caliban,/ And they to him are angels.” –

Prospero to Miranda, *The Tempest*

Back in Milan her father’s words
become whirlybirds that knot her dark hair.

Her tutor’s wrist is a breezed leaf.
She knows it would turn in her mouth
to Soave from the steel.

She knows she could swallow
him entirely, fingers first.

The servant who brings
her food in the early mornings,
carries blue tits in his eyes.

They sing to her
from the small caves, “te-te-te.”

At her wedding, the priest’s tongue
is a burrowing blindworm.
She wants to follow it into the red soil

and fold herself inside the earth.

She wants to shed her skin in curls.

But Ferdinand's tongue is kind.

It follows the arches of her flesh

the way a fruit fly might.

And Ferdinand's eyes are deep mires

from which she has trouble walking freely.

And Ferdinand keeps his wrist

as straight as a crow's feather

when he sends his queen

across black spaces.

Chess with her husband takes years,

and she turns her head to the pasture

where the herders call out to the sheep.

Their arms, dusted with dirt from the day,

wait for the approaching storm to bathe them.

Miranda's hair tightens, a tangle of vines.

IO IN THE SMOKE

Io doesn't think just closes her eyes
against Zeus's dusty touches.

This is not the passion she imagined
while walking along the water
that flows from her father's lungs.

Where is the chest carved from carnelian,
the olive eyes? Where is the sweet,
fuzzy tongue like a starflower arm?

This isn't the god she was promised in girlhood,
in gossip stories or while bathing her queen.

"Just one kiss," she thinks.

"I'll give one to the god of the gods,
since he's here."

And that's the moment everyone wants
to paint, that one beautiful pause before
Io's every orifice fills with black, liar's smoke.

One moment with her hand out to a cloud-hidden body,
and the arm that lightly cradles her back

before the thick mist holds her down
with a violent claim to her skin.

Io senses Hera somewhere nearby:

“Whore,” she hears whispered.

“Please don’t hate me, my queen

I gave only one kiss.

Can’t you see the rest was stolen.”

But the storytellers keep Io at fault.

The girl deserved it for being born dirty water
coughed from her father’s rocky mouth like smoke.

For wandering fields and rivers naked.

For nymphing around as nymphs do.

What choice had she, motherless as she was?

ODE TO A PUNCTUANT

The warrior commander commandeering the line,
doing so for the commonwealth of paper, ink, and words,
while commanding division among forces,
she compels the line onward,
coming together again only after combating the full stop,
only after she has compassed a commendable end,

and she knows comrades often compete initially due to incompatibility,
but she comfortably compromises,
combining parts of speech who refuse to communicate,
bringing them into a commandery to bend them into compliance,
but don't compare her to her sister with the comb in her hair,
who divides rather than adds,
whose commutation would end this run-on,

the comicy made with a comely pause,
the combustible possibility that lives in a momentary coma,
the commandress slowly twirling on the common street corner,
the come-hitherness of her blink,
the comedy as she commiserates with your break,

and all of her compiling to make what you hope is a complete comment,
something complicated or compulsory,
which your comically large but competent hand started,
and then wouldn't stop commuting to every community of your paper,
like the composite of branching fibers of a commissure,
creating with her what you've commanded to be a fluid,
competent compendium of complex word combinations,
which compound into a fractionary arc of composition.

LADY OF GALERA

after Sylvia Plath

The milk clouds my head with doves.

A woman-phoenix sentinel on either side of me.

They worship alabaster.

The wax mixes in the bowl of cream.

O eternal,

evening star purring with a bird-heart voice.

Wings, dusty feathers—

in the earthen womb,

the earth has ground down my face,

wheat after the mill.

Eight feet usher me through birth and space,

but my eyes stare dead as my crafter's.

My arms near-translucent captives

of a shallow crater, bound and aching,

prisoners of Adam's pointing finger.

THE RIVER LIFFEY

A thousand years ago, I fed life
into people born from the land—
coated their brown dusted
bodies with the clear calm of clean.
They worshiped at my mouth
because I was the nature of things
who gave them reprieve
from the hard touch of the earth.

Devils donning iron tore southward
in a fleet of twenty thousand former trees.
Tired arms of dark slaves ripping into my body
in exhaustive cycle of updownpullup
until the Vikings on top found
the ground they wanted and filled me
and my lover, Poddle, with the blood
of the land people I have raised.
“What a deep dark pool. *Dubhlinn*,” they said.
Claimed the land and confluence for themselves.

Liberators came three hundred years later

carrying an ancestry the same
as those they devastated and a desire for change.

They hewed away pieces of the earth
around me to bend me to what they wanted
me to be, but even then I wasn't right.

So people of new Dublin gagged me
with their shit until they drowned
in the hovering reek of waste
and covered me in stone.

And you modern fools expand the city
above me, above four hundred year old pillars.

How long do you think I'll support
your weight? Again I feed life,
but you are not people of the land.

You see me coil around the towers of Dublin,
but most of you don't even know
parts of me are here hiding under your feet
waiting for brick arches to give way beneath you.

Reprisal for all you've done to me.

NEVER EVEN

Like the launched arrow that has yet to hit,
this moment it carries my fate.

I've already said you can have
all this, including me.

Everything stands frozen
absorbing particles of broken time.

All things make living diagrams of themselves—
Zeno's arrows in half-motions;
they'll never arrive at any destination.

They'll never arrive at any destination—
Zeno's arrows in half-motions.

All things make living diagrams of themselves,
absorbing particles of broken time.

Everything stands frozen,
all this, including me.

I've already said you can have
this moment. It carries my fate
like the launched arrow that has yet to hit.

MANILA NORTH CEMETERY

Today I cracked open two graves
and raked out the tenants, soft twin brothers.
Someone stopped paying their rent.
Their feet wore pink socks, their bones wore black paste.
But the fresh air in the cellar's unclaimed heap of defaulters
must be a relief to them after so long in the stale tombs.
Nearby, my brother Jimmy calls letters in a language he doesn't know.
"B-8," he says. "I-22. Bingo!"
his toenails the color of the tomb he sits on.

There's a giant slab of concrete under Maria,
and under that my Uncle Antonio slowly rots away.
His flesh must be loose from the bone by now. The smell
from Jemma's stand gives my stomach a tug.
It's more than twenty graves away,
but that doesn't stop the greasy, brown sugar taste from filling my mouth.
It's quiet inside our mausoleum. Outside it's a madhouse.

A girl is dead, and her family talks fast and over each other.
They don't know which picture she should carry into the dark apartment.
Her mother cries; she counts rent money. Counts again.

I'll have to take the dead girl's body back out in pieces in a few years.

When her muscles and tendons slide apart from the bones
and she's more compact, I'll move her into a cheaper spot
that will look like a concrete bucket.

A two by two space for her mother to visit.

Maria's asleep, my sweet daughter's head against a name—
the name of someone in our family I never knew,
someone who could afford this mausoleum
and the house outside the city we used to live in.

Maria's only three years younger than the dead girl outside.

My son holds a handle of the white casket.

Switches feet then switches back;

His right hand deep in his pocket fingers pesos,
remembering it's worth it to stand there.

The dead girl's mother paid good money for his young arms.

Behind me, the TV pops with color but no sound.

Someone sings Cyndi Lauper

on the karaoke machine a few mausoleums over.

Mara's making her money the best way she can,
and "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" will pay for tonight's dinner.

The dead girl's mother seems to have stopped to listen.

With her thumb, she wipes the tears from her own face
and gives them to her daughter.

She traces the bones in the dead girl's cheek,
follows it around the jaw line. She picks fuzz from her dress.
The breeze outside is picking up and the rain's not far behind.

Down by the bridge, slum families have a view of the river
that will flood and destroy what they've made—
their shacks cluttered around like a makeshift Venice.

We may be borrowers of the dead,
but we have doors to shut out the water.

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AREA OF CONCENTRATION:

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