

# Fractures

2007

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FRACTURES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
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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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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Writing Life: An Evolution of Influences.....	1
Fractures.....	7
I.....	8
Note to Self.....	9
Dichotomies.....	10
Then.....	11
Cardboard Futures.....	13
3 AM.....	15
Writing From a Place Somewhere.....	16
Tremolo.....	18
Writing the Remains.....	20
II.....	21
Everything About It Was Wrong.....	22
Day After.....	23
Gaps.....	25
Beach Town.....	26
A Million Lights.....	29
Ribbon.....	32
III.....	34
Paths.....	35
Returning From Mexico.....	37
Escape.....	38
Signs of Life.....	40
What Else.....	41
The Only Way Home.....	42
IV.....	44
Song of the Valves.....	45
Predictions.....	46
Ghost Women.....	48
When I Can't Sleep.....	50
Anniversary of Your Death.....	52
New Boyfriend.....	53
Letter.....	54
V.....	55
Fever Songs.....	56
Self Destruction.....	57
Projection.....	58
Fat Girl.....	59
Body/Mind/Fracture.....	60
Body.....	62
VI.....	63
Splinters.....	64
The Girl Next Door.....	66

Rochelle.....	68
Migration.....	70
Hotel.....	71
Author's Picture.....	72
REFERENCES.....	74
Poetry.....	74
Fiction.....	75

## 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 tissinging 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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