

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: LANDFALL

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*The Levee* considers the arbitrariness of our attachments to both people and places, while at the same time marveling at the inevitability and necessity of those attachments. The importance of place in these poems, most prominently that of southern Louisiana, is pervasive, and the insistent description of landscape becomes inextricable from an interrogation of personal and familial relationships. The power of such bonds seems to defy any satisfactory explanation, but by drawing on personal narrative as well as on the natural world, these poems begin, cautiously and in fragments, to approach and confront that power.

LANDFALL

by

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## The Field

More than wide, borderless,  
with only the sky to match it, the one  
laid over the other, night blue on ripe green

(the kinds of colors  
you only find in dreams)–  
you are a white column, and I am your mirror.

The stars here don't flicker.  
They pipe down from their settings, the sites of their own logic.  
To get here, I walked a long way

through night, the grasses falling where I stepped  
like green hair, the path  
blushing dust even as I made it,

and at the sight of an owl I heard  
the voice of a father who was not my father, brown  
and barred as the owl's wings,

and at the sight of a flower I heard the voice of a child  
who was not myself, pink  
as petals dropped in glass, and the voices rang

like the tongues of great bells – terrifyingly solid  
through the black silence,  
yet somehow my feet  
set down one before the other, as when,

in the department store where I'd hidden  
inside the circular rack of clothes,  
that forest of enormous skirts, I'd still watched

for your shoes: plain, low-heeled,  
sensible on the balding carpet.  
Now the green field stretches in all directions,

bodiless vessel for a voice I listen for  
as the stars grow nearer, the sky cupping down  
like a hand ready to pluck.

I

2

## Crawl Space

Lipizzaner stallions on TV  
the night my mother writes that the dog has died.

She says my sister kept watch, hand  
laid on the abscessed side to monitor

the lungs' rhythm.

Now the stable hands trick

the young stallions through a barn door, separating them  
for the first time

from their mothers.

It is very early in the morning when this happens.  
Their alarm dusts hay fiber up into the marbled air.

I wonder about the breeders  
and the dressage riders polishing their knee boots

in bicorne hats bestowed after years of service,  
men who must

think more of the horses than farmed meat.  
As for the black horse eye, inscrutable, rolling in the white head—

the handlers say they know what they are,  
like dogs with a sense for death know

what a crawl space is for,

but what they know  
of why they go alone—

My mother says

the younger dog keeps making the rounds,  
looking for his companion.

Now the mares,

pregnant again, packed haunch  
to haunch in a long stable.

The cinematographer's done his job  
with the muzzles and their functions,  
and I know

that fine-haired horse lip  
is the only thing in the world that feels this way

as they rub their spotted abdomens together,  
bellies so full they glow

a pale orange  
from the heat of their contents,

the dawn barn swollen with orbs,  
swinging,

lanterns of foal.



## Father's Shoulders

When did they become so small? The rest of him  
spilling from them like a shirt from a hanger.  
It isn't until we return to the motel that I notice.  
All of us undressing, all of us undoing

piece by piece the things we'd done  
for the wedding, though for all our efforts my sisters  
and I appear, so like our mother in the end,  
a hair shy of what was expected

by the jewel-toned ladies of the South.  
All of us. I take cheap pins from my hair.  
He sits on the stiff bed, shoulders so lean  
I could wrap my small hands

almost around them as if they were handlebars,  
as if holding them I could make the pedaling tip  
into the dry ditch off Mulberry, the neighborhood  
dare he'd once forbidden us from—

lean as the local girl's arm must have been  
braving the ditch's steep drop  
before it broke. The day he buried his father,  
after the flag had been folded and the last

shot fired, he found mine was the nearest body  
to hang himself on, the weight of his torso  
sinking me like the soldier's boots  
in the cemetery mud. Would it be so terrible

to tell the lie that we were the last mourners,  
left alone with the marks of boots  
in the ground? or that now at his earlobe I could pedal  
into the space behind his right shoulder, into someplace

older than this motel or the endless string  
of beige-walled Baton Rouge strip malls – instead I'll say I see  
tire treads, slender and regular as snakes in new skin,  
caught and hardened sometime after the last rain.

## On the Mysterious Noise Out of View of the Bedroom Window

I've decided it's pigeons, not squirrels or worse,  
responsible for the ruckus –

pigeons and some kind of metal fencing,  
chain link, jangling under what must be

a half dozen of them every morning doing  
who knows what. Rabid copulation?

Is some perverse neighbor dangling feed  
just out of their reach? Whatever it is, it finishes

for all of them at once. On turkey hunts,  
my father liked to point out dust bowls,

having me kneel to see, his hand just  
skimming the bowl's lip, where a tom had rolled itself

clean, where the stiff-spined wing feathers  
and hooked spurs had brushed and scored the dirt

as if needing to mark the place  
red earth stops being earth.

He never wanted to disturb what they'd done.  
He loved how he could see and not see

the bird in abandon, like the painting of Bacchus  
that looks more like an imprint

of revelry than actual sex: broad blue  
and grey brushstrokes implying the pile of naked bodies

and the god they prop up,  
drunk and potbellied, proud to the point

of glee at what he's made.  
That's the story. But all I could see in the museum

was a figure contorted to wrench himself  
from all that flesh, the groin

twisting into the distended gut, the hands  
bearing down from tensed shoulders;

and on top, where the paintbrushes  
must have been the most furious,

the whitened head

indecipherable  
like something scratched at, frenzied

as a fistful of birds, birds in all their racket –

Lord knows where I'm from, we'd march out back  
in the name of mercy and shoot them.

## Game

I no longer have a hard time believing a hunter can love  
his killed. I've seen the old man's hands  
as he arranges his bagged gobblers

in a patch of bluebonnets  
so the sun will best show the blue in their feathers,  
will paint the red wattles

unbelievably red. And the troubled walk  
he walks to track a trail spattered onto trunks  
and low branches by a deer he failed to kill

cleanly. At his camp, a wooden plaque displays  
a set of vertebrae, horizontal as when  
the doe still stood

and shot straight through by the arrow  
tapering toward the ceiling. A one-in-a-million shot,  
worth immortalizing on a wall

the crossing of skill and luck – not some myth  
of the animal's sacrifice, of a mysterious confluence  
of wills. Worth sawing through bone for.

If ever there were a reason, it would be his as I picture him  
lifting the spine from the deer with the same wonder  
he lifts the weapon from its case.

## Emergency Surgery and Nature Program

I choose this of all things while waiting  
for Jane to leave the ER, since,

as it is, I'm already useless.  
Shouldn't I have been woken too when she

began to bleed, when the little pod of her ovary  
began to contort like a live wire?

Shouldn't our bodies, still so similar,  
have coded over the four states between us

like the flashlights we'd beam across the hall  
after bedtime? Instead, the phone's ring rolls her back

onto the operating table. Still, I imagine  
I could've felt it, the skin of her abdomen palpitating,

the way a thumb pressed over an eyelid  
feels the grape rolling in the socket,

quicker than a rabbit's panicked heart –

Outside Melbourne, a woman who rescues fruit bats  
reaches for one hanging from the ceiling of a cage.

She found it wrung up  
in wire fencing along a highway.

Carefully, she pries at wings whose hinges are unsure  
as a broken umbrella's, that are black

as rubber and thinner than beaten leather.  
She unwraps them, confident, and in the furred interior

the infant, clinging, unwilling to be sprung  
from its mother. If I were the documentarian,

if I rewound and replayed who knows how many times,  
it could go on, the wings

folding and unfolding, the folding  
seeming to be what keeps the infant alive

the way a bedroom door shuts to finish the job  
of keeping a young child – I feel I need this scene – safe;

as if the tuck of a blanket into her neck  
(more delicate than sheet

or the underside of a bat's wing) is sure  
as the bed's edge knows

its affordances, as if the door's closing keeps her  
not just asleep but breathing,

or could it be the other way around?  
The girl breathing it closed, with each breath in the girl

lapping shut again the always opening door.

## On Being Asked to Select a Reading for a Second Wedding

–for Lisa

What to say for our crooked hearts? I am unsure  
if I can look this time to my own love, which came to me  
easily and as a hand in the night,

or at least that is what I see, the hand approaching  
through the distance at my back as I rinse  
my face at the bathroom sink, the hand

tethering me to the room by my shoulder blade.  
My love, simple, neither special nor the love  
of others, too simple, simple as a child holding a pebble

when I am the child, or the child is  
remembered, small and with knees dusted in dirt where she  
crouches in the shadow of a house or a stand

of trees, strayed from her family to listen alone  
to the running water, to smell alone the pine  
bristling in the spray, to select then scoop the pebble

so warm and round as to make her grasping of it  
a given. No, not for me to circumscribe the smattering of hurts  
two people have offered one other. These two,

my friends, of whom I've seen so much, and their people  
of whom I've seen less – the bewildered relatives,  
the ex-wife, the friends excited or nonplussed – not for me

to enclose them as if drawing a circle in dirt  
with a long stick and then standing back to look;  
but what I have is what came to me

unasked for last night as I sought sleep from the dark  
pool of my bed, what the damp evening sent  
in place of that sleep, and what I saw was

a sheet of rock and cool water coming down it,  
bringing the silt of other places, and the white where the light  
enters and refracts, and the green where

simple kinds of life insist themselves  
into what alcoves are amenable, and the black where  
the water shows how it wets the rock, how the dark expanse

that again and again so coolly and clearly  
fills my vision is itself filled by water which is also cool  
and clear, within arm's reach and perfectly lucid.



## To Emily in Hard Times

Your letter before me on the desk,  
I watch the alley life through  
the window— the dumb bombs of pigeons  
plopped on the eaves of the next street  
over's houses, the squirrels that rush  
from roof to tree to ground and back  
again, fighting over whatever  
seeds and nuts and bits of twig they may  
fight over in the process. The fire escape  
runs like train tracks down the window  
so that each squirrel that runs its stairs  
seems to plummet straight from roof  
to earth, feathered tail brandished skyward  
like the fletching of an arrow. Your letter  
says your world is unspinning. Two pigeons  
move on to the next rooftop. A squirrel  
hops from somewhere in the neighbor's yard  
onto the railing, its entire body  
hooked around the rust-spotted wrought iron  
and trembling with the work of keeping itself  
there and upright, and I think of the time  
you scaled the mountain outside Anchorage  
and got pinned by the wind and your own  
panic, only a set of ropes battened  
into the mountain's sides leashing you  
to that knuckle of rock at the top  
of everything. Without warning the squirrel  
slings itself at a tree that must be  
six feet out— it can't have leapt far  
enough, and a vision of its fall  
blinks into my mind, the little limbs  
pinwheeling, trying to right the torso  
before impact; but the nearest branch,  
the branch limp but flush at its tip,  
is blooming with grey down swelling  
in the spaces around the flat waxy leaves,  
and they are waving up and down before  
the brick wall of the house across  
the alley from mine, hanging  
suspended at each peak of their arcs  
over this small piece of a world

divvied into its rectangular spaces  
for living, the squirrel and the branch  
together, they are wiping themselves onto  
the brick, and Emily, it is enough.

## Driving Over the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge

Scattered at the base of the memorial  
are little white things—  
flags, or handkerchiefs,

easy to see, brighter  
than the sky and the mist that coats the sky  
like grey moss on rock

grey as the stone blocks that rise  
from the water to my left and right to prop up

bridges other than this one, other cars crossing the river.

I throttle forward, and the white things  
begin to inch in the grass,  
and as they move among themselves

grey spots begin  
                                  to bloom on their backs like stains  
spreading on cloth napkins,  
and sprouting from their fronts:  
  the heads of gulls

bobbing at the sightseers' shins—  
          *gulls* I realize, almost across the bridge

when I see on the water's surface

a canoe  
and myself in it,

arms raised, kneeling and facing away and  
already receding:  
                                  so soon the bridge will be past,

and the canoe with it, rocking with each  
reach of my hands, the water

sloshing over the boat's lip, cold  
and cupped in the hull like sky  
overturned at my knees.

II

## The Levee

If I'd seen it in a photograph  
it might have appeared smaller,  
but from the bend in the road I can say  
with authority that this is the place  
where we stopped. Mid-morning  
in summer, no bathrooms nearby,  
the zoo minutes away. I don't know  
how old I was. The road's white  
cement peels off in each direction  
the way the even scales of a belly-up  
alligator narrow towards the tail  
and snout while seeming they  
could, if they so desired, repeat  
without end. But the same sun has  
the same land by the throat: untrimmed  
azaleas flattened to the eye  
like cardboard discs, the green belt  
beyond bright as a strip of felt  
and buttressing the sky, monolithic  
as law. A perfect incline, a thing made  
at a desk with a pen and protractor,  
from where we must have heard  
the untidy rising and receding  
noise of cars on the cracked road  
when we ran up, rejoicing in our  
release. The grass grew in spirals,  
each blade bursting from its predecessor  
flat at the base, knotting the rosettes  
that caught our palms when we  
dropped to our knees short of the  
summit, short of the flattop trail  
that would have shown us the river  
that forced the white road to bend.  
Why so suddenly, so clearly have I  
remembered this configuration:  
three stomachs flush with the ramp  
of lawn and aimed at its core, three  
backs exposed to the gusts off the road,  
our mother watching from  
somewhere behind and below.  
I didn't need to see the river. Already

at my navel I felt the tremor of the  
soon to be brackish, already the thrum  
of a thing always passing and never  
past, and already I leaned at it  
like the traveler who, having arrived  
too late to the crossing to have  
heard the freight approaching  
or to have seen the first cars break  
from one patch of brush and vanish  
into the shrub at the other side,  
perennially waits, living  
and reliving the segments of machine,  
and thinks of the invisible conductor  
elsewhere pushing at his levers.  
How many times have I waited  
at tracks, eyeing the stalks of weed  
closest to the break,  
at once harbored and barred  
by what is more and able?  
And would that I had myself  
achieved stillness in the dust  
that kept me from the silver current,  
and let whatever will it was that  
drew her hands on the steering wheel  
from the road to the white  
roadside be the same that pulled  
down our knees, that bent us  
before the sun branding the backs  
of our necks, all of us  
leaning at the thing like small  
fish at the gills of a larger fish.

## Cotton Picking

She cut her hands their first wear the summer  
she turned sixteen, digging her tanned fingers  
into the bolls' sockets to tear from them

wads of cotton coarse as burlap.  
Now all my mother has to say about it  
is that the sweat stung in the cuts lacing

her hands, and that the pay was pennies.  
But the gunny sack she dragged behind her  
down the cramped, furrowed rows

to the weighing scales, the heat it must have  
radiated, licking its matte trail  
into the red dirt – the same dirt I loved

as a child, sought at the bottoms of ditches  
so tangled with honeysuckle and  
blackberry that I relied on touch alone

to learn them, emerging with my arms  
and legs, pale skin of my father  
and his father, streaked in red to prove it.

## Camellia Scent

We breathed it through the back porch screens  
playing with the old toy farm  
and its champion toy stallion, while our mother  
sat inside with her father. We loved the horse

because he had been her favorite too,  
and because of the way age had whittled  
his white plastic extremities, the long nose  
polished like old bone, one ankle

so thin the foot had snapped off,  
which only made the muscles in his shoulder,  
tensed perennially mid-buck, that much more  
magnificent. So we gripped

him by the extraneous flap of plastic  
where he'd been snipped from the mold,  
and thundered him up and down  
the porch, slapping all three hooves at the wood;

pleased how he clamored at the wire screens  
and wicker furniture, and pounded  
through the floorboards to the space  
between porch and floor, and shook

the camellia scent from the camellia  
bushes, growing louder,  
flooding us, until we were all of us running  
for the front of the house

to the woman who'd run her blue jalopy  
off the road, through a camellia bush,  
and into Old Papa's ditch, clambering  
hollering from the ditch to the highway shoulder.

Later, I'd ask my mother why she hated  
when my father came in cupping camellias  
in the crook of one arm to float them  
one by one in glass—

*—They rot too soon—* she'd say scooping them



one-handed and lobbing them  
water-logged into the trash. That day it was  
her hands at our small chests

that pressed us back toward the house  
as smoke rose from the rusted hood  
and the white and bright and light  
pink petals settled in the yard,

and the woman's breasts loose under  
her t-shirt as she shouted, and the woman's  
wild hair, frayed and fanned  
around her head like unspun wool.

## Severance

*The war took our youth* was your response to the reporter who asked how you knew so early that you wanted to marry my grandmother, as if the day you rose from water to beach you'd waded the shores of your boyhood.

But it came back for your old age, the last months you spent suckling an eyedropper for its sedative and mistaking me for the British nurse. You told stories you'd never told but that had lodged in you, stark and complete as lumps of metal

or the German words you barked at night. There were three sparrows at her bird feeder, competing for the blank pellets of birdseed, the morning you confessed that when the elderly couple tracked you down after decades

to the hear from you how their son had died, you lied, and didn't tell them that if you'd bent to lift and take him back to them, his legs would have simply fallen away, like half of a book split at the spine.

## The Louisiana Compulsory Education Act of 1916

Now when I see old cane  
    yellowed and leaning off  
        from newer stalk but still stiff, hollowed  
and hardening  
    through the dry joints, I wonder  
        was this what the English-speaking teacher  
used on my mother's parents  
    when she called on them in words  
        they couldn't understand to stand?

The lowered eyes, so failed  
    by the ears, the mouths so  
        ready to be made example of  
for their bastard tongues. No doubt  
    in the whistle of cane whipped down  
        wasp quick. Now when I see old cane

I see in the stripped fibers  
    the frayed binding of the Cajun  
        dictionary my mother kept hidden  
in her drawer. Only when she  
    thought no one was looking  
        would she take it out, hunch  
over it splayed in her lap,  
    and choose two or three strange  
        words to mouth, to mutter to herself.

Once, I stole the book,  
    hid it in my closet behind hung  
        dresses. Did I look as she had  
holding in both hands  
    the unraveling red canvas cover  
        rougher than raw cane? Thinking  
I too should learn, alone

and in a whisper, guessing  
as best I could at pronunciation,

until the big book disappeared  
and the season ambled on, the old cane  
leaning as its shadows leaned.

## Falling Game

My mother taught me the route not by the aluminum signs planted into the crushed oyster shells at the roads' shoulders, but by its landmarks: the overpass at the end of the straight shot through the swamp to Labadieville, the whitewashed church and the auto body shop straddling the bridge over Bayou Lafourche, the hand-painted pro-life billboard of the faceless pregnant woman with a full-spectrum rainbow erupting from her gut – always laughing at that last one the summer we made the two hour drive down two-lane highways to the city to visit Papa, who was dying. At the wheel my mother told and retold the story of the day in 1974 when he and her mother-in-law sat her down at the kitchen table, passed her a mug of coffee, and explained why a nurse from Marksville not a good enough woman to marry their son. In the passenger seat I hated her for it. It wasn't until she got to the infants passed into her hands at every family gathering, left to her care, and I pictured her dark fingers darker in the lines around her knuckles on the pink and white skin of my cousins' fleshy middles, that I remembered her nightmare: her mother-in-law takes my sisters and me to the top of the state capitol building, steeple of Baton Rouge, and dangles our small forms over the balcony of the thirty-fourth floor; and how Jane and I, cross-legged in the backyard, had made a game of it, our hands locked like mollusks over our eyes, squeezing a color out of the darkness that would tell what happens to us after Grandma lets go– for example, if Jane presses a bright pink into the backs of her eyelids, her lanky little self lands on the hood of a pink parked car.

## On the Tenth Anniversary of Katrina's Landfall

Eleven years now since I left. Today  
the disaster plays out again on television  
just as it did the first time, when I'd  
purchase a coffee from the campus cafe  
just to sit and watch on those days  
I went with no word from anyone I knew,  
phones on the fritz and no cable yet  
in my brand new apartment, so that in public  
I sat to listen to these same clips  
repeating, these same sounds spun  
from reporters' mouths like an electric current  
out of anyone's control. The brown water  
rose as I watched other students  
methodically stir sugar into their coffee  
and gather their bags – yes, the water rose,  
as it rises now on every network  
unreal as the flawless blue  
of the tarp-covered roofs that reappear  
each time I fly home, blips like patchwork  
or a poorly programmed video game.  
I am disgusted by the attempts  
to memorialize, the I who writes this,  
who thinks of walking in the middle  
of the weekday into a church;  
the I who doesn't even know her mother's  
father's name, just that he went by Bubba,  
and in the flood of '27 saw his belongings  
cartwheel downriver, Gulf bound,  
and never forgot. How could he?  
He was there, he watched it happen.

## Live Oak

I'd always liked to think it had been split into its halves  
the first time it was struck by lightning – our old oak with its  
diverging sets of limbs, so prone to being struck, solitary  
on the point. Or not solitary at all, as my father is explaining,  
one of his rough hands pressed to the rough bark  
where the latest fork of lightning's left its mark. We don't have  
(according to the Parish arborist) one tree at all, but the merging  
of two seeds taken to ground too near one another, seeds whose trunks  
each year rippled a new ring until they touched and then kept on,  
their skins melding as they grew, and it's true, I can see the ridge  
they braided where the met, where the brindled bark turns darker  
and furrowed enough to cut a climber's foot. For this  
they won't be saved, two oaks that share a girth and therefore  
aren't old enough to be preserved as historic, as my father had hoped.  
Instead, the tree that spouts towards the canal will die  
slowly of the sickness the lightning licked into it.  
The bark on the stricken side of the trunk is molting, bearing  
the bleached wood beneath the crust, and we huddle to touch  
one by one the char that scribbles down the unlucky limb  
to the yawning fork then down the trunk to the ground,  
each of us quietly inspecting, as if our less than superstitious palms  
might make the difference. Overhead, half of the leaves are grey  
and brittle, and I am suddenly unwilling, I am casting  
my eyes to the roots for the colored shards of beer bottles  
embedded in dirt I once imagined the first stones  
of a house I would build. The old water tower is gone  
from where for years it stood rust-speckled on the far bank, made  
so small by distance I might've reached across to lift its orange cap

like the lid of a tin box, to peer inside for something unseeable  
as the bowl at the place where the two trees break loose of their trunk,  
the heart I climbed towards so many times without success, my bare feet  
scrabbling against that line in the bark I took for granted.



## Fly/Flown

—after W. S. Merwin's "Fly"

I suppose we were cruel to an old mallard  
Who pestered us for a summer  
He'd only wanted younger women and an easy meal

We were trying to raise ducks  
From the egg the damn ducks every one but him  
Picked off by the alligator or the pair of hawks  
One by neighborhood dogs on the loose  
Before they could fly

Shoo we said but he waited on the doormat  
Hobbled after us honking  
Obstinate always snapping the horned beak  
At the backs of our heels  
Until we poured cracked corn in the grass  
Until he wasn't afraid even of car tires anymore  
We shot a snake in the pond he barely looked up

Disappeared the first week

Of duck season a steel  
Pellet I bet in his belly full of corn

We trimmed the azaleas then put a pot on for supper

\*

All the while his mate had been waiting  
Out on the point for his return  
Her nest smartly tucked under the tallest oak

She'd come with him to our place on the canal but never  
Came around us the way he had always sat  
Squat on the nest eyeing us anytime we came near  
Someone had tagged her a cheap  
Tin band shackling her left ankle

Her wedding ring we said  
Must have been around the time he started  
Eating corn she stood up  
We weren't looking she stamped  
The eggs and left but we'd forgotten  
Was it weeks before we discovered the eggs  
Stinking to high heaven

Flown probably

Across the canal her sticky feet pointing  
Back at us as she flew

We who had always believed so much in husbandry

## The Great American West

It was quiet on the mountain when my father said she wasn't the woman he'd married anymore. We had the hiking trail to ourselves, but more than that it was the alpine air, so different from what we were used to, cold, thin, and dry, bracing in our lungs as we breathed it. "She's had a hard life," I said. We'd stopped at two pines whose roots had wrestled themselves into the rock. From the knot of rock and root, their trunks swung out snake-like from the cliffside, dangling poised limbs over the canyon. "What's she had to be unhappy about?" he asked, the thought never having occurred to him, and for a decade after it never occurred to me that she didn't tell him about the poorly hand-sewn dresses, the wads of paper stuffed into the toes of her shoes, the hot cotton, the great-aunt dying and not-to-be-disturbed, the rickety ladder in the yard, the rooms left untouched and un-dusted after deaths, the flight from the Church for which she was never forgiven in that tiny town by kin with whom she didn't share a language, the corn husks, the stolen, hacked-off stalks of sugar cane, the sticks for toys, the walk to school, the wink of a penny in her daddy's palm, the clamp of authority's hand at her nape. We were quiet then. I knew this landscape meant something to my father because his own father had brought him to see it despite vowing, after the war, never again to sleep on the ground. A chipmunk darted in and out of the rock at the base of the pines, scavenging no doubt for the kind of soft, dried things that line his burrow. I could smell them from where I stood, the sweet, urine-dusted hollows where winter would be waited out, fastidiously tucked away from the high blue that swallows the bluebird's call, that sky we'd come to see domed over its wide plains

and its range of mountains whose backbone  
we thought we could feel beneath our boots.

III

## As You Drove Me to the Metro Station at Dusk

I told you the story of Sarah's wedding,  
held in an un-air-conditioned wooden house  
on church property, which meant  
the reception was dry, and while we  
sweated through our pantyhose,  
those poor men bore white tuxes  
and wool cummerbunds. We ate the gumbo  
anyway, and I watched my own name  
blink around the room on placards  
bearing the names of the wedding party,  
glued to handle sticks so the guests  
could fan themselves. That August,  
as did every, swaddled us in wetness,  
in the smell of wet cypress and the ripe muck  
at their knees, all the while Sarah at the center  
in white, belly already growing  
like a face turned to the light.

And I told you how that evening the young people  
gathered outside a cousin's trailer that was  
far enough down the bayou to shake  
the brassy orange of town light, stood around  
the bonfire her brother had built,  
even in that heat, to keep away the mosquitoes,  
and let the enormous damp of that night,  
drenched in the clicking of all its insects,  
contain us. Until the boy who'd lost  
the bag of pills came stumbling  
out of the neighboring pasture, alive  
with panic; and so we took up our beers  
and whatever flashlights the cousin had  
and set out into the pasture spread over  
by a marsh fog too low and flat to have  
anywhere else to travel, and too thick  
for us to see anything but our feet before us  
and the haze of the bonfire behind.  
I walked through the shin-deep damp  
weeds, mosquitoes beating off my skin  
as I parted invisible curtains of them,  
and found nothing in my cone of light  
but discs of cow shit large as dinner plates

facing right back up at the moon.

When I told you these stories had no place  
here, where mechanical ticks signal when  
a train nears, the cars stacking neatly as they pull  
out of a curve in the tracks to take me back  
to my apartment in the city, you disagreed,  
and I left your car. Then on the raised platform:  
a praying mantis, its six wire legs immobile  
as the tile at my feet, its angular body washed  
yellow under the station's electric lamp.  
A draft rose off the rails, and the mantis  
unfroze, began an odd, slow sway, a shifting  
from one set of legs to the other.

## Glass Triptych

From the third floor I watch the sunlight  
slap your shoulder like the flat of an oar as you turn

the corner. The ceiling fan pointing its four directions  
is incorrigible as a burr, one blade

tilting into shadow, two the same shade.  
Your friend has died. When you first found out,

you sat stiff in your chair and failed to answer  
my automatic *what*, you for whom

talk is so often less necessary than touch (your own  
form of gentleness), while I was, in that moment,

annoyed at the inconvenience  
of emotion. When our dog felt her first hurt,

the yelp froze her mid-leap, her hind leg going rigid  
as it jabbed at the ceiling, and when she found

the floor again her eyes found mine,  
round, black, pitching their wordless question to me,

no different from my twin cousins  
when they, flicking doubloons palmed from the old

copper bowl to ricochet down  
the wooden stairs, broke the picture frame holding

our grandparents. The glass  
was like rice after a wedding, and I turned away

as my sister with steady hands gripped me and drew  
the prism of the longest shard from my heel.

\*





by our proximity to grief.

\*

Pressing my hand to the little table  
I painted green I feel  
the scar on my palm and inside it  
a small shard of glass. When it happened,

I'd tried to clean the cut well;  
I held the slit open under a running faucet  
and peered inside and saw  
nothing left to pick out, but still I sense

the splinter buried there, wrapped  
tight under the white lump, the mark  
the lines of my palm disappear into  
and reappear from at the other side. I try to align

the nick of glass with the grain of the wood  
the way sometimes, my hand  
on your arm seems to just  
be going in the correct direction.

All around me, your plants are growing  
slowly, leaning at the sun  
slanting through the windows.  
Remarkable how close we could come,

as time and the power of my own cells  
wear away at my piece  
of fire-blown sand, the once-  
foreign now dissolved,

glass into skin into painted wood, flush  
as the crepe myrtles blooming  
beyond the window that keeps  
me from them and no more.

## Nonsense Lines from a Rented Cabin Complete with Sauna, or, Pennsylvania

I guess even the trees are fighting each other.

\*

Our Russian host taught us how to sauna “like in the old country,”  
to shut yourself inside a wooden box  
before someone else has to do it for you.

\*

In Tokyo I went to a modest bathhouse. The women's beautiful bodies  
slipped like sardines into the tubs, familiar as that.  
I knew I'd stayed too long when a child began to bawl  
at the sight of my pink skin, shaking her tiny fists until the mother,  
eyes averted, moved to a different pool.

\*

It's possible the woods are meant for the stark of heart.  
But even the woodpecker's twiggy little knee  
has to contend with the red crest blinking through the branches,  
showing off. When one pine leans to another, the slice of sky between  
them  
disappears if they are close enough. I swear  
they do it on purpose, they are winking at me  
because they know I like them.

\*

The Russian showed us how to build the fire so hot  
you can hardly stand it, and how to stand it long enough  
to lose your breath  
so you can run gasping into the November morning,  
plant your feet shoulder-width apart,  
and pour an entire plastic Penzoil container's worth  
of ice cold water down the top of your head –

\*

Instantaneous, the steam cloud, massive

and billowing from your body with a ridiculousness  
greater than the pull of the tides,  
sending wave after wave of *you* into Pennsylvania  
all in the time it takes for the shock of cold to become

\*

the sound of the water slopping from you to the ground  
like progeny – splat! Brash as the male woodpecker  
scuttling red spirals up the pine.

\*

May it be nothing simpler than you, buck naked and absurd in the middle of nowhere.

## In Winter

On this gravel road through these woods where I've chosen to walk  
far from the people I love, my own blue-hatted head

is a solitary orb over the landscape, moving slowly  
like a target on a digitized map. The season hasn't yet

unclenched, still holding onto the cold that I used  
to despise. Everywhere there are cold branches and the sound

of wind through branches, and the morning light  
filtered through the wind as through a sieve.

Small redbud trees line the road, shoulder-height beneath  
the taller growth, wrapped all up their trunks

by crawlers, wine-colored and snaking their way  
to get their leaves to sun. At the end of this road,

I'll find a shallow, widening tributary of the Chesapeake.  
I'll sit on a decomposing pier and watch the waterfowl

in their element: a kingfisher quiet and discerning in the low branches  
to my left, long-legged egrets momentarily at ease

on the sun-struck bank, Canada geese stomping down a still-frozen  
stretch on the river's far side. I'll wonder if I've spotted a bald eagle,

or if above me the wide-winged predator's white head  
is a trick of the light. It will flicker like a tossed coin,

and I'll have no one's opinion to ask. Now, on my right,  
a redbud reddens towards its tips as if making a frame

for the vine spiraling up its center, the vine that does the opposite  
of shine, that deepens, hardens, makes of itself a fact darker than blood.

## Walking Home After a Night of Work

I'd walked to the museum to see its pale stone walls  
rising from the floodlights, as bold at night as in day,  
because the sound of my shoes on sidewalk bricks  
still holding the day's heat so long after sunset

reminded me of myself. The city finally gone quiet,  
cars and crowds giving way to the silent time-keeping  
of traffic signals – but in the gallery yard's trees,  
I found a host of brown sparrows, all singing,

so high-pitched, whistling, I thought at first  
through the thistle hum of their wings they could've been  
a colony of bats. Tricked, must have been, by the lights  
into thinking that all the night was an hours-long dawn,

always its own verge, and so continued  
to sing for it, and yet I could hardly see them,  
the lamplight etching an orange frieze of bird  
and leaf and bark, only the texture of movement

to suggest the blurt of a wing or the pivot of a head  
and its blackcurrant eye, or the occasional fall,  
as one, too crowded at its perch nearest the light,  
dropped from a branch and flew back up to perch again.

After that, after finding them swarmed in the floodlit,  
curling tree limbs, squawking for morning, how could I not,  
coming home, go to the room where you are already  
sleeping, and rest my palm on the bit of foot you've

kicked from under the blanket; how could I not  
imagine myself, immutable figure of a woman  
standing in an entranceway, quarried, in her need  
to reach the sleeper, from the light the door lets in?

## To the Cockroach My Beloved

It's the root of the Korean word for Korean,  
this syllable you say doesn't translate  
but blame when you lose your temper.  
When pressed to explain, you grin at me  
crookedly. *We're like cockroaches – worth nothing  
but you'll never get rid of us*, and across your eye  
glints some sting of a history I could learn  
to describe the way I can learn to read  
your face, so close to mine as you speak.  
What accomplishments of geography  
that this is loving; that what rouses me in you  
should be so unsayable.

\*

The last time I was apart from you  
the insects protested. A swarm can begin  
slowly: at night, attracted to the light,  
Formosan termites began to creep in however  
they could, slipping through the door cracks,  
crawling up the pipes. The wings they dropped  
were petal-thin tapers, and looked like what I saw  
when I read about linnets before I learned  
what linnets are. We turned out the lights and sat,  
my family and I, near each other in the dark,  
listening for the nothing sound of them  
getting in or not.



## To My Mother, Cancer Patient

When my back is  
turned you still love me.

- Frank O'Hara

My brother-in-law called today  
to talk about our respective spouses, two siblings  
who can't seem to show  
how much they care for each another.  
Not so long from now,  
their friendship will be the only proof  
their parents ever walked this earth, he says.

Unemployment doesn't suit him,  
but he has a point. How would you react  
if I called you like that, out of the blue,  
talking like a Bible verse, you  
who only told your children you were  
losing your breast after your husband  
mistakenly opened your mail?

Out back, in our excuse for a yard,  
Ryan is working, painting an old truck,  
clearing stubborn weeds with stems  
like rope, while from my table by the window  
I feel the day's warmth  
gradually filter through the glass.  
If I were out there now

I'd kneel at the neighbors' low iron gate  
and peer through the bars into the bushes  
where the cowbirds and sparrows  
get up to their bird business  
sneakily in the shadows. I can't remember  
ever having felt so fond of them,  
the way they perch in the azalea's

dim interior, tail feathers  
levering away, little heads cocking  
precisely with each slight shift of light  
or new thought or non-thought, the way they sit

in their own bodies with the inevitability  
of breath. What better  
way to explain it, that today

I can love the turned back of the world  
the way I love the thought of the sun  
flat across Ryan's broad back  
bent at his task, all the while the small birds  
around him, and his hands moving and moving  
and moving. Your good news today, like weather,  
has colored everything in reach.

## I Found a Pair of Barn Owls

I found a pair of barn owls, juveniles, afloat  
on the water hyacinth clogging the covered boat slip,  
black eyes buried in white, heart-shaped faces  
and bobbing in the brown wake. They must have flubbed

their first attempts at flight, must have careened  
from the rafters, from where they perched  
small and ringed with down, to the muddy canal,  
the half-formed wings not strong or skilled enough

to sweep them from the drop: they must have spun  
like weather vanes. I took an old net hooked  
to a hollow aluminum pole, scooped them  
from the water, and drew them sopping onto

the dock, as I'd pulled, from their parents' pellets  
cemented like tar to the ground, rodent bones—  
toothpick femurs, orange teeth in skulls white  
as the heart-shaped faces that hover on the dock,

that watch me, who'd saved them, dumbly gripping  
the crooked pole and frayed net and watching them  
back, watching the little hooked beaks breaking through  
the drying down, hard and live as separate animals.