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FORCED OUTAGE

by

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B.A. Oberlin College, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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ABSTRACT

This collection of poems explores an inner emotional life contrasted with a plodding existence in the external world of day to day business as usual. The poems embrace the importance of noting moments of beauty and grace in an otherwise bland landscape, and mourn the difficulty of holding onto such moments as life moves forward.

These poems lead the way down bumpy emotional roads and explore the struggle to make human connections in simple circumstances. Most important, they attempt to capture the beauty of the connections that come from these struggles, and the triumphant promise that we are not alone.

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WRITING LIFE ESSAY

Simplicity and Epiphanies

This questions of when one “decides” to become a writer and “why write at all” trouble me. On many graduate school applications or essays I have dutifully written answers, but they feel bland and nonspecific. *I have always wanted to be a writer, before I can remember*, I type, and though it is the truth, it doesn’t feel as though I am really answering the question.

Since I was very young, I’ve been attracted to mythology, to science fiction, to novels with wildly imagined worlds that provide escape from this one. I’m also beguiled by the simple beauty of written words for their own sake. It still amazes me how silent words are on a page but how powerful and loud they are in the reality of the every day. Before I *could* write, I was confident I one day *would* write, but for a long while exactly what and how was not clear to me. It wasn’t until high school when, in an advanced English class, I received an ancient handout of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” that I finally understood that this was how I wanted to write. Having just struggled through *Hamlet* without experiencing much connection to it in my restless 17 year old heart, this poem, by contrast, knocked me flat with its impact.

The poem made sense to me, and it made sense in the best, most subtle yet obvious way imaginable. I knew I wanted to write in this same language, for it did seem a language all its own. “Prufrock” is a portrait of a practical, worn down individual daunted by the thought of taking steps to “disturb the universe,” but the poem puts his life in epic terms, melancholy though they may be. The way the poem centered so achingly around an inner emotional life struck deep chords in me. Nothing dramatic or grand happens in the poem, and yet it moved me more than that melodramatic final scene of *Hamlet*. Sitting in the classroom surrounded by my classmates

who one could say “measured out [their lives] with coffee spoons,” “Prufrock” seemed like a keenly observant and well timed warning, with the added bonus of being beautiful and memorable.

After reading “Prufrock” I began to write as though I was T.S. Eliot. It took a long time before I realized that it wasn’t working. I ended up with many long winded poems crammed full of highbrow allusions, but that in the end meant nothing. I realized I needed to simplify and become less grand in my writing scope. It was a hard lesson to learn, but it became easier when I turned to another poet I read in high school, but who had been dwarfed beside Eliot at the time. I re-discovered Jane Kenyon.

I first read Kenyon’s poem “The Suitor” soon after I read “Prufrock,” and its purity and honesty made it stand out from most of the other literature I was exposed to at that point. Because there was no extraneous clutter in the poem this singular image leapt off the page: “Wind moves the leaves of the box elder;/ they show their light undersides,/ turning all at once/ like a school of fish.” It’s such a quiet picture, but it is one that creeps underneath a reader’s skin and lingers. I strive to capture such lasting and clean imagery in my own poetry. I learned to distill my experiences into a trail of moments, which I could then gather up in poem form.

In addition to Kenyon’s own poems, there are twenty poems by Anna Akhmatova which Kenyon translated from the Russian, and which are included in her collection of essays *A Hundred White Daffodils*. I immediately saw why Akhmatova, whose poems include powerfully simple imagery stretched taut with emotion, would have struck Kenyon and inspired her to translate them. These poems also introduced me to the “Imagism” movement in poetry specifically, versus the “Symbolism” movement. As imagism was emerging Akhmatova became one of its early followers. It is a movement that emphasizes craft, concrete imagery and clear

language over the mysticism and metaphor of Symbolism. I immediately identified with the Imagism philosophy and can see it living today in my own poetry. There is something hauntingly honest in appreciating an object's beauty for its own sake and not as a metaphor for anything more ostentatious. Yet it is amazing how quickly and easily the two philosophies become intermingled. While one can describe the moon's beauty and admire it simply for what it is, one can also assign it greater emotional significance in the eyes of the speaker. You can use it to set a mood and describe a state of mind, as Kenyon does with the leaves of the box elder in "The Suitor." It is when these two philosophies meet that the poem begins to become transcendent, and this is what I strive for in my own work. So I've suddenly found myself on the opposite end of the writing spectrum from where I entered it. I went from wanting to provide only escape into other worlds, to depicting this world as it is, in sharp clarity and full of emotional life.

James Joyce's *Dubliners* has steadily affected the core of my writing for many years. After reading this collection of short stories I have been forever striving to capture on a page the elusive epiphany. That last story in the book, "The Dead" was particularly influential. When I sit down to write, it is impossible not to see the snow falling "upon all the living and the dead." I loved the length and pacing of this story, how the first lengthy piece is set during a rather tiresome party, and does nothing much except establish character. The fact that nothing really *happens* in this story was what really intrigued me. There are no action set pieces, no bank robberies or weddings or guns being pulled. It's just an evening at a party with a married couple, and the journey you go on with them is completely internal. It's the internal journey that interests me the most, not the external one. In "The Dead" the only real drama takes place at the very end, with a wife telling her husband a sad, deeply personal story about herself that he did not know. All of a sudden he feels as though his wife of many years, the mother of his children, is a

stranger. He feels deeply foolish and suddenly as readers we are caught in the current of his inner emotional turmoil. Though all that's happened is a story has been told, we can feel wheels turning and sands shifting in this man's inner life. The moment is monumental, though in the morning everything will return to normal. The paradox of the epiphany fascinates me. It is by its nature something deeply moving and important, yet it is also slippery in nature, and nearly impossible to incorporate into tangible day to day life. Joyce explores the paradox of the epiphany with his masterful prose, I would also like to embark on this exploration.

One of my foremost goals in writing poetry is to capture those moments of crystallized realization which are so hard to hold onto, to take the reader on a purely internal emotional journey. It is a challenge, because you must make your work engaging without anything overtly dramatic happening, and you also can by no means shout what you intend at the reader. "The Dead" taught me that this moment of epiphany must creep up on a reader as softly and steadily as it does on the one who is having it, otherwise the experience is lost. This is what I hope to achieve in my poetry.

Poets continue to teach me most of my lessons about writing and reading. Yeats taught me that though I may not love a poet's work, I can learn to respect them as writers and even like them in time. He taught me that reading poetry can be hard work, but also worthwhile. In short he taught me not to judge so quickly. After reading his sing song "Lake Isle of Innisfree" I was ready to write Yeats off. And if I had I wouldn't have experienced "Adam's Curse" which is one of my favorite examples of epiphany captured in poetry, and also has one of my favorite endings of any poem. Frost also taught me a lesson in judging too quickly: I loved him as a child, but as I grew older brushed him off as just writing pretty poems about nature. After later encountering "Out, Out," a poem in which a young boy chops off his own hand while cutting wood, and

promptly bleeds to death, I decided I should re-evaluate my opinion. Now Frost is one of my favorite poets. His poems emanate a dark peace which I take to heart in my own writing, and he is a master of setting moods with descriptions of nature, which is something I am always attempting. Yeats and Frost both showed me to be more flexible and open minded, and that sometimes you have to work to take things away from poetry. Just because you don't immediately like a poem does not mean you should immediately despair of it. I've found these lessons invaluable in further reading.

Through all this poetry and serious literature my love of science fiction still persists, and with Kurt Vonnegut the two intersect. It is him I turn to now, when I look to answer that bothersome "why do you write?" question. "Why write?" Kurt Vonnegut says, "Still and all, why bother? Here's my answer. Many people need desperately to receive this message: I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people do not care about them. You are not alone." And in sharing an emotional inner life through my poetry, this is exactly what I hope to convey.

READING LIST

Poetry

Thomas Brasch	<i>Was Ich Mir Wuensche</i>
Charles Bukowski	<i>The Roominghouse Madrigals</i>
Raymond Carver	<i>All of Us The Collected Poems</i>
Billy Collins	<i>Nine Horses</i>
Billy Collins	<i>Horoscopes for the Dead</i>
Billy Collins	<i>Sailing Around the Room</i>
T.S. Eliot	<i>The Complete Poems and Plays</i>
Thomas Sayers Ellis	<i>The Maverick Room</i>
Nancy Eimers	<i>No Moon</i>
Hans Magnus Enzensberger	<i>Lighter than Air</i>
Robert Frost	<i>The Poetry of Robert Frost</i>
Tony Hoagland	<i>Donkey Gospel</i>
Marie Howe	<i>What the Living Do</i>
Donald Justice	<i>New and Selected Poems</i>
Laura Kasischke	<i>Gardening in the Dark</i>
Jane Kenyon	<i>Selected Poems</i>
Phillip Levine	<i>New Selected Poems</i>
Peter Meinke	<i>Lines from Neuchatel</i>
James Merrill	<i>Collected Poems</i>
Joseph Mills	<i>Somewhere During the Spin Cycle</i>
D. Nurske	<i>Burnt Island</i>
Frank O'Hara	<i>Lunch Poems</i>
Cathy Park Hong	<i>Translating Mo'Um</i>
Sylvia Plath	<i>Ariel</i>
Lynn Powell	<i>The Zones of Paradise</i>
Adrienne Rich	<i>Diving into the Wreck</i>
Anne Sexton	<i>Selected Poems</i>
Jane Shore	<i>The Minute Hand</i>
Charles Simic	<i>Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk</i>
William Stafford	<i>The Darkness Around us is Deep</i>
James Tate	<i>The Eternal Ones of the Dream: Collected Poems</i>
Wang Wei, Li Po Tu Fu, Li Ho, Li Shang-Yin	<i>Five T'ang Poets (Translated by David Young)</i>
Jonah Winter	<i>Amnesia</i>
Jonah Winter	<i>Maine</i>
Franz Wright	<i>Walking to Martha's Vineyard</i>
James Wright	<i>Above the River The Complete Poems</i>
W.B. Yeats	<i>The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats</i>

Fiction

Albert Camus	<i>The Stranger</i>
Raymond Carver	<i>What we Talk about When we Talk about Love</i>
William Faulkner	<i>Absalom, Absalom!</i>
Rivka Galchen	<i>Atmospheric Disturbances</i>
Jonathan Goldstein	<i>Lenny Bruce Is Dead</i>
Ernest Hemmingway	<i>A Farewell to Arms</i>
Ernest Hemmingway	<i>The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemmingway</i>
James Joyce	<i>Dubliners</i>
Franz Kafka	<i>The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony and Other Stories</i>
Franz Kafka	<i>The Trial</i>
Heinrich von Kleist	<i>The Marquise of O and Other Stories</i>
John Knowles	<i>A Separate Peace</i>
Jhumpa Lahiri	<i>Interpreter of Maladies</i>
Kenzaburo Oe	<i>A Personal Matter</i>
Walker Percy	<i>The Moviegoer</i>
Dodie Smith	<i>I Capture the Castle</i>
Robert Stone	<i>Bear and His Daughter</i>
William Trevor	<i>After Rain</i>
Kurt Vonnegut	<i>The Sirens of Titan</i>
Kurt Vonnegut	<i>Slaughterhouse Five</i>

Plays

Samuel Beckett	<i>Waiting for Godot</i>
Samuel Beckett	<i>Endgame</i>
Jean-Paul Sartre	<i>No Exit and Three Other Plays</i>
Tom Stoppard	<i>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead</i>
Tom Stoppard	<i>Arcadia</i>

NonFiction

T.S. Eliot	“Tradition and Individual Talent”
Nancy Eimers	WMU Interview
Jane Kenyon	<i>Hundred White Daffodils</i>
Kurt Vonnegut	<i>Palm Sunday</i>

FORCED OUTAGE

Life in a box is better than no life at all, I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking: Well, at least I'm not dead.

— Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

FORCED

When you were called, did you answer or did you not? Perhaps softly and in a whisper?
— Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Over drinks I see you stew
twitching like Abraham but saying
there is no leap to take and we are all ashes
flicked from cigarettes-- a pin prick hole
burnt in the black and white of my skirt
and then we're gone. So that is all.
I'll preach at you *Fear and Trembling*
talk Plato's cave, design galaxies with doors
that open outward. But you insist:
this is nothing. We are abyss
eaten up and chained up and choking
on rocks clicking against our teeth.

Finally grown soggy with beer
I'll retreat. Finger the smoldered
fabric at my lap and remember the world
is widening without you.

Maybe you can answer me in machine clicks
in screeching metal in the chugged up calm
of broken pieces, the moving parts
shuddering still. I know you find redemption
in breathless devices.
You make the lifeless whole
and leave me.

LIMBO

Down in a candle flickering bar hipsters are propped
on squat stools masquerading as liquor cartons.
I am drinking bourbon for the first time in years,
sipping it through the muddled mint and fresh
Michigan cherries. I can't feel it pounding in my blood
like it did when I was younger, urging me to roam
in tight hot circles and smoke cigarettes in off limit
spots, glaring through exhalation and picking battles poorly.

I have not smoked in years. The ash blows in my eyes
and when I wake at night the smell is in my hair.
But tonight is an echo of an inhalation.
My friends are shutting long white gowns away in closets
and already posting baby pictures. Meanwhile I am drinking at bars
with no signs outside and the boy serving us is dressed as an airline pilot.
Everyone has turned into children! The children have children and work with heads down all day
right next to me but so far they are fuzzy in my eyes.

So we trudge from one bar
to another in the liquid cold of the north, and when it's over
I tip my taxi driver a good 40 percent. She tells me
without complaining how often students are sick in her cab.
The extra tip is in apology.

The taxi driver I understand. She offers me a cigarette as I climb from the car. No thank you. I
say, not quite making up my mind in time.

BEDROOM

Paint swatches would claim
these walls are mint flavored
or a mist filled morning.

I can think only of sickened calves,
flared nostrils blowing at grass blades
in pale green puffs.

We could toss and snore to death here,
move like the sun shadow patterns
that shift and flow over the sock
scattered floor. Fading to sleep

and rising into cloud,
I wait on a foreign taxi
and chase pigeons the size of cats
across a far off square.
Their wings melt in the rain.

ALARM

My mother passed her sickness
on to daughter. At night
she never slept but haunted
our house in long pale gowns—
a glass of water clutched and pacing
patrol to living room, bedroom,
bathroom listening for breathing,
for shattered glass.

Now tiny matters breed disaster.
The plant not watered,
dead. The forgotten door unlocked,
a murderer's way in.
The morning doctor visit,
a tragedy. Vein rolling,
needle digging, fresh bruise
blossoming as the nurse's teeth
gnash and deep red secrets
finally gush to one tube,
then another.

And so my mind will go
until I think to listen
for the rhythm of your heart
skipping over distance
heavy as a stone. I can count 1,2
the beat matching breath
1 and 2.

YOU NEVER SLEEP WELL

so to hear you breathing now in the dark
slow and heavy— full of rest—
it seems a quiet gift, each puff of air
a facet of a dream. I feel as though
I am peering around kaleidoscope corners
multitudes of eyes witnessing the measured
firings of your synapses.
I do not move for long minutes. In leaving I would wake you.

Finally I will cede my covers, tuck you in tighter.
I long to leave all the doors to this moment open
to walk through its corridors forever. But the tile is cold
the bathroom light scalding bright, the doors are slamming shut
one after one. In whispering goodbye success is in not crying
in getting in my car and switching the heat on against the outside.

Still, before I turn the keys,
I cannot resist forcing out one long breath
to watch it dissipate into morning.

NEW HOUSE HAUNTED

My first night there I woke up often, tossing
into the space where I have no name
and can't remember who you are next to me.
It was all black—
the kind with creatures waiting perched
and red eyes flashing just out of sight.

You did not sleep well either
and when the alarm came on I squeezed your wrist
before breaking in your shower.
There's a window opening onto the stall,
so I can feel the leaves' breath outside,
and watch the sway of a neighbor's bird feeder
bending a stray branch. The outdoor air opens
the world to me like a peeled orange twisted in two,
the juice leaving fingers dripping.

I am sorry for my nightmares, for the tangle
of sheets I leave behind. I am sorry this is not my home
and I promise to tread carefully with no dripping water
on the floor and no sticky fingerprints
left on your cheek when I linger goodbye.

RAISING THE WHITE FLAG

I came close once.
It was like falling asleep
on a ship,
or a train.
Soft waves, steady
track clicks, your breath
in and out imagined.

Now in the dark of mornings
when some restlessness wakes me—
a building's sigh, your face yanked
from a dream—
I have to pretend I am close again
to slip back to sleep.

And in the bright day
of cruise control and toothpaste
taste leftover and screens
after screens I know
I have left something
on the train
or the ship.
The black and green of a broken
earring, a smudged window
thumb print, the opened
umbrella of my closed eye lid.

Empty handed, I stand on the shore
waiting for rain.

AWASH

I

To step out into it from the shower—
not neat lines of small round capsules
but fist mashes of blue, white, yellow.

And to lie down when it's over,
Feel the salt slap of rearing,
snorting waves. Feel the comfort
of the ending

of a book read once.
Long skirts dragging,
then nothing but sea.
Feel sluggish hope pried free
and that warm watery
taste of approaching,
of far off final peace.

II

Now you call.

Insistent songs. First like sirens,
crashing over
something out of slept-
through cassette tapes.

Then sharp. Nothingness
split. And after curled up
crunched air gasp out

the shame sting
of salvation is what is left. Entire oceans
drained away.
Long since fled.

KOREA

I lie down in the day,
pretend it's dark as where you are.

To sleep like this forever,
cow heavy stupor,
or no? That is not
my question.

The invasion has won—
and there are others now,
cannon boom loud.

Were it just me then—
curl up seashell smooth

and silent.

DROWNING IN THREE PIECES

I.

When I heard
glass is a liquid, the window
a spell bound water fall,
I pressed my palm flat against.
Were you on the other side
I could part seas.

II.

Chinese poets are always drowning
beneath their own reflections.
Their intentions are good
and so thin schools
of silver fish swirl to honor—
clouding over flesh in a shroud.

III.

For me the rain will thicken
into a hanging sea.
The world will rest
in other depths
in other frozen lives.

BETTER TO HAVE AND NOT NEED THAN TO NEED AND NOT HAVE

What a thrill to go unprepared,
without the solemn saying of childhood.
To, without a towel in sight,
shake myself dry on the shore in the sun.

BEFORE I DIE

It was a hard morning
hot grey knuckled deep into eyes
and I flopped like a catfish yanked
into air, mouth and tail frantic.

From bed
to shower back to bed. Fight defeat
with all my fingertips
pressed into throat, to forehead.

The airport is just past work.
I could keep driving. Today \$449
is all I need for a ticket to Alaska,
one way.

But what after the plane trip
when your life becomes the small
towns a homeless drive the stone
wall fact of nowhere to go?
What to gain then but
to see the mountains there
before I die?

BEASTS

I.

Baby flounders
should not be floating so high.
After we shake him from the net
you hold out your palm,
gray scale engulfed.

Gingerly I take him—
flat like a stone—
and toss him back.

II.

Hunting squirrels
we do not chase.
Just steady stare paw raised.
But from the glint
of teeth comes loud
that ancient declaration:
I will eat you.

III.

The best I can say
is that there were toads out--
lumpy gray leaves littering
the moon chalked sidewalk.
As I passed by
they puffed up and skittered
off onto darker paths.

Looking up I wished
I knew what tree they fell from.

IV.

Walking back at night I almost fell on a dead possum.
My feet caught asphalt and then
I was on my knees staring straight up.
What was there to see but buzzing lights,
with not even moths attached,
the moon barely holding his own and below
there was the possum. Oh. Which heavenly glow
should I beg for mercy?

ON GETTING THROUGH MY DAYS

I.

Everywhere you are I put a beach,
even landlocked I'll sketch one in mind's eye
for you to walk along,
the waves tasting the soles of your feet.

II.

I broke my first morning rule—
crawled back to bed after getting up.
It made me late but it was worth it.
I dreamt of neon bright horses and you.

FOR MATT ON HIS GRADUATION

They bubble you here
bursting green and hung by strings
woven of tuition and they promise you freedom
and shady trees forever changing hue
the same year for year

and now watching you stand at the end
the spring verging into summer and eyes colored
autumn with goodbyes. I tell you don't let them take it.
You have momentum. The world is everything green
and don't let them take it. Don't just put one foot after the other
and the other in the dead hot asphalt of nowhere.

CAPE CANAVERAL

There was a lone flying fish
skipping between waves
with a stone's conviction,
wings and perfect spin.

I was alone when I saw him
beer can pressed cold
between my knees.
Chin tucked down, eyes ahead
and I shared the conviction of gravity,
of sinking in the end.

Later I dreamt that fish flew high, escaping
ocean gusts to catch air with gills—
a clammy Icarus climbing sunward
as the crowd, coming out of nowhere,
cheered, distant but louder and louder
for disaster.

MAKING A BREAK FOR IT

The water is just above my waist, the current
herding me along the beach and urging
me further in. I draw in breath as six pelicans
surf air over breaking froth.

They know it is evening— the time when
silver fish bubble between breakers.

The birds are close enough, I could reach and touch them,
though one swivels sharp eyes in my direction.

All day I have been giving myself to the waves,
gathering strength they toss and pummel
body into gritty beach. I pry a dainty pink shell
from my wrist, shake out the salt
coat tangle of my hair. The ocean is gripping,
waves coaxing me away from shore.

Come join us they howl with a slam, then softer
join us as the tide recedes.

Down the beach two men with cigarette pressed lips
and coolers full, wait with poles shoved deep in sand.
One lifts his hat and runs hand through greasy hair.
We can think we know them
just by watching the ease of their casts in the sunset
the ragged edges of white shirts licking at their arms.

The pelicans glaring and braying
are not to be out done. Three dive at once
always waiting to level the last moment--
triumphant with struggling dinner clutched tight.

I do not know any of you. I will check into the hotel.
I will eat a breakfast I do not taste
and my life will click heels on tile until the squawking mounts
the tides grow loud, the feathers fall out,
and I swim fast and hard into the surf.
I will break down and become the sand.

IN BETWEEN THE FIRST AND SECOND FLOORS

Like a windup toy,
I am fine once I get going nowadays.
It is the pauses that kill me,
like this morning when I took an elevator
just one floor up for a change.
For a moment my finger hovered
over that bright red button.
Oh! To set things still and ringing,
to hear the doors latch and to sink
heavy to the floor. To curl there.

FIELD TRIP

The plant man laughs at our shiny new
steel toed shoes as we shuffle onto site.
We're strangers here emerging from gray walled
mouse mazes to peer at a gutted turbine—
its pieces lined up as though called to war.
I want to tell the men to not strut and mewl
like ruffled pacing peacocks. This is their world to rule
yes, but it is a small wasteland
where rust fans over each metal edge,
and scuff marks litter the pathways between cranes.
The big machines dip their necks to swing and lift
the fine crafted components heavenwards. Looking up I wonder
about salvation for discarded parts, Viking funerals for burnt
down pieces that no longer fit.

We move slow, herded up some scaffolding
to see the lower half of the unit scooped clean--
an empty vessel thick with tiny measurements, the upper
piece propped looking ready for moon landing.
And beneath more metal a man sprays methodical
liquid tests. Squinting, you can watch the colors run
to check for cracks, pink and purple like finger painting
I might have made young. The machine is within a thousandth
of an inch of life, and someday it will be all-powerful
aligned and bolted and the blades
within spinning up perfect storms of roaring gas.

But now it is petty, hollowed out. Smudged hard hat men
stare at us with disgust or confusion as they clean bolts one
methodic machine squeal at a time,
heads bent to whining metal to whirl
the threads clean. Everything must hold together.

This is what you leave me for, the grunting,
the miniscule degrees, the clank of a crane contemplating the lift.
I can't take my eyes off the swinging arc of rusted ring
hoping for redemption somewhere above.

GLOCKENSPIEL

My lights have been burnt out for months
I bought the bulbs but buried them
in some corner waiting for a time
to illuminate and every morning
the same girl starts her cranky Mustang,
the engine rolling at me,
three tries before
it catches and I'm just walking by.
I am barely there.

We are all on tracks rotating
small and wooden
jerky figurines keeping time,
whistling cheerful tunes to the hour hands
and I'm tired. I'm tired and the bands of radar green
and yellow and red flecked arms
are swirling closer on the morning news screen.
I can feel myself rust up in rain that's coming.

I want an oil lamp to set against the wind
against the footfalls in hallways
the rising fear like stone monsters
pediment perched spouting on shadow edges
watching the little rosy cheeked marchers
with a chiseled scorn.

LATE, LATE

I cannot stop to take a picture
of the spider web hanging in my hallway
even though it's flashing green
gossamer in the rising sun— insistent.

What would the snap shot give me
to take along? I want to travel.
Not toward the office but
somewhere distant where I could stare
hard at my reflection in a bronze shield
forged when worn hills were still sharp.

Or maybe my grasp of geology is slipping
was that when humans were squatting,
hammering and setting fires?
I'd go backwards to check if I could.
Watch eroded hill stumps become jagged, gleaming white.
And there are fewer people, if they're here at all—
beyond the soft parades of birds sliding on a lake that dries
as I watch as the rocks become time smooth

as men cobble boats and rafts and gleaming
bronze shields to hold against sleek metal
sharpened to finer and finer ends as the mountains
above shrink and large wooden homes
emerge, full of smug smiles and knowing
gazes at private views.

A quick photo snapped would not take me back,
would not whisk the shield to mirror my days
and hours backwards across seas to gleam
as flickering threads in a world still new.

ALTAR

I.

Count up these omens:
black horror bugs erupting
in pockets to spread over sidewalk
with the world in mind.
The swollen gray rat that would not frighten
at your headlights as it paced
our fence line. The snow that dissolved
into rain the instant you stepped
from your distant car.

And so many miles away what can you give?
Not even a brush of the fingertips.

II.

My mother told me people crave
the weather they lack inside.
I want cold clean clipped breathing, pristine
snow bank beds, my nose,
my untouched fingertips,
chipped off in frost.

III.

If I was strong enough
in the winding descent of my day
I would direct my life in scenes
Fog rushes in as the sun settles.
The camera angles
around hidden corners
the mists part to reveal
a classroom table. Students discuss
the literary distinction between the gothic
and the grotesque. In the back room
altar I lie finally frozen.
The screen goes black.

STOP THE AUTOPSY

In the river you are the one to spot
the fish, tail swinging against pressure
pounds of water racing chopped down
the valley. A big fish, you say. We crash
over him slow motion. He is content to face upstream
and go no further. Later at the caves
we'll see icy trout flitting underground
descending as the cavern rocks creep closer
until we are inside the mountain, no sun
to poison slimy flesh. I would drop,
crawl on my knees until all light fades
and I feel cool scales start to form.

All my pills are gone the edges
are sharp again the air furious
and soft voices shrieking. My mouth agape
gills flapping on cold stone as I thrash
through our sheets. You shake me awake
and awake but it is time for you to go
half in dream I cry stop the autopsy
don't let them find it. It is time
for me to go.

I should have been a trout the comfort
drip of ice water on rock no danger
of dehydration, we are inside
a mountain! Just a curl into hypothermia
not a bad way to go. I hear it's warm at the end
and then just sleep like you won't let me
stop the autopsy. They can't find it.

The closest I come to fins is a cold shower
the running water lets me breathe but makes me late
and later. Head down the cold rushing
water I am speckled as though I could find
our cave and swim in and out as I will
go to the world tail thrusting upstream.
Stop the autopsy I'm screaming and you
just shake and shake me awake your sweat
smelling like burnt tires.

CATFISH TOMAHAWK

You look both ways under lamplight same as
crossing the street but with my head buried deep.
I won't call you love, to see you shrink away
from my spine rippling in bumps like milk poured in sour chunks.

And I'll stop telling you the tiger my mouth is full of
fat fingers slipping. The promised buttons un-pushed
in my repeating nightmares reality a thick dial tone
that won't interrupt with ringing. With your voice

carrying over water a drunk fisherman yowl a red fish
on his line but water is not ocean a call skips only so far
rocks always sink.

My mouth could still be around you for all the sweat
I taste, nervous thrumming— a pitch of attacking pines.

A breath now. Your postcard benediction— did you mean
to show the sliver slow carve the cliffs into fire blossoms
Did you mean it as a promise of something grand?

Once your brother climbed a tree all the way
into the wind it swayed to the point a mother's shriek
beat the rhythm back and forth. Your feet were on the ground
your face frozen against a winter that would come slowly
rising like the waves you love.

A catfish was pitched quick and like a tomahawk it stuck
all spiked from your side the belly ooze of infection
a clammy sea kiss you desire. My lips are too warm, the boat
all a pitch of the soft slow ball into a glove hot with impact

There was a goodbye swirling around like a tongue. In my ear
you said it. And me I'll satisfy with nothing. The wind spaced
out down the line the pull of need spiny and rearing
flashes of fangs of us empty the vessel open but the peace
of snow not falling to fill.

WEEKS WILL PASS

and the sunburn wrapped around my ankle
will turn from scarlet to pink
to the pale of new grown skin. Four or five
pounds will expand and shrink from me
like lungs filling then emptying
with a sigh. The days will lengthen
and I will walk at night in long shadows
and settling sunlight. I will dream in your absence
dialing your number, my fingers sliding
sweaty on a key pad full of foreign
symbols, listening hopelessly to endless ringing.

And one morning I will wake and not know
whether it is pouring or the shower was left on.
The world outside will be flooded with wide
bone slick mirrors. I'll emerge into reflection.

ON THURSDAY

There's the possible promise of your flight
touching down today. The landing gear unclicking,
your forehead drawn tight to cattle shuffle to my car.

I will pick you up, staring skyward to count off
each goose tail, each cloud patch you left behind.

I'll greet you only to sink my teeth deep
into your calf as though possessed with fangs
I could keep you here. A wolf with sheepish fluff
around her muzzle. But you will go again
and I sleep through the hours after goodbyes.

My barking dog marks dream time with sharp exclamation
points, then long pauses, then just squirrel tuned ears
twitching the minutes curled next to me.

I worry where you are,
maybe driving the bridge out of town
an osprey on every light post,
a fish dropped thunk
from talons onto car hood, a frozen
frightened eye bounced into your lane.

Come back to me on Thursday we will drink fresh cider,
it will be so cold our teeth will burn.

ABSENT

It is a month before my birthday
I cannot ask for presents.

But I am blowing out candles
one by one and softer with each breath.

I can wish for leaves to fall to orange
though it is summer and looking out
the trees are swaying palms— no good for climbing.
Their husks crumble at clinging fingertips.

I can wish but cannot ask for the presence
of mind not to stand
eyes up to streaks of rain, to stare
droplets down and listen for the slick steel
engine growl trailing the sky
without you aboard.

HOMUNCULUS

Coming to Terms with Goethe's Faust, Part II.

After you were found
fingerprinting yourself in red
panic all over your attic
they locked you up,
opened all your doors
and watched as you showered
and kept lights on your eyes
as you stared to find sleep.
They pressed papers after papers
into your palms. Lithium
to make your bones grind
and shake. Long white
and short fat and bright green
pills etched like filigreed keys
twisting and turning over in locks—
clicking but never catching.
You belly rolled to lie
so they'd let you out with one
final paper to clamp your wrists
to pour you down electric torrent
drains to let light in.

But you could not.

Later though, you learned
to dance. I've seen pictures.
Hand resting light and her skirt
frozen mid swirl all toes curled.

For me it was all subterranean
inside down, counting twirling angels
on each pin head etching with their
rusty points a criss cross
red welt talisman standing out
on hand and palm to keep
twitching fingers or worse away.
To fend off that attacking
forest, jagged limbs
and bark and roots advancing
to take this hill over
and over along my skin.

Later I learned too.
There is picture proof
of flying. The jumper's
hooves snapped up
snorts of nostrils flaring.

Nowadays you hunker inside down
to details, tracing number streams
aligning in laser precision
the awkward angles
your synapses fire from.

We have seen the writing on the wall
it is all chemical compositions, webs
of serotonin and arrows piercing
towards the brain.

But now is the time to be grand.
I tell you, we can take
these elephants over the alps,
dance fire on salted
fields, break through
old rusty wards
and float away fully formed
to marry the sea.

OUR MOTHERS SAY BABY

like we could step outside and pluck one from the sky. It was different at 17 pregnancy test propped on the toilet paper waiting in a mall bathroom with that boyfriend outside shaking like a rabbit who said *I will kill myself*.

And now we roll our eyes past playgrounds and scoff at our mothers and say over drinks there are too many people in this god damn world god damn it. And I scream no more into the dark when your hand stops to rest over my belly.

FIRST RESPONSE NEGATIVE

I'll admit, for a week I hoped
rather than dreaded. Listened
for ghost heartbeats with my head cocked.

No one cooed on crowded busses
or pressed ear to belly button.
My feet braced for planetary shifts.

And my tongue escaped to tell you the news,
the words scrambling upward
like life clawing its way to light.

And I could see the mouth open,
agape in yawn and scream.

Yet longing was all there was
of this sinewy bridge to you—
thumping on the air
with fists that look like yours.

THE ULTRASOUND

In movies it's said with a squeal
"that jelly is cold,"
but here it isn't— they heat it for comfort,
and it scorches my stomach. The hard knob
of the wand presses against flesh,
the tech is scowling and I squint
toward the screen to read my future
in fuzzy black and white smudges, my tea leaves.
"Put your arm above your head."
I had always thought by now
I would be here holding hands, tears streaming,
listening for a heartbeat and praying inside
there was something healthy.
But I am stealing that scene from so many movies,
taking what is not mine. I do not pray
and there is no one here to watch me hold my breath
as the bored woman beeps and clicks
her way along my insides.
"We're almost done." I am feeling
that I've worn this body out and will float
away through any careless open window.
The end comes, the tech can only see.
Only watch. She cannot decree
whether I'll live or die, become sick
or stay healthy. She just takes her pictures
and sends me on my way, no new life in tow.

CONSUMPTION

I am not pregnant but I throw up in the morning. I throw up bile mixed with blood. This is dramatic until I rise and brush my teeth and pull on shoes. I imagine I am Keats or Chekhov but Kafka hits too close to home. My eyes are rimmed red but there is no starched handkerchief flecked with blood. There will be no swooned escape into death. No request for burning of manuscripts. Instead there are stomach pills. Doctor's scolding. You're travelling more these days. Not home to hear the heaving. Mornings come and I walk from my car through doors. Hours pass and then it's back through doors and to the car again. This is the nature of everyone's days. I sweep up all of humanity and clutch at them, tighten their ties, adjust the resolution of their screens and scream.

LEGACIES

To my living grandmother, I mail your picture. You will not meet her. She sits and stares at mountains and counts red cars on all the roads that she can see. She is nice sometimes but mostly is not. I wanted her to see you. All I have of my other grandmother, the dead one, is earrings. They are not heirloom. After she died my aunt took my uncle's guitar-pick cutter. She made pick-shaped earrings out of my dead grandmother's credit cards. Gramma would want you to have these, she said. What could I do with them? You cannot wear your dead grandmother's American Express in your ears. I am not sure where they are now. In Vermont my alive grandma is looking at your face, she is thinking you are handsome. Then she is forgetting all about you as she counts cars on her road.

EVERYONE IN YOUR PARTY HAS DIED

Many wagons fail to make it all the way to Oregon.- The Oregon Trail

Sitting waist deep in warm water
you were delicate, digging oysters from the river bottom.

I peeled away my modern trappings
and paused long on the bank
letting the next second run over until fording the river

with no oxen to tend no supplies to preserve
just staring honest hard at you.

This was now the pixelated game we used to play
death popping up in boxes dismissed with a click
and resurrection performed with each new start.
I christened your copy to shoot buffalo together
and leave all that sweet meat rotting until the next notice:
buck shot in foot wound festering disease sweltering and more dying imminent

Here sunburn shaking on the far side of our river
watching you crunch oyster husks between thumb and finger
and pick out their snot bodies carefully from under nails—
both of us dream to reach the coast.

WHEN THE MIRROR BROKE

you cried for seven years bad luck.
I could not believe, but wanting to fix everything
I googled “ways to avoid broken mirror bad luck”.
Burn it, the internet advised. So we stood midwinter,
sparks flying from lighter sore fingertips
ice reflecting in the glass, the snow,
in frozen tree branches: infinite shards resisting flame.

The mirror did not catch,
but the internet insisted then,
“running water will wash bad luck away”.
We hiked to a stream, though it was frozen,
the fish dark and sleepy blips beneath the ice. With hard
heeled blows we broke the surface, tested the flow
with mittens peeled off, and the trees watched, reflecting.

Grinning relief, you dropped the glass bits in.
Months later, when leaves came out green again,
I would start to worry.
What if some fish took the glinting pieces
for his next meal?
Some awful death then,
to float, thawed lifeless in the spring.

But that night your smile was lit,
you were born again clean.

And come April
I would stand in that same stream,
guilt eyed at the fish, mouths wide open,
corpses caught in river bank weeds.
I would google “wash sins away”
and the internet would say
“there is nothing to be done”.
And the almost icy flow,
sucking at me ankle deep,
would only stir up mud to coat my toes.
Wash me away. I begged.
The stream moved on.

FRESHMAN

After a party I dropped one 40, and laughed at that—
the glass on the sidewalk caught the blinking
yellow lights above our street, above the walk home.

In your room, I dropped the second one
and things turned to nightmare, bad dream bottles slipping
through fingers that grasped afterwards on air. The glass spread
across your floor like jagged squirming ants, and I bent to scoop,
to clean it all away.

Then the dreamscape shook, blood smeared across your door
the wall, the knob. It slid hot down my palm. I could hear you laughing—
“It’s only a cut.” But in the bathroom blood
kept oozing from the mirrors, horror movie
scripted now, knuckles blending with white porcelain sink.
In the hallway you were laughing still and the more I tried
to wipe things clean the redder they became.

Now it’s cliché, all that blood. The glass has long been carefully swept up,
the doors and floors and walls wiped clean. There was not a trace
by Tuesday. But it is my face
I still remember through the smog of years
staring between scarlet swaths, eyes knowing
this is a beginning.

DRINKING

It is a new bathroom this time
the bright blue tile frantic on my slick
sliding door eyes. I've stumbled
into so many starting with the clean
white trailer set in German woods
like a sterile gingerbread house
full of toilets and giggling
girls fixing their hair. It was funny
then to get the American kid drunk
the sticky red sugar gritting
through my teeth
but I finally recognized
my own reflection and I still
look better in these places, with the cracks
and speckled chips the fogged up distortion
of the glass my nose my eyes my mouth
fading away at last.

In the morning it's always cold showers
like a Hemingway character brushing his teeth
spitting up the night into the grim reflections
shining off each water drop.

WINTER BREAK

I've always liked the cold but it has become extreme.

The night before leaving, I stood outside for long minutes,
breathing the flurried snow deep in. When it's cool the stars
come out brighter and cleaner,
happier to be looked upon.

My jacket was too warm—
crushing breath from my chest, so I took it off.

The muddy parking lot beamed, lit with the shined silver
of a pleased sky. I stood until my arms were red and blotchy,
until my face began to burn instead of sting. Still I did not walk inside.
Who could face old heater smell and bright Holiday
dolls dressed in white trimmed furs?

It became worse in the airport, boarding the plane
bound south for suffocation.

You were somewhere down there, shirt off, slithering beneath
a boat or a car, fixing things. You beam through sweat
and do not mind the smothering of stars, their feeble yellow points
muffled in the steamy night.

FREEZE WARNING

The woman moves to smother the hot house plants
with long plastic sheets, saving the bad tempered
blooms from delicate frost, from freezing
slowly to brown wasted stalks.

For this walk I do not want
a coat, I want to be air filled, scorched
by cold in raw red lungs.

In Maine on the ocean side I would stand on one rock
then slowly shift to another, careful but not sure footed
on cliffs' edge where there were lighthouse stranded
ships and waves—
music on stone rising to opera climax, a deep voice
declaring love declaring death declaring the gray sky
means only bad omens and flocks of crows

watching with bright black eyes. So strange this far south
the woman with bathrobe, feet bare of slippers, continues to roll
and roll out the plastic. Protect the lilies the bougainvilleas the azaleas,
pink blooms almost blue with cold and drooping now.
Is it that it has already been too late?

I will walk naked armed a crow's eye scanning the still brilliant
green grass, frost melting to dew, ice wet blades caught on early morning toes.
I hop delicate from one patch to another bending to see a frozen piece of sun.

The plants, so many, will be dead by spring.

THE BIRDS

We've become overrun by birds,
their black-ice eyes glinting down at us,
filling the only tree
whose leaves have dropped, perched
ominous on rooftop peaks,
bisecting the sky with frantic thrusts.

I think they are swallows, though
I can't be sure. Big red breasted
with beaks thrust up.
God notes our fall, they jeer.

But who will catch you? You don't want
to land in our hands, my dog's teeth glinting
and instinct boiling
as his eyes trace your paths to and fro.

And not me, who shies away,
when it comes time to end the suffering.

THE MOON AT NIGHT

I shuffle into shoes every dawn
and walk in tight circles nose
to the inside and head bent down.

*sometimes a white stretched bird
reflects each shining wing swoop over water.*

And every
every day I pick up my speck of sugar
of dry cracker and follow scents forward,
along white lined trails and beeping
glassed in doors that swing
shut swing shut every minute.

Before I grew many slender
limbs to trudge with, before
I sensed one crumb leads to another and
another leads to the end
of that snaking maze of painted flowers
and headless marchers, before I twitched
antennae in the gray seriousness of afternoon

I stood on winter rooftops, light flakes
truly aimless in the air,
and the moon having risen
I thought it could expand
fill the sky
touch the ground
hold me.

WOOLF

I think of her when I walk into waves
I'm not sure how it went if it was gray
like today the only blue the water
ahead, color draining as you reach it.
I think there was no surf no crash
no long lungfulls of sea. I've heard
of pockets packed with rocks and a slow
stately march clothes blossoming
outward like Ophelia's singing
gowns and it's a good picture
to fall asleep to as you will your breath
to slow, your heart to beat in rhythm
with the tide and one foot after
another going deeper.

THE SIDE OF THE BOTTLE

commands call doctor
if you experience sadness.
How? When life is a trudge from my car
back to my car and the trees I see
look tired but there's no help
for them in muddled asphalt, unless—
I'll melt it with my eyes
create a hazy lava sea don't touch
the carpet you'll get burned
we would say jumping
from chair to bunk bed to door
frame. Stop that my mother
always screaming pitching
balled up socks with carnage
unrestrained. There was a maple
tree outside my window
I couldn't take it with me but I think
of it sometimes. Just big enough
to climb I would sit
trace names in bark with chipped
fingernails. Now it would be your name.

I BECOME THE FIRST OOZING OF LIFE

onto some primeval beach
with no head even to raise
in regard of lush green volcanic
fires forging new worlds while
I'll leave only a slight slime trail
and then death with no cry or gasp or
(that which I most desire) the world ending
whimper. No wailing like when I lock
myself in the car. Sparks of litter
blow their territorial way
through outside world windows,
and with head curled onto cool cruel
steering wheel tears come oozing and they
say we are so sorry you are sad.
As if I was not alone (which oh I am), tentative
foot forward and forward when all instinct
screams beware the forest mists the rich
warm soil the triumph of the pounce
of higher forms of life. Keep the head bowed
keep it down. Keep it still.
(Oh!) to be only one cell.
To be absolved.

PREY

In dream I flip to dive deeper
to not break the surface
I want to not return
to be the color of snow
gathering on the hill side.

Instead I am the deer who,
nose twitching, head high, ears flicking,
does not run quick enough
as the gun shot slaps against the sky.

GENERAL ANXIETY DISORDER

My dog caught a squirrel and snapped its neck
and I am now he who barks, the baby that wails
to be left alone to quiet calm settle hush or
choke— my own warning stuck sharp in throat.

I can't share with you the sick green
foam of worry rising and falling
like tides that climb to swallow the sun.
You'll take your own way out—
a slow slide to dust. I am not tied to earth
but float with no sure footing.

You are wrong.
I am the bone in the squirrel's neck
hear me crunch with one good shake.

SENTENCED

The sunset is shuttered by window blinds,
barely visible even when I stand and peer outside.

With a pill here or there my days can blur—
sweep through in moments caught by sleep
chin tucked to chest.

Lately, I have not been good at finishing.
Even pausing while brushing my teeth,
turning the faucet and walking away.

I sit sometimes half dressed on the edge of a bed
counting my toes as though they could change—
multiply in number and scuttle across the floor.
I blink and it is one time, a wink will take me to another.

In Munich I perched astride a silver lion in the street.
No one looked too closely and from my seat
I counted passerby, pulled inside tight against the cold
red cheeks bright and eyes down. They'd seen my like before.
I rapped my heels against my steed. He did not budge.

A blink and I am walking onto asphalt, the sky reveals
its bruised outsides, fading purple red and pink.
I have seen your like before. Have watched the colors drain.
When I turn the key the engine rolls then dies.

WRETCHED

Driving back, I wait to hear from you
but your silence transforms me
into some dumb snuffling beast hunting
through a muddy bottom damp and dark
finding only twigs and dirt.
I try to sleep through losing my way,
but am tossed awake unmoored in waves.

What journeys I set myself on!
I cried all the way home
my dog whining softly to himself,
knowing his comfort out of my reach in the backseat.
And you have made no promises. Told only the truth,
but if I sit beside you will you turn your head for me?
In my car I lie and lie out loud. By the time I am in your driveway
I am blue from lack of air.

A PIN'S FEE

If only Grendel,
neon green eyed,
had been the one
to greet Hamlet
among his mist strewn
first act trees.

A better ending then,
no wailing gnashing visions
no monsters lurking in puffed-up
clouds. No death ten ways
or final act ballrooms
littered with splayed hands.

No doubts to hang
from muttering tongues—
instead existence snapped from air
no questions asked.

In the end
just dinner,
both sated.

LAUREL TREES

My mother gave me tapes to talk me to sleep.
Greek myths where monsters were slain
and snakes rose from fields in deathly strikes.
Heads sang in rivers and people
were always changing, bones cracking to sharp angles,
fingers melting into hooves.

Once a goddess fell in love
with a poor shepherd and begged the Gods
for his eternal life. She did not ask
for everlasting youth though— and he aged
bent into a cricket, too old to even hop
inside his cage. I would not keep you there.

And Zeus changed one bride to white cow
with big brown eyes all ripe for slaughter.
I will not turn beast of burden, no milky skin
no pleading to survive. I owe,
we owe

it to ourselves to change with dignity,
like a nymph returning to her tree,
skin flaking to bark, silver brown
limbs heave and reach with creaks,
roots unfurl near the river
to dip in and drink together.

OUTAGE

What it is like with no power,
the lines sparking in the street
as children walk by heading home
to games of hearts in candlelight
a radio and stacks of batteries
water boiled before drinking.

The past is suddenly open and present
beneath bare soles of feet on cold tile
a shuffle from one dark room to another.

And in the plants there is silence
no whining sputtering surges or rhythmic chugging
the crunched and jolted metal expanding
in rest.

Who wouldn't rather run their hands down a horse's leg
feeling for heat for soreness for pain, and find the tendon,
bones, muscle all straight and cool and full of strength?