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FRACTURES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

A stoplight at night. A dim bedroom. The smell of smoke and loss in summer. In winter, the crackle of snow underfoot, the city cold as a lavender planet. These are the settings within *Fractures*, and it is to these backdrops that the conflicts of the poems' speakers bare themselves. In the glow of these places, the truth of fractures, the gaps and slivers within us all, are illuminated.

Below the visible wholeness of life lies a masked truth, the truth of a world that exists as a collection of fragments, of lives, of stories that connect, intersect, and sometimes overlap to create the tapestry of life as we know it. Each of us, in our own way, is fractured: in our minds, bodies, families, or relationships. And yet we live with these breakages, embrace them, even, because these splinters—personalities, moments, obstacles—are what make us whole. *Fractures* is a collection of poems that examines these pieces that characterize human life. The events and speakers in this manuscript are fictional, yet, like all fiction, they reflect some remnants of reality, some recognizable truths of ourselves stitched throughout.

Each section of the collection can be viewed as a separate fracture, and each poem may also be a fracture. Some poems are broken even further: within stanzas, within lines, sometimes within the mind of the speaker. The poems do not tell a linear story, but rather tell bits of stories that often overlap. These narrative gaps too are indicative of a fracture as they mirror the disconnect, both physical and emotional, that frequently occurs in the stories of one's life.

The sections of *Fractures* address different topics, ranging from loss to love to self destruction. The speakers are linked by a sense of searching, a self-awareness of being splintered, and, as one poem states, of recognizing a “hunger” for something more. One has

lost a dear friend; another destroys her body in a quest for beauty. Some reflect on their families. Others mourn for lovers past, while one clings to a fleeting moment of love in its perfection.

Just as the body suffers its broken bones that heal with time, so too these speakers suffer rifts that mend but are not forgotten. In this way, *Fractures* is a dissection, an X-ray of its speakers, each break a lit scar, fluorescent on the page.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing Life: An Evolution of Influences

To pinpoint “who” a poet is—her influences and idols, her defining experiences and sparks of inspiration—is akin to asking someone to define who she is as a person: her likes and dislikes, her shifts over time, her brightest memories, her formative moments and the people responsible for them. Quintessentially, it seems to boil down to two questions: who are you and how did you get to be this way? There is generally no single answer, no way to summarize oneself in a simple, satisfying sentence, as people are complex and angled, full of delicate nuances that stem from seemingly limitless origins.

Thus the task of mapping my poetic influences is daunting, as countless influences have often seeped into my writing slowly, almost unnoticeably, and tracing their origins is elusive. My writing has evolved from years of reading and processing the things I have read; in this way, all writers have had some degree of influence on my poetry, in the same way rain is absorbed by the earth. Upon examination, however, I can articulate the strongest influences as originating from both poetry and fiction writers, and most notably these writers are Stephen Dobyns, Sharon Olds, Lynn Emmanuel, Rita Dove, Laura Kasischke, and Lorrie Moore.

Late in my sophomore year of college, I took a course entitled Understanding Poetry, largely because no other classes fit into my schedule and because, up to this point, I despised poetry and felt utterly obtuse when it came to understanding even the most surface meanings of poems, let alone the more complicated techniques that are the backbone of poetry. I did not expect to enjoy this class, but I hoped it would enable me

to overcome, at least to a small degree, my fear and hatred of poems. And, as it turned out, this class was one of the most valuable classes I have taken to date, as I not only began to understand the vocabulary of poetic techniques—figurative language, imagery, alliteration, assonance, iambs, trochees, caesuras—but I also discovered that, beyond occasionally comprehending basic meanings of poems, there were also some poems I read that I actually liked, even admired. Many of those poems came from two poets: Stephen Dobyns and Sharon Olds.

Stephen Dobyns, with his black humor and cutting truths, was the first poet who truly affected me, who made me feel a connection to the words on the page. I read all of his poems that were in our literature book, and then on my own I read several of his other books, including *Velocities*, a collection of poems from his previous books. At that time, his poetry did not prompt me to want to write my own poetry, as I was more interested in writing stories than poems. Yet his words and characters were deeply influential, as I learned that poetry can be both funny and serious, simultaneously simple and complex. Dobyns' poetry—of outcasts and freaks, loners and rejects--inspired me to read more poems, and to realize that poetry was not so terrifying, nor was it something I needed to avoid.

In that same class, I read poems by Sharon Olds, and she too inspired and influenced the writer I am today. Olds, like Dobyns, wrote poems that I could understand and connect with, poems that struck some chord deep within me. Again, after the class ended I read Olds' poems on my own, admiring her striking imagery, figurative language, and narrative voice, her ability to write poems rife with emotional honesty and surprising beauty, often accomplished through subjects that are not always considered beautiful:

strained family relationships, illness and death, raw sexuality. Olds' poetry has a sense of command in every word and every line, and I learned that apologies for honesty are not necessary; images and carefully chosen language, however, are. Later, I was fortunate enough, nearly seven years after first reading her work, to participate in a three-week-long workshop with Sharon Olds, and during this time I experienced a renewed sense of inspiration, as her advice shaped several of the revised poems in this thesis. During those three weeks I became more aware not only of the importance of honesty and imagery, but also of the power of revision, and how much stronger a poem can be if pared down to only what is absolutely essential.

The poems in this thesis often rely on the strength of their imagery and metaphors, and I was greatly influenced to hone these skills after reading such poets as Rita Dove and Lynn Emmanuel, and the fiction of Lorrie Moore. These writers display a remarkable ability to create descriptions that, because of their vivid detail and appeals to the senses, truly seem to transcend the page. The worlds these poets create become real, and, regardless of how many times I read them, I am still inspired. In "The Oriental Ballerina," for example, from *Thomas and Beulah*, Dove describes a scene where "the bedrooms of the poor/ are papered in vulgar flowers/ on a background the color of grease, of/ teabags, of cracked imitation walnut veneer." Later in the same poem, she describes "the papery kiss/ of a Kleenex above the stink of camphor,/ the walls exploding with shabby tutus." The images are so rich and palpable, and I have tried in my own work—"Note to Self," for example, or "The Girl Next Door"—to strive for this type of richness, and to create images that serve somewhat as guideposts in their respective poems: markers that lead the reader through the narrative tunnel.

Like Dove, Lynn Emmanuel has a distinct talent for portraying vivid imagery and unexpected—yet absolutely perfect—metaphors. In *The Dig*, Emmanuel writes strings of metaphors, one often growing out of the next, as in “What Ely Was”: “fats that made a surface gleam like a pigeon’s neck,/ like a spill of gasoline, melt-down crusts of oleo/ on the tuna casserole, toast that was blackened/ to a piece of macadam, a singed field, a roof shingle.” In reading poets like Emmanuel, I learned how powerful the metaphor, when used correctly, can be, and I have worked to strengthen my own metaphors, which appear in nearly all of my poems.

From Lorrie Moore’s fiction, which I first read in a fiction workshop, I gained an even greater appreciation for both strings of striking metaphors (à la Emmanuel) and charming oddities (à la Dobyns). Moore’s sentences are filled with clauses, and yet the writing does not become cluttered or overdone. Her metaphors and images take chances, and I admire this. Thus when writing I have kept in mind Moore’s ability to use the unexpected comparisons to their greatest ability, but I have also tried to find and stay true to my own style of writing figurative language and chains of clauses.

In the poetry of Dobyns, Olds, Dove, and Emmanuel, there is usually an adherence to the concrete; even when (especially in the works of Dobyns) the subjects and characters are odd or unexpected, there is still the quality of very definite images, a very outlined narrative, and a distinct knowledge of how these two things connect. Yet in the poetry and fiction of Laura Kasischke, there is a sense of the concrete, but it is joined by the abstract. Certainly, she uses specific images and metaphors, however, they often have a surreal feel, as though she has provided the reader with the visuals and ideas, but has not led the reader by the hand to the connections between the visuals and ideas.

Instead, it is up to the reader to navigate, satisfyingly, the sometimes surreal language and scenery of Kasischke's work. In "Happy Meal," for example, from *Gardening in the Dark*, the speaker remembers "All those years, the way we lived," and continues to illustrate this idea by comparing it to "So much gardening in the dark./ Or an old blind woman sewing/ a tremulous rose on a tablecloth." It is a beautiful comparison, and I found it affecting not because it specifically informed me of the way the speaker lived, but because it informed me of something better: the idea of how the speaker lived, the knowledge that it was akin to moving through life blindly, gropingly, yet still with lovely results—the rose on the tablecloth, shaky but intact.

It was this idea that it is acceptable, and can even be more effective, to be illogical, to not overtly state connections for the reader, that truly affected my work. Before Kasischke, I clung to the notion that everything in a poem had to readily make some kind of sense, because I did not want to lose my reader along the way. But after reading Kasischke's poetry and fiction, my perspective changed, and I began to experiment more with the idea of surreal images and disassociation in both images, connections, and the mind of the speaker. Kasischke's influence can especially be seen in the poems of the last three sections of this thesis.

As someone who enjoys answers with only one tidy solution, I find it difficult to define all of the influences that have factored into my writing. Many writers, such as Stephen Dobyns, Sharon Olds, Rita Dove, Lynn Emmanuel, Lorrie Moore, and Laura Kasischke, have influenced my writing, and, even more, how I view the process and technique of writing. Countless other poets and fiction writers have affected my writing in subconscious ways. But perhaps just as important as all of the writers who have

influenced my writing is the greater awareness I have gained of my own identity and process as a writer. I will never be Stephen Dobyns or Lynn Emmanuel, and I will never try to be. I have my own inherent style, and certainly it has changed from both time, knowledge, and reading other poets. And I believe it has evolved because I have examined my writing, compared it to others, experimented with it, kept what worked and improved on what did not. Each time I read someone else's work I think about how they are similar and different to me, and I use that knowledge to judge what I would like to do in my next poem. My poetic identity has evolved and will continue to evolve, and simply reading other writers is not enough to spur that process. Instead, I have to continue to analyze what I have read, process it, question what I liked and what I did not, the techniques that worked or did not, and in that way my writing will continue to make its greatest strides. The poems in this thesis, then, are indicative of my influences and likes thus far, in combination with my own inherent and evolving style.

Fractures

When I die, cut me
open: you will see the moments
lining my insides, the tapestry.
I am pure white
from the lights of the city
and the flush of my palm in yours.
I am ruby as petals
or the summer gingham of our picnics.
I am orange as the orchards
in morning.
I am silver as rain
sheen and green as the sparks
behind your eyes, clover-sized
and bright. I am blue
as an echo, turquoise as forgiveness.
I am yellow as the house in October,
the slice of apples.
I am water-grey and fluid
as an oyster, leaking
with years of unsaid apologies
and pruned love. I am
pinking in the light,
I am beautiful in rebirth.
I am violet and amber
scattering in shadow,
in wing flaps
and a path of feathers.

I.

Note to Self

Remember the tarped sliver of sky through the window, moon
a paper boat floating in a pool of black, silver shadows
slicing lines across peach linen, bars across the tangle
of ankles. No stars. Remember the faucet leaking tinny
drips like dimes dropping into water. His arm a halo
around your waist, its yellow-watt flush
snug in the soft curve of skin.

Have no illusions. You hate love
poems, their nectarine scents and squishy edges, their constellated
lunar diamonds, their glowing skin and blossoms of fire.
Don't forget that the sky is just a vault of particles, the room
a diorama, all wooden angles, bodies just vesicles and synapses.
Remember you hate to be held, pinned like a fly to one place, pale
wings clipped. Listen to how his breathing, that uneven wheeze pinging
in his lungs, keeps you from sleeping. You need your sleep.

Breathe from that space between your bodies, that tiny
cloister of air separating back and stomach, the size of a sigh,
and forget you ever thought you couldn't. Know that if you
sleep, this moment will slip into the ravine, drowning in that
fuzzy black stippling of veins behind your eyelids.
Forget the moon, its tricky light painting shades
that don't exist; you don't need it. Just remember
the cloister, your lung that breathes in, out.

Dichotomies

Snagged in that lip of shadow between
sun and night, we are split and wholed,
sealed and undone while the rain taps
the window and its symphony of bells jangles.
It is the summer of moments
and learning to remember, the quick
grace of catching fireflies, how to cup
them just right, their bellies burning
brief stars in the safety of jars.
We pick peaches on a trip
in the steeping heat and can
their sunset bodies, slices of moon
in thick-sugar blood. You work
third shift sometimes, your headlights
sliver a black wing against the house,
then your entrance,
smell of clothesline laundry.
In the center of the dark,
the frogs sing songs of gravel
and green, but it is their pauses, a clasping
in their chests, that I remember best.
After a while, you too pause
and the musicians of August gather
their lyrics and carry their notes in cases
lined with velvet. When you leave, the day
is an unnamed color and the sky forgets
how to pattern its lights and so they scatter
across other earths. You remain the shuffle
of quills waiting for the wind to shift,
the taut arc of feathers that parts the stars.

Then

Confetti flakes dripped from a grape sky splitting like glass sheets: that winter, the one that went on record

and schools were closed for two weeks, the winter when cars slipped off the slicks of ice and into ditches the way my brother's

Matchbox cars skidded from the Tonka track and into the chipped-paint floorboard, the husks of crinkled Fords lit

by dying headlights—it was the winter I memorized the feel of your wind-pinked fingers on my hips,

like a whisper and warmth tattooed on the skin. Early mornings of cancelled classes, we skated the frozen lake

with no skates, just rubber-soled boots, your red scarf flashing by like a stop sign. We learned how to

make snow cream, but we were hasty—too much vanilla, not enough milk, that sickly sweet

taste chapping on my lips and curdling in bowls. We ate icicles from the wooden fence instead,

and in our hunger the bland spears seemed like enough. In the banks we collapsed to masquerade as angels,

our arms arcing messy wingspans, then peeled off the layers of parkas and flannel in exchange for dry ones.

My skin still remembered the cool rawness, the cold that feels like heat.

Later, you went back out, in the peaching haze of dusk, the dull remnants of light clinging to your body like skin. I watched

from inside, sitting in darkness, imagined the gold atoms of sun hugging you with their long tongues

the way the holey blue afghan clung around my body. I thought I knew how the sun felt, wanting to hold you like that.

Through the glass I saw you gather the flakes with numbed

hands and pack them in a solid ball, cratered and bumpy.

It seemed that it could never melt, that the sun and fat
grains of salt could not crack the globe of that winter.

We put the ball in my freezer for safe keeping, but soon
the plows started coming, churning up the road's white flesh

with their silver teeth, and the sky faded back to gray.
And then, somehow, it was April.

The hard sphere of thumbprint craters lodged
behind frozen vegetables blistered my skin when I held it
in my palm, its knuckle spots, its melted edges dirty and dated.

Cardboard Futures

Dress up like a virgin, he told me, but
we couldn't decide what one looked like,
so he settled for nurse, all medical curtsey
and healing hands. That was in the beginning,
when we stole hotel room keys for fun, stayed
two nights in the Sea Witch IV under assumed names,
toured half-finished condos early weekend mornings
when construction workers slept. We ate lemon
Danish on those unsanded floors and our clothes
clung with the scent of forest. Sometimes
we never slept and just watched the night
bowing like a hammock above the ocean.
In winter, we visited the holiday lights lining the inlet
parking lot, a hundred blinking sharks.
The Ferris wheel and Merry Mixer were tarped
but the arcades were open year round, all the skeet ball lanes
empty, the fortune teller in her glass booth waiting
with cracked hands to deliver our cardboard futures.
My favorite was *in a new climate you will discover wealth
and happiness*. I hoped it meant a place tropical
where the sun was like our secret and the summer buttercups
shined like wishes in the fields. I hoped it was a place
like I imagined when I thought love was living
inside of a nectarine, the world orange skin,
moth-wing thin but sturdy as bone,
juice always on the tongue, air
and its helix of sugar grains and dew.

He's been gone for years now, to a state where people go
to find mirages of themselves and the air is like
polished knives. I'm still here
where in summer the sky becomes a tangle
electric as live wires, where sometimes
it feels like I could drown
in puddles, where every morning is sunny but in the distance
there is always the churn of thunder,
secret as a dog whistle, this place with its fortunes
and taste of metal, like the water at the bottom of wishing
wells. But now I have a back porch garden
with violets lush like a purple heaven, and seven
pots of mint. I like to eat the leaves and let
them clean my mouth and body until it feels
untouched as an empty house,

sunlight lying like blankets on the floor.

3 AM

I leave my shoes and memento scrap of lace-edged dignity
and poor judgment on the back porch, scabble through the wet
darkness to hole myself in my car where I will hide from
the stars and drive from under the taste of his beer
battered tongue, down the highway where the white lines rise
in lily pads of steam I will follow until I pass
every mile marker the orange sweat night has to offer,
past the pancake place with its scent of early edition
newspapers and undercooked eggs, the booth
where I sat with a boy and the world was
the smell of just cut grass and everything
it needed to be, past the new condos where the bathrooms
are tiled turquoise and pineapple, past the exit
for the black rock beach where I skinny-dipped
and picnicked on a June afternoon before
it rained and I cut my foot on a jagged shell,
past that stain of blood, past the hotel like a castle
and the billboards advertising its Jacuzzi tubs and complimentary
shrimp cocktail, past the sound of the ocean, past the rest
stop for the weary, past the last truck stop for thirty miles
where an ex's truck-driver cousin said the bathrooms were clean, past
the summer camp's new lot of land clotted with imported trees
and port-o-potties, past the farmland, then the forest that burnt
a couple years back when brush fires started with every cigarette
lit, past the rising sun, farther until there is some motel
in a crowded mall parking lot, bleached sheets, new
grocery store names, out of season fruit, an old woman
with wise hair scrunched over watering her lawn,
who smiles though she has never seen me before,
her smile like the glint in the copper drinks that got me
here in the first place: the promise of dew, ripening.

Writing From a Place Somewhere

Somewhere, he peels off a wet suit suctioned
to his body the color of toasted almonds, his body
smudged with the silt of girls silverfish slick.
Somewhere, he sleeps in his bed lit with the aquarium
glow, sheets sweet with salt, back taut against the wall.
Maybe the neighbors fight on the other side, or
maybe he doesn't sleep at all. Maybe he doesn't live
there now, tired of the rooms he described
over the phone as bluish with someone else's left memories.
That smell of cats and tin, that clog in the drain.

Somewhere, he lifts a soup spoon to his mouth
whose walls are lined with unsent letters.
The things his mouth used to say, the things it didn't.
The words gifted along my body,
blessed along the hips. Maybe he has found someone else,
a girl sweet as apples with hands like violets.
Maybe he has given up altogether.

He said in the last conversation he was beginning
to get headaches that sounded like the heavy flap
of wings, like crows or blackbirds, swarms of them.
In the background, there was the sound of the ocean,
or a motorcycle. He said he couldn't talk anymore,
his phone was dying, there was water overflowing
in the sink. And then goodbye, then nothing.
Outside my window, it was February: snowless,
the sky mud dark, roaches scuttling through bushes.

Somewhere, I hope he is happy in a house
on the beach, with a sunroom to paint in
and a dog with golden fur. I hope he has sweetened
cereal for breakfast and drinks the milk last,
watches *Jeopardy* and gets all of the answers right,
sells his art and stories in a studio across town,
one with oak floors and all-glass walls.
He has let his hair grow a bit, he is five years older,
he is more handsome than ever. He was always
so handsome. His eyes were dark as the bottom
of a well, with flickers of copper at the deepest part.
I wished so many times, and for too much.
And all along, so many missed chances like loose change
left in the dirt: I never wished for the right person.

Maybe one day he will read this and know
I still think of him, writing from a place somewhere
he has never been, living inside of a girl he never met.
When he loved me I was thick with plum juice
and blushing with heat and health. I was spun
in the center of my pink cocoon and I was a blizzard sky,
plump with the weight of winter.
When he stopped I drained my berry flush.
I learned to strip myself of the need for love.
Maybe he has passed me on the street, too
busy buying bread and basil, matches, coffee.

I like to think of him now in a white
tee shirt and jeans spattered with paint, waiting
at a stoplight somewhere warm with ivy.
He is listening to the radio, some song he used to like.
The back of his neck is a deep tan and he does not see me
watching, a girl from another life, like a girl
who has just emerged from the wombs of seven other girls,
each girl smaller than the next and splitting at the center.
He does not see me wave three cars over,
the goodbye like branches of an autumn tree,
silvery and pared, shivering in wind.

Tremolo

He parts you at the spine, he knows your story.

When you leave him you think not of his eyes
but of the blue dress you forgot crumpled
on his floor, of the orange juice for breakfast,
pulpy as if with shed skin, of the tarnished polish
on your nails, boysenberry, palm print on the window:
your eyes into the moon,
the yellow blindness.

From the sky at night, the city lights are underground
stars, pennies at a well bottom.
Your wish there among them, its copper varnish
greening in the air. What did you wish for, why?
Did you ever expect anything else?
Though the city will remain, you fly farther
and farther away. The restlessness inside
is an organ unlatched, you grow sweaty and lightheaded.

Each time you leave, a porch light somewhere
flickers dark, the frozen lake shifts
into its thaw of whispered pops—
you think not of those you are leaving,
but of those you have never known,
the shadows flimsy as saplings. Postcards
from a country you have never visited,
ivy sleeping along walls, the call of a train.
The name of a food you have never tasted,
tomato-based, oiled with garlic.

For each peach tissue of desire inside of you
that wants to stay, a place to settle, there are never
arms of welcome, only palm arcs of goodbye,
the hand and its tremolo, same story.

You never wanted to stay.
The lights from above are beautiful, the passages
shiny as birth, rich as champagne.
When you leave him
you are leaving a man, the city
inside of him—but he is only a man.
You carry your story with you:
tiny fingers in your chest, hen-pecking keys,

the rattle, the stutter, your rhythm.

Writing the Remains

The rooms are fragments, scattered artifacts.
Petals of crimson stain on the beige carpet: cherries,
two summers back. A puckered lip of rust around
the tub's drain. Your unfinished poem in the back
of a drawer, the pages stalled in their various stages.
Silence clawing with its gray paws all over.

I will graduate soon but have learned very little: lonely
meters of Dickinson, haunting Amherst ghost, her clipped
dashes bleeding black nicks on the page. Ugly
Old English clunks towards beginnings, *heofunum*, *earthan*, grim
heft of consonants clogging in the curve of throat. The dissection
of sentences, dull words sliced into logical slots, tiny surgeries:
The girl is crying but she does not speak.
The boy turns his head and looks at the yellow wall.

What I know best, the gifts left:
the shape-shifting of my body, earthworm, caterpillar,
its contours billowing like sheets in the night,
arabesques of paisley and rose and sun-spotted white.
Of you—solid with a mole behind your ear, overlapping
left canine and incisor—I write memorized facts: strength
and width of your shoulders, stretch of your fingers,
the plain-sight places where you hid,
your taste of soy and salt and ache.

But knowledge has not taught me to put words
to the memory of the frayed hole in the collar
of your gray shirt, the weight of your body, the tang
of cherries at midnight. Your poems, stark as silver
in a dark room and thick cream rich—you were always
the learned writer, syntax coaxer, vision magician.

So little then, what I have to offer:
in the trash, scraps of paper with your backslanted
letters. *Gerund clause, adjective clause, ellipses,*
and all I truly know is that
when I read them I can still hear the shallow
swallow of Boston in your voice, the collapsed syllables
found only in certain words: *Heart. Hunger.*

II.

Everything About It Was Wrong

Everything about it was wrong:
the afternoon fuzzed with dandelion hairs,
the winter lukewarm. The pastor who took
your money spoke of your smile, which we had never seen,
confused your dead son with your living one, told us stories
of a sweet woman who was never you.
At the wrong moment, the funeral director played
the wrong song and trumpets bellowed their golden arcs.
In that room, pinched with body heat
and sticky peppermints, heaven was never mentioned.
We knew you too well to believe
anything else. No one from our family spoke
of your life, not even my mother, who was the most wrong
thing of all, my mother who you hated
just slightly more than the others who turned
their backs to your rocker graying with dust in the sun,
my mother who had the sense to leave
but not the sense to stay away, the only one who still tried
to love you, those white kisses of lilies on Easter, the late night
drives to ensure your porch was lit, the house still stood,
intact if coldly locked, her ear pressed to the door.
The day after your funeral my mother and I did not mourn,
in black clothes and holed up in your small house,
sorting through accumulated junk and the staleness of wasted money.
Instead we drove to the boardwalk slicking in a February mist.
We browsed the souvenir shops with tacky tee shirts and hermit
crabs, won lines of paper promises in the arcades that smelled
of sawdust and dimes. We drenched our fries in vinegar,
our sundaes in hot fudge, and not once did we speak of you,
not in the ice cream parlor with its tinny symphony
of spoons, not on the bench as we discussed what movie to see,
not as we tried to guess how many bodies might be buried
at the bottom of the ocean, answers wedged in the sand,
not as we drove along the inlet's edge, the few gulls squawking over
our tossed leftovers, waves cresting like blue shivers.

Day After

No one knows we are here.
My mother and I sit in the freezer-
cold of Hot Fudge Heaven, lit
by fluorescent lights and the gleam
of the checkerboard floor, and eat
ice cream one day after her mother
was lowered into a vault of ground
as the oak trees looked on, trapped
in that unsure breath between
winter and spring that is as dark
and bottomless as the space
where loose buttons fall and later
stick to strangers' shoes.
We lied to my father, told him
we were going to take care of loose ends,
that phrase that has always made me think
of the bloody strings of teeth when they loose
and leave that pink-black lacking behind.
We can't think of any ends
that need to be tied: my grandmother
is buried, her house will be cleaned
next week, her children have tossed
their rose petal sorrows into the grave.
There should be guilt for feeling nothing.
There should be a piercing inside of us,
a growing pinprick of ache.

After ice cream, we shop the boardwalk.
I buy a silver ring of linked swans; my mother,
a necklace strung with colored buttons.
If we were other people, the ring might be
a symbol for change, the hope of beauty
blossoming from ugliness; the buttons
a preservation of the past, a chance
to pin the halves of life whole again.
But we are uncluttered as the Formica table,
cool as the sundae spoons.
We are my grandmother's remnants,
her starched handkerchiefs and unopened books.
We don't believe in symbols or pretending
the past was something better than it seemed.
Today is the day after a funeral.
Tomorrow there is cereal for breakfast,

dry cleaning, the dentist,
our favorite TV show at nine.

Gaps

My uncle with Down Syndrome once said
that of the things in his life
he was grateful for me. I played games with him,
helped him write Christmas lists and sign his name
to gifts, translated his language
better than most: *dee-ah* was *mother*, *dee dee* was *sister*,
and *Gah* was the God he nightly bent his head to.
I remembered his birthday and bought cards
based on their pictures, since words didn't matter.
It was my name he could write on his own,
the letters a shaky maze of pain and pride.

But sometimes when we played hide and seek
I picked a spot he would never find
and I shut my eyes in those dark cabinets
and spaces in the back of the woodshed:
caves like the gaps in language
the brain and rooting tongue cannot grasp.
I let him cry when he understood he was alone.
I pressed my forehead to the ridges of trees
in shadows, the bark aching my skin,
and I tried to sleep through the warble of his calls
and the bitter scent of wet pine chats musting in autumn.
When I was older I abandoned him completely
except for cards, sent from a comfortable distance,
that someone else, a nurse, a passing
relative, had to read to him.

When he was in the hospital, his red head shining
with the effort of living, my mother stayed with him,
and when she helped him call me I was not home,
I was eating a chocolate rose someone bought me,
I was hanging paper hearts and stapling streamers
at work, the ceiling popped with pink and
blooms of bulk-produced cheer. Somewhere,
the phone line weaved hollow through the miles,
the plea on his tongue unforming, nameless.

Beach Town

In the winter the dead overtake it.
They uncloset their wool clothes
and toss the fringes of their
white shawls sprawling
to city limits.
They dim the hotel lights
except for a few to guard
for thieves; the windows are
yellow as the blond hairs of crocuses
poking through the earth
in spring. In the restaurants
the roaches unpack and mingle
to the papery music of their own
feet. The marquees along
the strip offer nothing but cold
stares; the neon has melted
to puddles in the ditches, shiny
like car oil swirls. The boardwalk
smells—fries and funnel
cakes and the sugar-spun freedom
of other people's fun—
fade, and only the scent
of salt and driftwood
is left.

Every year we shared the winter
with them. My father
picked me up from school
on a Friday afternoon in January;
my mother waited in the hotel,
arranging her lipsticks like
a garden row on the bathroom
counter. Each one would unswivel
to a bulb of a different color; my
mother liked to look pretty
even for the silent crowds
scattered along the highway like
thrown bouquets. My father
was too oblivious to notice
appearances. He settled on the couch
with a newspaper and read
about people we didn't know
who lived in the next town over.

We stayed a week
each time, watching the same
TV shows we would have
watched at home but with
twenty fewer channels and
the frothy call of the ocean
rumbling outside. Each night
we ate at the same place on twelfth
street; by the end of the trip
we'd tried, between us, all
of the choices on the menu.
By the end it seemed
that the dead had accumulated;
the blinding white was brighter,
the echo between beach houses
traveled farther, like a stone
skipping to an unknown end
in the water.

So when the fighting started,
sometimes during salads
at the Italian place, sometimes
during dessert or Friday
night unpacking, it was like a match
lit in the center of a forest.
The flame was lavender like
the sky before snow; it
was orange like the construction
cones around the mildewed houses
waiting to be demolished.
My parents took turns cupping
their hands around it, to protect
it from the wind.

They could've burned
the town to ashes
if there was anything left to burn.
But when we left they threw
the match over their shoulders,
where the town took it
for its own. That's how I knew
it always burned, even when
our backs were turned:
the ghostly fires burning yellow

behind the hotels' glass eyes.

A Million Lights

Each Christmas I wish
for the silvered static
of snow. This year, just
before dusk, though
roads are glazed inch-
thick with ice and the bitter
wind burns skin raw
through layers and jackets,
the breath catching
stillborn in the chest,
my brother and I go
for a drive. The sky's
round stomach bulges
purple above us, but does
not give. Earlier, she
shed ice that settled across
the surface of the city,
and now she only
pants, heavy and dry.
We say we are looking
for the house that is
lit with a million lights,
but really we are fleeing
the screaming match
between our parents
that has been raging
for years.

I drive downtown first,
near City Hall's giant
spruce lit ceremoniously
each year, past the old
Woolworth's that opens only
for the tree lighting
and serves hot chocolate with
chunks of fudge
at the bottom.
I eye the frost-
hazed horizon, waiting.
*You drive like
my grandmother*, my brother says.
You're stupid, I say. *Well,*
you're ugly, he says.

I flip on
the radio. *You have bad taste
in music*, he offers.
Radio off again, we stifle
the urge to bicker, listen
for the shift most never
hear, when the sky splits
and the night
glistens and falls,
like the faintest
snap of a twig underfoot,
or the muted caw of a baby
bird tottering in a damp
nest in the next town over.

After almost skidding into
a ditch near the college,
I turn onto the back
roads, where horse and chicken
fences run parallel
to the frozen streets.
I begin to wonder
if the house is really
a myth.
I drive until tree branches
vein gray across
the sky, then until they bleed
black with the rest
of the night. I go
until I don't know
the name of the city
and the roads thicken
more, until even the air inside
the car feels laced
with ice and the scent
of churning chimneys drapes
across our coats. I wonder
if where we are
is on the map at all,
or if we have fallen
into that dark
crease between pages,
a pocket of stillness
and space.

It's a lost
cause, I say, turning
to follow the sheet
of slippery tarmac home,
to listen or not
listen to the war
that wages in the kitchen,
but then my brother jams
a cold-stiff finger into
my arm and points to a place
above the heads of jagged
pine trees. *There,*
he says, *drive,* and we
go towards a roof
lit like a triangle of fire.
The house burns a
blaze of glinting lights
against winter, a candle tip
singeing earth's chilled
skin, a flush so bright
it should sputter
like flames crisping
through dry leaves.
It's more than a million,
I say, and as we stare,
still a quarter mile off,
the taut night contracts
around us, wet with
effort and the gift of that
first rustle of soft release,
the delicate crackle
of white static settling.

Ribbon

The air nipped ginger-brown, the first night that feels
like fall, stippled with change and chimney smoke:

I miss you more tonight,
the house warmed with old kerosene heaters, a candle

sputtering orange and cinnamon in the bathroom. I miss
the steaks beginning to brown on the grill, the porch's concrete

hinting at its nightly frost under our feet, the TV
echoing through the walls. I picture you

shuffling through the small kitchen, bundled in the flannel
of an old floral nightgown whose sleeves just miss

the stove burners as you stir vegetables unfreezing themselves in a pot.
Your hair is windblown from walking the short distance between

house and car, car and work, the trip in reverse.
People who know us say that we look alike, they can tell by the hair,

but when I was younger I wanted to look like anyone but you.
I wanted to love only from a distance.

Tonight, you light the first fire of the season,
though the house will get too hot and you will sit in a chair,

cheeks strawberried, forehead etched from years
of work and giving. The phone line is a black

tunnel mossed thick with static growing like mold along the curves.
It's cold, I say. I should say more. *Here too*, you say,

and for a squinting moment the wind dims, the TV channel flips
and offers a flicker of quiet. But then someone settles on another

station, the audio snaps back, the lid on the stove is lifted and clatters.
Florida cold is fleeting, but you have months of frost-caked days

ahead, the crackle of ice under your feet, heavy felt of night
blindfolding the city blacker and tighter until it seems a ribbon of light

squeezes only through the thinnest slit in the center of day,

a worn knot tethered around fingers.

III.

Paths

Night is dampness at the corner of the eye
as you wait at a stoplight in dark that blooms

around you, petals curling back in a wash of black.
Ahead, there is dirty laundry, dinner to make,

a story to write, dance of clumsy routine.
How many times have you traced this

asphalt vein through the city,
how many times have you waited

under the same streetlights, worn the same
dinged halo of tungsten.

Time is an unlit tunnel that cuts
underneath streets, darkness puddling

down the walls, and the past presses into you,
though you say it is only the hardness of the seat,

the dig of an errant spring.
Sometimes, reality sloshes like murky water

on the windshield, smears your vision:
That party, the costumes and glitter.

You didn't know anyone. And yet you recognized
someone, masked in black.

What are you supposed to be, you asked.
Nonexistent, he said, and you laughed,

but some part of you did not laugh, some part already knew
his hands sliding under the angel wings

strapped loosely to your back, some part knew
shadows, the sliver of light when they shift.

The last time you moved, your life packed sadly
into boxes that barely filled the U-Haul. The boy

who helped shoulder the heavy things, straining

down stairs, the dew on the cusp of forming.

You could already feel it wetting your ankles,
and again, when you said the sofa was too heavy and left

it half on the concrete and half on the green, when you fell
to your knees in the dampness, the boy too, the zipped tent

of cloaked sky, of almost day, around you.
The shy knock on your door almost unheard

after a drizzly night of delayed flights and motion sickness,
but you heard, shuffled the blurred path to answer it.

And then the opening,
later the room flushed with candles lit to eclipse the smell of rain,

then finally the scent of extinguished fires.
But never mind, just never mind.

The stoplight will switch to green in a second, and you'll drive,
you could forget

the past, let the white dashes scattered on the asphalt lead
forward like a path of bread crumbs.

But you remember Gretel.
And the night with its black smugness--

drive home, it says, thick with dew and the smoke
of your house, the way it will smell of blown

birthday candles, of dried pools of wax
and blackened flickers.

Returning From Mexico

Once on the beach you shed your skin
of damp bathing suit and watched the two blue halves
disappear somewhere in the heart of the Yucatan.
In your suitcase now, there's a new white bikini, shot
glasses and a mostly eaten bag of macadamia nuts;
in your mouth, lime and the memory of a man
whose name you didn't bother to learn
on a night shaped like the petals of an orchid.
The week was a moon cycle of burning
desserts and horses that strolled slower than a pierced
heart, though all of the pictures are double-exposed
or half-blocked by a thumb, all of the images
of a slivered girl or ribbons of fish.
And here, home again, the answering machine waits,
a flower picked petal-less. Everything is exactly
as you left it but oddly lit, like a face in a flash
of lightening. Even the ghosts have fled, taking
with them every quiet shuffle and that ghost scent in the sheets.
You used to think nothing was worse than sharing the bed
with those phantom bodies and roving limbs.
But ghosts whistle as they brush their hair, they lie
across the couch, they rest their chins on your shoulder
and breathe into that curve of nerves that runs down
the center of your body. When you sleep, they write
long letters they never let you read but whose presence
is comforting, hovering in mailboxes invisible
as the footprints you left on the marble floor of a Mexican hotel.

Escape

Soon I'll move to the airport, my clothes forever smelling of suitcase.
I like the shoe shine man with his smile of sweet corn
and buttered biscuits in the shade of a summer picnic.
I like the gates that go everywhere, and the dead ones
that are friendly and wait with patience. I'll eat pizza every day,
and the doughnuts stale as memories, all of it packed with fat
and guilt-free. Each day I'll buy a new souvenir:
a coffee mug with a stenciled space shuttle, a bag filled
with shells, pencils with my name in pink and red.
I used to collect those when I was younger but
I preserved them in a magnetic case, their eraser tips
staying pink as nipples. Each day I'll pause at the disposable
cameras and unsent postcards, ellipses of undone sentences.
I'll guess the destinations and occupations of men with fanny
packs and the ones who buy newspapers only to stare over their tops:
paramedic, Chicago, waiter, Alaska, pervert.
I'll count the number of women who cry when their husbands leave,
and the ones who pivot and leave without waving, the type of woman
I will never be no matter how hard I try to freeze-dry
my emotions. I might date the security guard with dark hair
and a thin moustache of sweat, the button above his stomach
always coming undone. On his break I'll bring him candies and
cashews and we'll kiss discreetly behind the potted fig trees.
While he works I'll sit in Airside Lounge B where everything smells
like onion or chocolate muffins. After he leaves me, I'll take up
knitting and make sweaters with uneven sleeves that flop
like limp hugs. My best friend will be a grandmother from Utah
who is eight months away from dying and travels the country
on a tour of relatives who still can't make time for her. Even after
she dies I'll write her letters about what's going on:
there's a new custard flavor by gate 12 (apple brown betty);
construction on the new parking garage has finally started, but
won't be ready until 2010; Lance from security has met
a tiny blonde named Charlene who he plans to marry.
There are more and more perverts.
All of the smells are starting to blend together.
I seem to be having trouble sleeping, even with the looped music
and safety of twenty-four hour workers and scuffling feet.
I find myself inventing new names for myself
but even I don't believe them.
I think of going up north, where the travel posters boast
a world paced slow as syrup, spectacular shopping,
and an airport view that overlooks a maze of cabins and cars

two-inch thick with snow, the city hidden in banks so high
someone could get lost forever in that pure white lace.

Signs of Life

Someone upstairs runs the bathwater
at four in the morning, someone who too is
pacing these hard swallows of unrest.
Someone is lying in the hot bath with a head
propped up on the ledge and staring at the age-
stained ceiling brailed with constellations
of years and previous lives: the winter of '02
with the broken pipes and busted boiler, Robert
of the green eyes like good luck charms, Mrs. Arlen
with her rooms of afghans and potted plants.
Down the street, a cashier yawns behind
the counter of an all-night drugstore where occasionally
a man enters for a tube of ointment or a pack of batteries.
Always the coolers hum their soft melody, the fluorescent
lights keep watch over the candy bars and cigarette
cartons, the sliding doors jaw open and shut
with their secret language of welcome.
On the other side of the city, a diner serves
grilled cheese and pizza all night long, the yeast
filling the mouth, the grease soothing
the tongue. The movies on TV too loop
endless, the faces through the glass like people
you hope to meet, their voices familiar as friends
in third grade classrooms, the ones who shared
their lunches and walked with you through hallways.
These are the reminders of what
the living share even in the passage of night
when all things feel obscure or distant, the shapes imposing.
You wrap your palm around these small comforts,
let their salt thicken the body, wait
for them to settle in you like stew.

What Else

In ten years you'll still have this car,
the salesman says as his tie flaps, *what else*
can you say that about? And the car is ugly
and will need a new muffler along the way,
the battery will die at least twice and
I will sometimes be stranded at the mall
or late for a meeting, a funeral, stuck in my own
driveway, but he is right, I have kept nothing
for ten years except a flashlight with corroded insides
and a pencil box too pretty to be filled
and the people in my life have left
without follow-up calls, maybe a jacket
forgotten under the bed, and the days have been
Day-Glo blurry and filtered through a kaleidoscope.
Always the words in my throat
slippery as summer storms.

There is dried red in the chap of the salesman's
lips and suddenly I think of teeth, of some time,
say ten years from now, owning a house and sitting
on a plaid couch, watching an old movie,
a clap of lightning crisp as the bone
crack of gingersnaps, of a daughter
with her first loose tooth, of tissing it
in a velvet box, of the Tooth Fairy
saving it for ten years in her nightstand.
The daughter's father will smell of the safety
of cornfields and evaporated milk, he will draw
the shape of a full moon on my back,
the two of them will have eyes the color of burnt stars,
sewn sequins, eyes plaintive as puddles.

Yes, okay, I say, because in this incomplete language
what else is there. There are words to describe
the day, winter wet, a clog in the chest, and there are
words for the cars, shiny, alluring disappointments.
But where are the words for how to get there,
that place that is whatever it will be.
Surely there are other people who are thinking this
with our hands gripped around Styrofoam and cocoa,
we are all wanting, in this used lot we are all searching
for something to buy in exchange for promises,
something not-yet-named and velvety and ours.

The Only Way Home

I.

I live behind the glass doors of this wordless world
where the bridge between brain and tongue
splits in the center. When people speak, the rooms clog
with exhaust, I search my purse for lost stems of letters
glued to tubes of expired lipstick. The ditch in the dark
widens, and the way home is senseless as flying on kite tails.

II.

My father may be dying and I have no words.

He waits as his bad organs turn with their yellow
fingers another page of their story. I will phone
him using the stalk of a daffodil, speak only
in the lazy sips of French I remember, and sigh
like an umbrella unfolding on the driest day in July.

Rent is due on the first and no one pays for silence.

I will bake myself in a cake and live
in its center bedroom papered with vanilla lace
and arabesques of brown sugar, drowse
in a cot of candied oranges and wake to a canopy
constellated with seeds of strawberry flavoring.

I daily race my body to an unreachable finish line,
the two of us starve for stew and sentences.

I will shrink to fit in the bow of a magnolia leaf
and carry down river until my body can no longer
reach over the edges and the world greens to a plush
jungle of beetles sunning in secrets and bikinis.

The man who once loved me is gone but his questions
cling unanswered to the refrigerator door.

I will vacation in that undiscovered country
in the back of history books, the one with outdoor
thermostats and peacocks pink as painted lips.
I will go sockless and wear feathered hats like tethered wings.

III.

When there is no one home on the block
and even the unsaid echoes through the trees,
I will sit at a neighbor's desk and smell his
pens, I will wash my feet in birdbaths, I will look up
the tooth fairy and borrow some pantyhose. I will lie

under a tiger skin rug and wait until my claws grow long,
until I am bone and bone and teeth all over.

IV.

Song of the Valves

Under the willow next to the swing set, with a prong
of barbed wire on the cusp of rusting, we blended

our blood with index fingers pressed tip to tip,
pledged the intricate curves of our identities in red

forever. But we'd been melded since birth,
in side by side hospital rooms sodden with sweat

and the strain of entrance,
you an echo of me that August night and always.

Through different schools and cities,
through years of dead phone lines and trips never

made, through galaxies strung across opposite coasts:
the two minute pause before your life pulsed

its complementary bass beat,
that certain and necessary rhythm of chambers.

On the night of your death,
I dreamed unbroken through the hours, of a red

poppy wedged behind my ear, of a near forgotten
afternoon that tasted of mints and strawberry pie.

I felt not,
as you disappeared on a curve of Virginia road,

a twinge, not a twitter under my lids, not a stutter
or thump in my blood, and instead woke to the Florida sun

flushed and punctual as always.

Predictions

The doctor who delivered me predicted
I would have small feet, high arches,
hair like my mother's. Based on family
history, the likelihood of nearsighted vision,
hypertension, migraine headaches. Poor
judgment, he joked to my mother. Happiness.
He had a thin moustache that was too short
for his face, trailing off like an unfinished sentence.
He was the same doctor who delivered a friend
of mine only minutes after me, the friend
who would die twenty-five years later, alone,
on some slick patch of road in a town named
for its forests. He was supposed to have thick hair,
skin that tanned easily, long strides. A pre-disposition
for high cholesterol, anxiety disorders, allergies.
Happiness. But there was never any
mention of a short life, a death breathless.
How could the doctor tell a mother she would lose
her son on a lukewarm night in October
when the world smelled of heaving chimneys
and dogs sprinted into dream and stories.
How could he warn of the delicate moisture
coating the road, a mist like a ribbon of silver,
the way of the body to survive some broken bones
but not others. Who would have taught him
the words to tell the mother, he is yours only
for a brief time, he will scar his arm
on a fall from a tree, he will write music
and draw cartoons in high school, he will have
the kindest hands you have ever known,
he must be given back without your consent
in the season you both loved, of frost and gold.
How could he say, you will find yourself driving
the streets at night, struck by the open garages
filled with yellow light, you will want the people
in those rooms to take you in, to give you soup,
a blue afghan, directions to an address you have lost.
The doctor with his moustache of unformed words,
how could he do anything
but joke about quick tempers, a talent for trouble,
a fondness for dancing and sneaking candy,
anything but give the mother his doctor smile,
paper slippers identical to my own mother's,

a squeeze of palms, quick, fleeting.

Ghost Women

I.

His mother was buying coffee filters
and milk, her hair undone. She was still
beautiful, the kind of beauty pink as hard-
earned scars, taut as stretch marks.
When she saw me, I should have said something.
She is someone I once knew, who sent me
birthday cards each year, who fed me dinners
and French toast with extra cinnamon,
who asked about my family before putting
her son on the phone to talk. She is fair-skinned
like me, she likes to watch old movies,
she knows as I do the way the woods
behind her house smell after rain,
of mud and green, frog skins and wilted dandelions.
She is an overlay, she is red and raw and beautiful
as I will ever be, she is untouchable
and sharp as splinters lodged in my spine.

II.

To lose myself, when I was young
I lay on my back in department stores,
beneath racks of dresses and I stared
into their holes of black,
the skirt mouths and bell-sleeve eyes.
They were a city of ghost women, widow shells.
They were a game, lives I could leave
when my mother was ready to pay,
the wispy bodies swishing as I escaped through hangers.

III.

When he died I tried to find a new dress,
something appropriate in the midst of all
that was not, something to paste across my body
like a paper doll, but in the store I didn't get past
the first rack. Inside of me, I went back
to that place to stare inside the women
empty as caves. I could not bear to live inside
a single one of those women, to wear her
even for a second against my skin.
I was afraid I would not know
how to return home, or that even after

shedding her, her shadow might still hold me.

IV.

If I were his mother I would throw the funeral
dress in the back of the closet, I would set it afire,
I would rip my body free
from the fabric and scrape my skin raw
and let it bleed pink as birth.
I would forget his name,
I would say it over and over
until its force bored a hole in the earth,
until it no longer meant anything but sound,
until it meant everything it always did.

When I Can't Sleep

I go back to my aunt's pool in the summers
when no one was home and I floated
with my wrinkled-raisin skin, oyster
crackers and a virgin daiquiri on the concrete ledge.
The birthmark on my thigh, my good luck
charm like a chain of stars or promises,
was still there, and the lightness in my hair.
In my inner tube, I dreamed of becoming someone else,
as though all that mattered was being
someone thin and pretty who looked good in swimsuits
and would someday live
in a city beautiful as silver wings.

I go back to the inside of a kiss
in a diner at morning's first flicker,
when the boy was new, when it was exciting.
His hands were sticky with strawberry
syrup, my lips felt blue, I lived
in an apartment teeming with mold spores
and old tenant stains but it was full
of vanilla candles that looked like
a thicket of flaming doves fluttering.
He was gone in a year and called even after
he left, but I moved too, no forwarding number,
because all that mattered was not saying
too much or being shiny wet with truth.

I go back to the city where I was born,
and my friend too, when he was still alive,
when he lived in a house that was a drawing
with perfect sheep clouds and his hands
were what I drew when I pictured something warm,
something right. Tulips near the pool,
a flag gentle in the breeze,
and all that mattered was an afternoon
of cartoons and crayons and a box of popsicles.
If he was a flavor, he was cherry-orange,
a bit of blackberry, no hint of lemon.
If he was a color, he was green as cut grass,
the moss sleeping wet and sweet in forests.

If I had known what would happen to him
I would have held his hand longer,

I would have tied a scarf around our wrists.
If I had known what would be lost,
I would have told everything,
I would have been someone else entirely.

I didn't go to his funeral. I pictured it
hot as a fever, cold as our tongues
when we caught snowflakes, no soup afterwards.
At home I wore a dress and read
the *TV Guide*, newspaper cartoons, then
watched an old movie about a family who lives
in a beach house and finds mysterious gifts
washed in by the waves, then washed away
before morning. I thought about calling someone
but there was no one, or no one who seemed right.
I pictured his friends, his mother and girlfriend,
the pretty one with a single amber braid and sensible shoes,
and I had no place among them.
And him, always the good one, still what stays with me
in the long nights and finally drifts me to sleep:
flowers shivering in the darkness,
their green arms waving, blowing wishes.

Anniversary of Your Death

The air smells of smolder and fire—
drying grass, bees, black bottom of a frying pan.
All of the kids are out of school and at the mall, trying
to be older, to skip over the rest of these years
lazy as bowed clotheslines, the only years.
They grope because they know nothing
of what it is to grasp. There will be robberies, yes,
flap of wings as they sleep, the world ready
for one wrong lit match, but now this means nothing
and they continue to move as caricatures
while I watch through glass.

I see fences everywhere: the highway pines stretching
forever, the glint of cars like electric hedges.
I picture you sleeping inside of things: in hollow
tree trunks, in tunnels underneath the city, in the yellow
shivering in eggs. But I've seen your grave, the pink geraniums
you would hate, your marbled name
so cool and unlike you. *You*—
this is how I think of you now, nameless but for that.
I think of saying something, if you could hear,
if summer wasn't the click and churn
of sprinklers straining, under feet snap of fire hazard grass.

Someone asked me, why couldn't I write
a poem for you and be done with it,
as though your death could be contained on a page,
as though your death was clean and for my art.
It's true that I construct my worlds from words,
stacking bricks, that I mortar myself in the center.
But you—you with your formless body, you still
in me at night—you I can never grip, you
signaling code somewhere beyond the windows.
You are not image or metaphor, you do not fit
into line breaks, you defy meter. You never leave me,
I am always alone.
Everywhere the fences, and you,
the heat trapped in cars,
white smoke huddling behind trees.

New Boyfriend

Eyes dark like yours, lake-shaped,
soft as moss. His body too,
moon-skin warm. Sometimes it is your name
I feel in my throat, your salt.
It's wrong to think of you living
in him, coming back, but he knows
the chords you first claimed, those fine strings.
He goes by instinct, and the notes—
how else could he know the language of my silence?

So much, the things I don't tell him:

I think of him as a gift you sent to me
like the messages in bottles we freed in oceans
in the summers, or the fireflies from jars.

Some nights I feel the space inside of me
where something should be,
the way an empty place can ache,
only you were never a part of my body;
you were only something I knew for awhile
in the years when our centers met
like air particles or arcs in symphonies on old records.

I have promised myself not to call him your name
ever, though the syllables are like scars
in my mouth. I have promised to throw away
the old pictures, and the newspaper clippings
of your death, and to never touch the clothes
packed in boxes, to never cry,
to not have a past thrumming with its set meter.

And I can never tell him, but it's true
that I can sleep only because of you, slowly
touching my hair, the crickets returning outside,
secret rhythm of their harps' pluck.

Letter

This is not to say you are no longer
that formless seizing, my phantom hand.
You remain the echo of a song,
shimmer of moon face in the river.
This is not to say goodbye,
that word like leaves forever sifting
across continents, shushed as a shiver.
So many days since, and still the tang
of late December: cold mulch, black
tea with ginger, bat-wing slickness.
Way back in the throat, oatmeal, copper.
Even in summer, the leaves hanging
with snow, draped scarves, tiny ghosts.
This is not to say I am fine,
only that I have learned the art of lying
and its tools of a smile and tightrope.
The boyfriend, he is some remnant of you,
a tatter eardrum thin, a boot track on the stoop.
He tastes of almonds and clasps my hip
when I jerk in my sleep and wake damp
with sweat. He would listen if I asked
to the stories cloaked in my chest.
For a long time I did not speak your name.
For a long time I bought peaches and ate nothing
else, each sliced like ships without sails,
the pits dark as bleeding tongues. I buried
them in the backyard just like you did,
and listened for the tree that never grew.
But people started to worry. They brought me
chicken dishes thick with gravy and tiered rum cakes.
They told me to talk to you, it might help
to shed words at your grave instead of petals.
But I talked to you the same as always,
in silence, in the frost coating the windows.
So this is only one more offer to you, my body
sealed in white. When you open it,
I will be there waiting.
I will know you are safe
in your igloo hung with pictures and hidden
in a clove of trees, dark tea whistling on the stove.

V.

Fever Songs

When shame is a fever, I imagine my body
as a copse of moths, all grey flutters, all flurry.
When their parasol wings open, I thicken with dust.
When they shut, I am a strip of silver light.
I am the cocoon or burrowed within, I can never rest.

Once I called a boyfriend from a diner at 2 am, I was drunk--
I almost told him the truth. Instead I asked for a ride home
and he came ten minutes later, his arms warm
as the hum of bees, his voice strumming with sleep.
His name meant *saint*, he would have helped.
He lives somewhere on the West Coast now,
somewhere in the salt. Sometimes I think
of visiting him, or the one who said I was beautiful
as a dappled palomino, a mane lush and lit like
spackles of fire. And the friends sweet and healthy,
the nights of sleepovers, the hairbrushes with our strands
woven like a story with a happy ending. And my parents
with their birthday cards of glitter and their scent
like pride, like warmth. All of that love
light and pure as the tongues of flutes.
And all of that love, how it was never enough, never
inside of me, my body with its pinhole space, unsleeping eye.
All of the ways I've tried to fill myself, that starved place,
and the circles of failure, burning choruses.

I read once that moths live by eating only liquids: skin
of mud puddles, tree sap, nectars souring in summer.
Fed, their tiny bodies go wild with frenzy, they panic
and flit into the night with its pillowed flesh.
And sickened they still return to the notes of light
scattered through the darkness, they die
for those copper spangles hot and delicate as stars,
siren songs crackling in smolder.

Self Destruction

My grandfather who died of cancer knew
the cruel absurdity of a single cell growing
too large for its home, like a family that burgeons
until boxes block the attic windows and the garage
walls dent from bikes and threaten to give.
But a family can move to a two-story
in the outskirts of Baltimore, with a pool and extra
guestroom and a backyard ripe for roses and dahlias.
My grandfather knew that some rooting
bulbs cannot be undug, that they too
coil and knot through you.
The tumor in his brain was not planted nor gardened.
One night, he went to sleep
and like an autumn frost it began to settle
over him, finally seeping inside.
My own seed did not ambush me, creeping
inside between breaths as I slept.
I saw it coming, I held the door,
I did not realize it would never leave,
guest who would buy the house
and wear the key on a chain around its neck,
throw its shoes and jacket wherever.
Like the captive to her kidnapper, I began
to appreciate the occasional smiles of pride
fed to me in morsels, to be grateful
for its presence, warm and close like a twin.
Sometimes, on green spring days when the sun
is almost a ripe peach on a tree in the reachable
distance, I am let into the backyard, leashed
to a pole, chasing my own black echo, pacing
an orbit that, like all circles, rings forever.

Projection

The thin-girl splinter of me lives
on a lake unbroken somewhere green-gray
and cadenced by the lyrical ballet of beautiful
things, the trumpet-call of swans parting the air
smooth as the comb skimming her unsnarled
hair, redder and straighter than mine
a starlit tunnel apart. The distance between
us is pierced by the plumage of stars that glint
like slivers of songs first clutched softly in that nook
between chest and throat, then freed just as carefully.
Somehow she knew the way of the wind
to dim, how in the right flicker of evening
the birds emit white notes that float
against the linty recesses of night;
the medley of clipped stems quavers and holds,
the lull of halves and pauses and wholes
settles on the surface, bloomed feathers billow.

Fat Girl

The fat girl wonders what a size zero would feel like on her skin, how miraculous it must be to live without puckery thickness. She wonders who will ever love her, whose mouth will whisper her truth. The fat girl, not old but so worn, burrows in memories of before: before she swelled to blubber, when she was a regular little girl, unaware and uncomplicated by calories and grams, free from her fleshy shroud. The fat girl wishes her arsenal of diet pills were magic, pixie dust bottled in Dexatrim and chocolate laxatives and Slim Fast. In wretched self-loathing, she wishes that she was strong, that Haagen-Dazs didn't taste so good, that her body would surrender in its terrible war against her, the daily betrayal. She imagines a crevice in the center of her body where a thin girl kernel might be buried in darkness and miniscule hollow. And desperate, her steepled hands pray to whatever god may be listening. *Please*, they beg. For the unmasking, they, in their gasping voices, pray. For the day the zipper will be pulled, and this suit, this devastating weight, will drop like lead to the quivering floor, they pray.

Body/Mind/Fracture

In her mind the right answer is always
wrong, the tapestry of sky crooked.
The body a scar, the world salve-less.

I didn't used to be this way.
Summer was a path of peanut butter
taffy; winter, frozen blueberries sweet
on the tongue. Everything had a taste.
My skin was sugar dimples,
plump as goose-bumped limes.

She has glossy nails, soft lips,
matching panties. She smiles
a curl of perfect smoke
at the right moments. Inside,
she is buried
in a thicket of wildflowers and posies.
She sleeps awake there, under
the mossy pockets, the lichen fallen
from the trees, she remembers someone
she once knew in a city in someone
else's life. Through the grid of forest,
she waves hello.

I could tell you a story to explain.
My parents insulted me, the pressure
heavy as gold. They were ogres.
My teachers too. I was never good
enough. The world tasted of cement
stained with oil and its sandpaper hands
were what I deserved.
My life was pocked with pain,
I was cauterized skinless.
I could tell you lies.
There is no other way to explain
the inexplicable.

She is not so bad off, she has her moments.
In the summer, coconut trees may bleed
lemons and baby moons. She holds one in her
palm, it tastes like salt, like sugar.
She lets it sparkle on her tongue's tip,
like a word forming.
She spits before it is too late.

I am not so bad off, I have my moments.
Rhubarb pie is thick with pink rivers;
sometimes I still float along their shores.
There are shadows of dreams, each
light as the sun and brief as a swallow,
and in them I let the current carry,
I wave hello.

Body

Mouth:

If it had a taste it would be empty, of garnish,
a crimp of parsley, the ripeness of raspberries
distilled. This is what it works for,
these months of simmer and boil, the uselessness
of teeth and tongue, now white thistles around a dull ruby.
They are its wolves and angels, cupids with cusped arrows.
How it loves me and my unsugared taste,
my insides like an unfilled pastry, flaking and cratering
in on itself.
How it serves my coil of virus
hidden like a swallowed string of pearls,
roiling in its red cave.

Stomach:

The walls grip the sometimes tatters of food
like seagulls with their dirty beaks, rooting
for bread crusts in the long pauses of sleet and winter.
The walls know the soup may be filched
and the lettuce is ungiving, a ragdoll that lies alone
in a corner. So the walls work fast to celebrate,
then shame just as quick. The walls are nervous as rabbits
and always wise: they know the way of gristle,
how the fat expands like mushroom umbrellas
opening for the indigo night.

Heart:

It is a wilted mitten lost in the snow.
It tries so hard to be brave.
How it wants so many things at the same time:
the mouth to suck at the red of cherries
and cream dollopped upon more cream;
the stomach to sleep through the hours,
a bed lined with chocolate and just as smooth.
But also the body to be beautiful as street grates,
symmetrical, accomplished
and disciplined as a pianist,
the song of long fingers on bone keys,
the pure, thin notes
free of echo.

VI.

Splinters

I.

She does what her mother said
never to do: she walks the unlit street
like a planet rotating alone
and she does not fear
the shadows or static
of ones to come; she is safe
because she believes
someone will save her
from strangers and from herself,
man with a silver whistle,
man with the quick grip.

II.

Scratch of skin
on skin, the taste
of sand, of hair and fist,
the bodyless kicks, broken
butterfly stroke,
and unkind the ocean churns
cold tides of song.
She asks him to let go
of her wrists, she asks him
to let her breathe, she asks
and she asks and she uses
only three words,
wet, lonely notes.

III.

She is afraid
to walk by the mirrors
of her house and the world,
to bare herself in the naked air,
shiver of thin
apple skin browning.
She is afraid
to eat at the table,
to eat the gravy
flecked with fat,
to eat.
She is afraid to open
her mouth and unloose
what is fluttering

in her throat, the dirty
wings of doves.

IV.

She turns away
from her rose garden
of bruises vining along her
flesh, each blossom undressed
of its petals, their raw lips
stripped of thorns, toothless
as she feels some mornings
before she remembers
the way pain laces
its fingers with love,
that faceless fairy
in a red-flecked tutu.

V.

She drives north,
head-on into the last
blizzard of the season.
She leaves all of her
clothes behind, loosing them
on the cusp of state lines: red dress
by the black-rock beach,
bone shawl by the wheat
town's mill, ruby brooch
in the wildflowers crawling
along a mountain's chest.
She rips the glove-box map
into pieces, then stitches them
together with Scotch tape
like the body with its stories
of fractures and flesh, the organs
grafted with slack thread,
the bindings coming undone,
always something lost,
always the hand
returning to the needle.

The Girl Next Door

I saw her again, this time through the glass
of a store downtown, a unicorn or some other myth

on her tee shirt, her hair tied back like bedsheet ropes,
her hair like flowerless vines searching.

I never told of the time her pressed back whited
with paint chips from the side of her house,

in the alcove between twin yards where the chicory
and wild asters huddled secrets in the summer nectar.

It was the first time she died
and learned how to hide the stench of wilting

blooms, the first time I did nothing
and let her fade slow and sure as back porch newspapers.

As she soured under the air heavy
as hands, his knuckles were greedy thorns

and the space separating the houses was a train jammed
between worlds in a season of mosquitoes and green silence.

She was eight, and because there was nothing else, she chewed
leaves to distract her mouth, the clover clinging in her like rain,

like stars. The hyacinth shook its tiny canaries, the TV from inside
sang strings of afternoon cartoons. At work, her parents

with rye and pimento. The asters at her feet, the scrape
and knock of her head, under his sneakers trampled grass.

On the next block, a neighbor and her dog, slow slap
of a basketball, sagging hammock and the red stain

of cherry popsicles. The time like roads winding,
gravelly and thick with tar, highway trees heady with sap.

For years after she tried in vain to make perfume from shriveling
roses limp off the bush, soaked them in a cat's old water bowl,

each bruised petal another sealed mouth. When they stank

of wounds and rivers she buried them in weeds.

Her footprints became tiny lies tethered to the earth,
our tongues grassy with clover.

Rochelle

As a child, she watched the cat hidden
under the couch, the penny glint of eyes
like amber stones glowing from their own planet.
She called, *here kitty kitty* and jingled
the jar of treats. She hummed a low tune
and sang to the kitty a song about cinnamon
and kisses and the white nuzzle under the chin.
But the cat just growled its steady moan, a heart
rumbling in the distance, and though it was old and slow
she would not risk its scratch, the rupture.

When her son died the strings inside of her
plucked loose, the notes spilled black on the floor.
She said nothing to the doctors or the nurses
with their pompom hair. She shut the door
to her son's bedroom but sometimes
when she pressed her ear to the wood
she could still hear him moving.
Once during a thunderstorm he clung
to her, he wet her with his sweat,
he thought the world might end
in the waving lilacs, in rainwater filling the ditches.
She sang all of her lullabies, robin's egg blue,
sea foam green and sweet, and still he knew
some dark truth hid nearby, a glint
beyond her sight, though she sang, *We're safe,
we're safe in our house like a blue galosh,
we're hidden in its tiny toes.*

When her husband left later the sky vibrated,
the toes of leaves pointed askew, they warned
her not to search. He was somewhere
in the country or city, somewhere safe
with pie and the ching of plates, somewhere
light, somewhere dark, somewhere without her
cold back he said he could no longer take.
In the early summers they used to eat black currants
that stained her teeth and teacups at breakfast.
He called her Roxy for short and kissed
the tiny birthmark between her shoulder blades,
the one she said looked like an island where
they'd one day live, lush with berries,
blooming with whistles of birds.

After he was gone, to live she believed
he was dead, another casket, another wordless song.

In the summers now, she sets flowerpots on the steps
and hangs a flag to flap in the afternoons and droop
like a dog's wet ears in thunder. She is friendly
at the grocery store, wears paisley dresses
and lipstick, hums but only in her head.
On Sundays she sits in a back pew and listens
to the chorus with their robes and lyrics.
She sweeps the floor of her kitchen and pretends
not to notice how the black beans, the uncooked
rice, even the fallen geranium buds
look like mouths, lonely on the linoleum.

Migration

She sleeps in a carnival sealed tourniquet tight for winter,
coiled in the Ferris wheel, each cage hung like
a rusting womb. She remembers when
the bumper cars were open and the fairgrounds
shimmered with freckles and honeysuckle wilting.
How she hated the taste of the fried oyster sandwiches
sold there, milk-gray and oozing like stolen embryos.
But the scent: the scent meant summers
and the heat of a beach towel, the sweetness of ketchup,
her mother in jeweled sandals, handing her ice cream
and a cool soda, two tickets for the mixer.
It meant autumn next, with its unlatched lid and
piles of gold, and then winter, when the world became
a different place altogether, so beautiful but only
surface and illusion: the cold cloaking the scarecrow
shadows and the lake, the hidden terror of minnows dying below.

Some days she takes a taxi and a ferry ride
to an island an hour away, the one where the men's shoes
are splayed with mud and fish skin and the women
are crinoline thin but famous for seven layer cakes,
each orange and white slice snug against the next
like a stack of folded shirts freshly pressed.
She cries on the way there, she does not know why,
or she does not say, or there is no one to tell.
She buys lace in a store that sells swizzle sticks
and abalone shells, and on the way back she ties the lace
around her hair into a kerchief of ivory netting.
Her fingers tremble like flags in a snowstorm,
like those blizzards when she was young and home
from school, the house mahogany and creaking,
the yard glittery as the inside of a jewelry box—
velvet and costume diamonds, broken pearl bracelets
nestled in cotton, when the place she lived was
so white she believed for the quickest second
it could be a flight of swans,
a moment frozen with possibility and blindness,
some kind of beautiful migration.

Hotel

Here, the bed is pure and new and everything
you want to be: furled tight as spring rosebuds.
Here, the world might be free of men
who like to break things just to hear the shatter,
a cloister where the man with sloe-eyes
and a slushed vodka voice has never been, the man
you turned to see a second too late,
that stutter in time all it took to snatch you
snake-tongue fast with a vice-grip and slap you up
against the brick wall, nails scratching at hip and bone.
He had a band-aid on his finger, a path of black ringed
around its edges, as though he was the type of man
who could be healed.

Here, walls spotless stucco, hung with sterile art,
there is no history of the good man who left
last summer, the season smelling of maple, the good man
with a canvas of inked skin, his bruised apple taste.
When he finally left you placed a palm on his
side of the bed to feel for when his heat drained.
I can't watch you kill yourself, he said, as though you were
one of those clichés, as though your sickness was a means to die
and not a corseted form of survival.
You did not watch as the door opened and the world
swallowed him into the black hole of men
who are too smart to stay in rooms of rumpled girls.

Here, with soaped skin and clean clothes, you sleep
to a soundtrack of chlorine splashes and room service
forks clinking. You make vows you will break
as surely as unswept shards puncture bare feet.
You write about a world where the earth's revolution halts
mid-spin, where flickers in time can be removed like splinters
and the figure-eight of people fallen like a domino track
uprights itself. Here. You cannot keep coming, always
turning back, always leaving the wrong things behind.

Author's Picture

The woman on the back of this book

is not me. Her dotless die smile,
straightened by braces in the eighth
grade, her cheeks of rouge and politeness,
her hair lacquered with products not her own

to become a product her own: she is not me

with my mouthful of sugar-free secrets, my forsythia
branches of insecurities. The woman on the back

would not kill herself skinny, boil the sweetness

from her marzipan body. She would not
sidle to the wrong and taken men, the acts

with their aftertaste of red velvet cake and soured

icing. She is a woman who walks to work
instead of driving, buys toothpaste on sale,
calls the friends who need her, her mother to say hello.
Her towels smell of lemon groves, her body is

a revered jungle trimmed and glistening.

She does not pluck petals from roses,
she turns her work in on time. She eats
dinner at six, carrots glazed in honey,
fish grilled and eyeless.

She lets it settle. She does not lie.

On the street, she would wave to me
with her lace bracelets, the click-click of her feet
a song always, something jazzy and purple,
something the public wants to hear.
She would smile her back-cover smile,

the kind that reveals nothing of girls in corners,

and she would not speak
of ghosts, the bathroom scales

always broken, the sheen and dust of men,
the mirror and its fractured woman.

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