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Silence Emerging from Birds

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SILENCE EMERGING FROM BIRDS

by

Rebecca S. Macijeski

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
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SILENCE EMERGING FROM BIRDS

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University of Nebraska, 2017

Advisor: Grace Bauer

This dissertation represents the culmination of five years of creative activity in poetry. Included within this document are three main components: 1.) a critical introduction to my book-length manuscript of original poems complete to satisfy the requirements of creative writing within the English Department; 2.) a description of my creative activity reflected in that book-length manuscript, and; 3.) a sample of previously published original poems from the manuscript. I will describe each of these components in greater detail below.

The critical introduction to the creative work seeks to explore and examine various aesthetic and theoretical influences on my poems. The introduction references specific poets whose ideas have shaped my approach to my collection, as well as the possible pitfalls I hope to avoid in creating a poetry collection with an overarching narrative. I describe my overall approach to drafting the various types and forms of poems that build the larger work. The introduction essay also takes a close look at certain of my poems that demonstrate key poetic strategies in action in order to contextualize my work within that of the poets I cite as influences; the effect of this is to assert the place of my own poetics within the broader tradition of American poetry.

The description of the manuscript digs more deeply into the work of the poems themselves. It outlines the manuscript's major aesthetic concerns and strategies, and offers possibilities for what kind of reading experience the work seeks to create. The

description also functions to explicate the relationship between the collection's two poetic sequences; these sequences interweave to create multiple layers of resonance and overlapping meanings.

The sample poems demonstrate the range and scope of the larger work. As noted in the acknowledgements section, these poems have been previously published in a variety of journals.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

As a reader, I value poetry collections that maintain a specific narrative or project trajectory without getting lost in unnecessary story details. I enjoy collections that ask us to read lyrically as well as narratively by providing poems that build toward a cumulative statement while also allowing individual moments of resonance. Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* demonstrates a masterful balance between building an extended narrative and offering individual poems that serve as epiphanic flashes of insight. This simultaneous power of poems interests me—how a single poem can be both a lyric statement that stands on its own, and a key step in a linear narrative progression. Maurice Manning's *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* is another strong influence for me in this regard. Manning manages multiple threads of story in his poetic exploration of the fictitious Lawrence Booth, which allows individual poems to take on various readings. Manning sprinkles details throughout the collection that link images or memories from one poem to events or experiences of other poems; the beauty in the poems themselves is always present, but grows into an entirely new kind of energy when readers are able to follow clues and find connections.

My collection, *Silence Emerging from Birds*, engages heavily with persona, which makes the influence of Dove and Manning on my work quite direct. Only about half of the poems in my collection, though, operate within a persona; for the other poems that are more lyrical in approach, the poets whose influences I draw from are a little less obvious. There are three poets who I feel as kindred spirits in this work, and I've tried to recast some of their aesthetic attitudes in a way that feels organic to my own modes of making

poetic meaning. I am inspired by Galway Kinnell's mystical approach to the physical and psychological world he navigates, as well as his keen understanding of the New England landscape. When I write about memories of my childhood, it's his poetic sensibility I'm channeling in these acts of remembering. His poems were some of the first I connected to as a student of writing, and it is fitting that I read them in my home state of Vermont, which was so beloved to Kinnell himself. Jane Kenyon's fierce positivity and the gentle awe she writes through in poems of simple daily experiences challenges me to look for my own gentleness and reverence for simplicity. There's a way in which her imagination always gestures toward the best possible versions of things, and this is the strategy I often try to employ in my poems. Thirdly, I've tried to incorporate my own version of Mary Ruefle's intellectual playfulness. I admire the way Ruefle is able to create complete, absurd little worlds as mini-commentaries on the artificial complexity of human life. The poems from my collection that engage directly with composers and the classical music tradition borrow a touch from Ruefle's silly, irreverent attitude.

My work as a whole resists becoming a single, definable statement; it's more interested in offering multiple possibilities of meaning. *Silence Emerging from Birds* combines two distinct sequences of poems to present a multi-dimensional exploration of the self as performance and the self as larger-than-life myth. Rather than emphasizing the differences between these two explorations, the collection searches for moments of resonance and demonstrates these overlaps by intertwining the narratives instead of presenting them separately. One narrative follows a personification of Death who appears "this time" as a woman. Through successive poems it becomes clear that Death inherits her career as death through matrilineal progression. Select poems show her gaining

practice with the various protocols associated with her job, while others show her in a very human light as she keenly feels her distance from the people whose lives she collects. The other narrative is not persona driven, and is voiced through a more readily identifiable lyric “I.” This sequence follows my experience training and performing as a classical musician and fiddler. Certain of these poems recall key memories or moments from my musical life, while others imaginatively explore the elaborate unspoken mythology that surrounds classical composers, the power of music in musicians’ lives, and the mysterious pageantry that so often accompanies practice and performance.

In my writing process for this collection, I worked on each sequence separately at first—with the goals in mind of bringing each set of poems to its own psychic completion, while also keeping in mind the ultimate aim of combining them. When I amassed a couple dozen each of Death poems and music poems, I started examining them side by side to look for natural places where the parallel stories seemed to interlock or speak to each other. I began to find deeply resonant, natural pairings between the Death poems and the music poems. I discovered moments where one sequence picked up on images or concerns of the other (and vice versa) in some surprising, subconscious ways. The result for readers, I hope, is a sense of playful alternation between voices, a kind of call and response format that echoes the way we all find ourselves in conversation with our various elements.

Before moving forward into a discussion of this alternation of voices, I’ll look a little more directly at what the Death poems accomplish as a unit. The original concept arose from reading a Charles Simic poem in which he imagines the point of view of Death’s wife. The poem was memorable to me in the way it portrayed Death as an

essentially human figure, but I also felt I wanted to challenge the poem's core concept. Why must Death be a man? What if Death was a woman? How would her womanhood color the way she interacts at a distance with the people whose lives she comes to collect? Would she have a family or long for one? How long does she work her career in the death business? What sorts of rhythms or rituals does she perform in the service of this career? A whole slew of artistic possibilities crossed my mind, and I was eager to realize as many of them as I could. The opportunity to really spend some time in the project came in Grace Bauer's Spring 2013 workshop on experimentation with forms. I set some parameters for myself early on; one was establishing the rule that I would not get caught up in the supernatural elements of Death's transactions in souls. I would focus more on Death's supposed humanity, how she observes her progression in her days and in her work.

Another challenge I set myself was to add variety to the sequence through the use of unexpected forms. This helped me add interesting information to the world of my Death persona without getting bogged down in back story or exposition. The forms also drove me to think about Death in new ways outside of the traditional life cycle narrative. "Death's Pocket Inventory," for example, functions as a list of items Death finds in the pockets of people who have died. While at first the poem seems simple, it is actually much more than a catalog of objects. The pocket contents offer clues to the scope and nature of Death's end-of-life interactions. Some of the items are undeniably mundane—bookmarks, paper clips, pens—while others hint at possible causes of death: "musket balls," "infantry medals," and "half-empty prescription bottles." Still other items carry emotional or nostalgic resonance as we consider them through Death's eyes—"orange

peels,” “dried flowers,” “directions to Grandma’s house.” Instead of lingering on individual narratives, the poem operates through a collective gathering of implied stories; each object gains greater significance by what proceeds or follows it. The poem is a community of things, but it is really about the ghosts of the people who left those things, pieces of themselves, behind.

Another poem, “Last Messages,” picks up on this mode of collecting, a verb I assign early in the sequence to refer to the nature of Death’s interaction with the dead. The poem saw its genesis in a voicemail mistakenly left on my cell phone toward the beginning of my work on the project. An older woman, a stranger, left a long message for her son all about various happenings in the family and requesting he have the name of her recently deceased friend added to the upcoming Easter mass. I was struck by the intimacy of this accidental message, and saw an opportunity to connect a new poem to a practice only briefly mentioned in an earlier poem from the book. “Death’s Practicum” details Death’s protocols for when she comes to collect a person, one of which is to listen to any phone messages left for the deceased. “Last Messages” adds gravity to this gesture through Death’s cumulative recollection of multiple visits, multiple messages. Again, the poem’s effect comes through implied story; the reader is invited to imagine both what happened for the deceased after their messages were left, and how Death came to discover them.

The poems also offer glimpses into specific interactions. In “Death Browses an Old Bookshop,” we see Death find an old phrenology manual. The poem combines found text from this actual volume with Death’s recollections of her visit to the woman whose phrenology readings are offered within it. The unusual form this poem takes allows for

readers to experience a kind of conversation across time between Death and the woman, Louisa Loton, who was examined in 1865. Loton's life narrative is suggested through the lyric flashes fueled by Death's memories. As an example, the phrenology manual offers an account of Loton's brain as a "quick, clear, sprightly mind," while Death conceives of Loton's mind as more like "a precocious bluebird." The subtlety in this poem's form continues the work of implying story, but also does something else important. It establishes that Death does not maintain a merely sterile, business-like interaction with the dead, but rather that she has a kind of fondness or reverence for them; this affinity complicates Death as a persona and invites readers to see her as both mythic and strangely human.

I play with this gray area between mythology and mortality by painting some of my own personal experiences as Death's experiences. "Death Draws Herself a Bath," for example, was actually written in the bath after a long day of graduate student life. I was finishing off a bottle of wine someone had left in my kitchen after house guests finally vacated my apartment; it was the first time in a week I could be by myself and reflect. The subject of me unwinding didn't seem worthy enough for a poem, but giving this experience over to that of Death reflecting on her career could somehow make the poem both about me and not about me. Another poem that does this is "Searching," which offers a scene of Death practicing dissections in a biology lab. Her memory is actually my own memory of a month of AP Bio spent exploring my way through Napoleon, a fetal pig. This memory was for me, as it is for Death in the poem, the first time I encountered the mysterious inner complexity of bodies. The experience felt larger than any way I could tell it. Letting Death tell it allows the story to be both mine and not mine.

This simultaneity is where my poems are most interesting for me, and where *Silence Emerging from Birds* ultimately operates. This simultaneity occurs not only between my experience and Death's experience, but also between this sequence and the interwoven music poems, which I will elaborate on this later.

While the Death poems explore the ephemeral nature of life through Death's eyes, the music poems explore the practice and performance of music as a metaphor, in my life, for that ephemerality. The Death poems become about how to live while the music poems become about how to be ready to die. Music's ultimate irony is that it only exists when it is going out of existence, but the discipline attained through musical study enables me to more fully feel my own existence in that passing. These poems explore how a life in music—both through performance and through full-bodied listening—offers a momentary escape from an otherwise routine progression of time. In this way, music invites us to better know ourselves through filling us with auditory and emotionally resonant sensations that push out distracting anxieties or preoccupations. We effectively become these sensations. “New England Conservatory 2004—2007” provides an example of this. The poem recalls long walks I'd take for weekly violin lessons in Boston. My keenest memory of those walks is how often it would rain down Huntington Avenue toward the conservatory. The rain became a kind of refrain for me week to week, a metaphor for repetition, practice, and the fluid nature of time. The actual lines of the poem enact a kind of gentle sonic repetition through the recurring, but slightly varied mentions of rain; in addition, the rain image transforms from simple precipitation in the beginning into a surreal representation of music itself pooled and gathering along the

city's varied forms—including my own body as I exit the lesson room. Inside the lesson I experience lyric time, but once back outside I return to narrative time.

“At the Salzburg Cathedral” plays with time in a related way. The poem remembers one of my most transformative experiences as part of an audience. The Salzburg Cathedral is so tall and so long that music performed there takes eight seconds to dissipate after it finishes its initial sounding. The effect is such that you can hear the music die out of itself. It hovers like a ghost after instruments and throats close; since visual and auditory cues don't line up, it's easy to sense the music as separately alive from its performers. Hearing a concert there I was both intellectually fascinated by this phenomenon and filled with inexplicable awe. It was the kind of music you could feel in your body like a wave. These moments of performance seem to generate their own mythology. The poem carries an additional resonance when set against poems that deal more literally with death and mortality.

The collection also offers some of my more private moments in music, and these are perhaps the poems that provide the most dynamic points of intersection between the book's two separate strands. “Fiddling in the Boneyard” begins Section III, and it is also one of the older poems in the book. The poem feels aligned with some of the more imaginative or fictitious ones from the collection—“Requiem,” for example, which claims “the gatekeeper to the underworld/ is a blind piano tuner”—but it relates an actual experience. One summer in my early twenties I would pack my fiddle several times a week and drive to the cemetery where my younger brother is buried. I'd play tunes there at the top of the hill. This practice was initially, I think, born out of the need to feel connected to a place. I went there at first for my brother and for myself, but I started to

feel a growing comfort and intimacy with the silent community there. Playing music for this audience became a kind of meditation for me, and freed me from the anxieties that bound me to my current time. This poem is the pivot point in the collection when the separations between the Death poems and music poems become increasingly porous; the collection's two women become more and more clearly imaginative extensions of the same self. As a poet and a musician, I am bound to two rich traditions. It is hard to adequately measure the profound influence these artistic narratives have on the way I perceive of myself in the world. The work of the collection is to play with the hold these narratives maintain on me, but also to search for lyric moments when I can escape them and imagine myself as a separate existence free from the continuum of time.

“Evening in Venice,” toward the end of the collection,” addresses this overlap between the Death persona and my lyric “I,” while also reinforcing my aesthetic philosophy that poems should provide both narrative resonance and lyric intensity. The poem joins an ongoing narrative by picking up significant images used elsewhere in the collection, but also stands alone as a memorable lyric moment through its rich catalog of sensations. The scene of “Evening in Venice” is a lone figure wandering through an open market to St. Mark’s Square before retiring for the night. While this poem initially resided staunchly in the book’s music sequence, there are no pronouns used to describe the lone figure, so it’s not clear whether she is my lyric “I” or Death. The poem supports both readings and, in fact, encourages both readings simultaneously. A careful reader will see the use of birds and water in this poem and remember back to their symbolism elsewhere in the collection. There is a mention of Ravel’s *Bolero*, which allies the poem with the music sequence, but there is also the metaphorical equation of an old man with a

bird turning down an alley; this reference recalls a specific image from “Death Takes a Coffee Break.” In addition, the word “evening” in the title creates a strong resonance with the poem that begins the collection where Death is introduced, “Evening Market,” which offers a scene of Death shopping for produce in an open street. These two market poems function as critical anchors for *Silence Emerging from Birds*. They mirror each other’s positioning in the collection, and the floodwaters of “Evening in Venice” tangibly represent the overflow between the persona and lyric sequences.

That is, ultimately, where my poetic self lives in this collection: in the middle of a Venn diagram between me and not me, lyric and narrative, living and dying. I see this tendency to occupy multiple spaces at once as key to my aesthetic in all of my work. My poems are most mine when they honor this borderland identity. Though I have explored writing from this space in other projects, *Silence Emerging from Birds* is perhaps my best example of this.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

My dissertation, *Silence Emerging from Birds*, is an original poetry collection that resists becoming a single, definable statement; it is more interested in offering multiple possibilities of meaning. It does this by combining two distinct sequences of poems. The first follows a persona of Death as a woman struggling to balance her career as Death with her curiosity about the people she meets as they die. She inherits her job as Death as the burden is passed down from generation to generation among the women in her family. The second follows my experiences studying and performing as a violinist and fiddler. While the first sequence operates predominantly in the third person, the music sequence is spoken through a lyric “I” and is located squarely within my own musings about classical orchestra tradition and the kinds of knowledge celebrated by fiddle tunes.

Rather than emphasizing the differences between these two explorations, the collection searches for moments of resonance between the persona self and the lyric self by intertwining the narratives instead of presenting them separately. The result is a multi-dimensional presentation of the self as performance and the self as larger-than-life myth. I take on the roles of Death, woman, and musician in order to build a book that operates at the borders and intersections of my various imagined and lived selves. I’m interested in the polyphonic potential this creates, how a single poem can operate as both a lyric statement that stands on its own and as a key step in a linear narrative progression across multiple poems.

My dissertation, at its heart, explores overlaps between verbal and non-verbal language, narrative and lyric modes, lived selves and imagined selves. In that effort, individual poems take on many different forms and sensibilities. Some of the poems focused in the Death persona, for example, adopt rigid structures in order to serve as commentary on the sterile nature of Death's work and emphasize the ways in which Death's job is part of a larger story that will continue even past her. "Death's Practicum" maintains a syllabic structure, meaning that each poetic line contains precisely eight syllables; the purpose of this is to reference infinity. Another poem, "Death's Pocket Inventory," functions as a list of all the things Death has gathered over the years from the pockets of people she's come to collect at the time of their deaths. Each item implies a story—from the mundane to the extraordinary. There are nail clippers and rubber bands, but also bullets, prescription bottles, infantry medals.

My characterization of Death, however, allows for a good deal more joy and reverence than the reader might expect. Death doesn't dwell in the macabre or melancholy, choosing instead to respect and admire the tenacity of the people she comes to know through her dying. She's always noticing what makes people, for her, miraculous—the idea that their biggest moments feel completely new and lived for the first time, even though each of us basically lives the same story over and over. We're born, maybe we achieve some things and love some people, then we die. But she sees how we make life much more than that. This makes her poems more about how to live than how to die.

The music poems, conversely, operate within the paradox that music only exists when it is going out of existence; these poems about my engagement with the

musical tradition of the violin become, in some ways, about how to learn to appreciate the world so we are ready to die. The two sequences build toward a complex but playful examination of mortality. The music poems take up many personal fascinations that began for me at a young age due to the fact that both my parents are trained musicians and I grew up in a house filled with melodies. One of the poems remembers the childhood piano where I first learned how different notes build different sensibilities and emotions. Other poems recall hours spent in lessons and rehearsals. Still others telescope out from those acute moments of study and play into what classical music and fiddling represent in my larger imagination. In one poem, I've invited composers over for an imagined dinner party. As each one enters my mind's dining room, they invoke my idiosyncratic knowledge of them. Tchaikovsky dreams of cannons going off, Bartok records the singing of the local boys, and Beethoven, frustrated, by his deafness goes out to experience the phrase that becomes the source of the title of the whole collection: he goes outside to listen to "silence emerge from birds."

Birds, along with their partner image of water, serve as symbolic linkages between the poems of the death sequence and music sequence. Because of their prevalent use in compositions, they function as ready metaphors for the sound and nature of music—but they also do important meaning-making work for Death's story. In the death poems, birds and water represent different kinds of life. Water represents the verb of life, the energy or force that gathers us all together and extends beyond us into our distant past and distant future. Birds, on the other hand, represent the nouns of life. The emphasis is on their bodies, the fact that they are temporal and

will die out of their own energies. The images of water and birds also function as mirrors of how the entire poetry collection, itself, progresses. Each single poem announces itself like a bird and then dies away to make space for the next one and the next one until an entire fluid work is generated. What we're left with at the end of reading is the sense that each poem has its own identity at the same time it contributes to the sense of a larger whole. What we're left with is a poetic approximation of the rhythms of our lives.

Evening Market

Death is a woman this time
and dying has never been more meticulous
in her hands. She walks through the market,
her heels a steady rhythm
on the pavement, a shadow among the colors,
collecting things. The ripe tomatoes
heavy with juice. The aroma of peaches
singing into the air. The beeping of the meat trucks
backing up to unload their sides of lamb,
pigeons scattering for seeds between the stalls.
She sees the big metallic fish lined up on ice
gashed at the neck,
their gills flared open
like petticoats.
She sees the impeccable teeth
in the mouths of the fish.

Walking home, she watches the clouds
yellow out between the church spires,
the last of the sunlight
rounding along the vegetables.
Before long she'll be frying a trout whole
in a thin pool of butter, lemon juice sputtering
in the pan, setting the fish atop a bed of rice,
setting the table, steadying herself into a chair,
guiding her skirt as she sits,
using a knife and fork and her slight fingers
to remove and pile the tiny bones.

New England Conservatory 2004—2007

Every Wednesday it would rain.
 Rain on the cobblestones, on the subway tracks.
 Every Wednesday it would rain on the long walk
 down Huntington Avenue, my violin case slung
 over my shoulder and slapping my side,
 the umbrella above us. If I hadn't practiced,
 or if I'd calloused my fingers all week,
 every Wednesday it would rain.
 Inside, dripping my way up the marble stairs,
 I still heard the rain.
 Rain on the cobblestones, on the subway tracks.
 Walking down the practice hall,
 still, arpeggios of rain.
 Every Wednesday it would rain.
 I'd enter the lesson room—213—
 hang my wet coat on the door and open my case.
 Beginning, I could still hear the distance in the rain:

*A violin is a strange box
 curved around the music. Pick it up.
 Let it climb your shoulder and rest
 between your sturdy neck
 and the warped branch
 of your collar bone.
 Now the bow,
 that disembodied arm.
 Let it let go.*

Outside, puddles on the steps. My feet
 splashing along the street. In my nose,
 the smell of wet stone. I still hear:
*My fingers across the strings, counting
 the bits of loneliness as they fall away.*
 Rain on the cobblestones, on the subway tracks.
 Every Wednesday: the sounds
 of water against me,
 rain drops searching my skin for curves,
 the music that falls away.

Sonata for Water and Birds

Each day becomes another and. Monday comes, dies away,
then Tuesday and Wednesday, and summer fades
in the gray wash of autumn.

Today is a little Unitarian church
where everyone is welcome and
everyone believes us, but
each day joins the world's cathedral of time.

Moments are the common books we paste ourselves into.
Every second primes the soil where we plant
the rough kernels of our souls
underneath a sky
accumulating circles of birds.

And the power lines they perch on become staff paper,
five infinities parallel to earth
waiting to be filled
the way we build symphonies from the tune up.
The way we build a life from the bones up,
fleshing out our skeletons.

When we bruise, that slow melody of blood
recedes back to arterial strings
listing along the chords our limbs are singing.
Our bodies are water and birds, churning and flight.

A Dinner Party

Mozart eats chocolate quietly behind my living room curtains.
Schubert sits, his elegant fingers working the spinning wheel in my parlor.
Tchaikovsky remembers the sounds of cannons, *loudly!*,
as he tosses in my guest bedroom.
Rachmaninoff has his hands on my dining table
forever arched and aching for a piano.
Bach marvels at finding himself in Nebraska
longing for the hillside of Leipzig.
Cage has no idea why he's here, but
he searches through my cupboards for a blender
and makes himself a smoothie.
Beethoven can't hear us. Beethoven throws his pencils
out the window. Beethoven goes for a walk
and watches silence emerge from birds.
Brahms has just arrived and hasn't finished brooding.
He removes his boots at the door.
Handel laments my lack of harpsichord.
Debussy adds more bubble bath and lowers himself into the tub.
Shostakovich takes his chair and waits by the clock.
Berlioz fidgets with his snuff box.
Bartok has gathered the neighbor boys. He's transcribing
their songs, the dip and howl in their adolescent voices.
Paganini darts from room to room, capricious as always.
Ravel taps rhythmically on the rim of his water glass.
And when I bring the roast goose to the table,
light candles, and pour the wine,
our eating becomes a kind of music.
The discord in knives and forks resolves
in the tonic of our conversation.
Copland serves us apple pie on small plates.
Mahler brings the coffee. Rossini adds amaretto.
My house fills with our polyphonic talking,
sullied napkins, what clings to the china,
the memories of sugar spoons lingering in my sink.

Death Draws Herself a Bath

Tonight death draws herself a bath,
pours a glass of red,
and tears the plastic film
off her microwave dinner.
Fork in one hand,
dinner in the other,
she settles into the steaming tub
letting the water lap up
over her body's tired landscape.
As she eats, she relaxes.
She remembers her painted toenails
and the oddity of her breasts.
She remembers the people
she visited today, how their skin
hung on their quiet bodies
all slack and puckered,
how their faces seemed
smiling as she collected them.
She lifts her glass
from its resting place
on top of the toilet
and makes a toast to bodies:
may they always provide steady work.
May they remind her of her own breathing.
May they decompose gracefully.
May they continue to astonish.

Death's Pocket Inventory

Roofing nails. Half-empty prescription bottles.
 A lucky rabbit's foot, gnarled and orange.
 Books of matches. A used tea bag.
 Thumb tacks. Bobby pins. Mustard packets.
 Bookmarks. Scone recipes. A pocket Shakespeare.
 Sewing needles. Loose handfuls of seeds.
 Directions to Grandma's house.
 Directions to the airport. Restaurant napkins.
 A crystal cigarette case. Ball point pens.
 Fountain pens. Felt tip pens.
 Blotting cloth. Musket balls,
 and bullets: .45 caliber. 9mm.
 Reading glasses. Quarters. Twelve watch fobs.
 Miscellaneous teeth—human and animal.
 Car keys. Pocket knives. Switch blades.
 Nail clippers. Forty-eight pairs of nail clippers.
 A grenade pin. Dental floss. Brass buttons.
 Handkerchiefs, monogrammed. *AM. RS.*
TR. LR. Stones. All colors and sizes of stones.
 Some deep gray. Some almost green.
 One weighing eleven pounds.
 Scissors. A colt revolver. Infantry medals
 from Normandy, Antietam, Hanoi,
 Gettysburg, and Saigon. Ribbons.
 Letters to and from the front—
 some worn to tissue, others never opened.
 Wax seals. Signet rings. Jacks. Bookmarks.
 The countless tiny galaxies inside marbles.
 Golf pencils. A compass. Locketts. Passports.
 The Lord's Prayer written in Latin, Greek,
 Russian, Spanish, English, Italian, Swedish,
 Japanese, Korean. German. French. Portuguese.
 Orange peels—some still fragrant.
 Dried flowers. A lachrymal.
 A music box dancer.

Searching

Death sits alone at the back of the lab.
When the instructor brings the dissections,
they are no longer pigs inside their flimsy bags.
They are something else. The smell
the only connection to their bodies.
Each day for weeks there are more incisions.
The miraculous blue and red tubes.
The shadows of a heart and lungs.
The skull a blank globe sleeping
under a stretched dome of skin.
The belly opening like a horrible story.
Everything so tidy, so intricately formed.
With her gloved fingers, she gathers small intestine
like wet rope anchored to something dark and deep,
some vital source she senses but never sees.

La Boheme

In a Vienna laboratory, scientists grow human ears on the backs of rats—
a pinprick of cells, then an itch, then a blossoming, a funnel.
Dozens of white and brown rats wait for delicate surgeons
to slice off the ears the way chefs claim icing roses for cakes.
But, before the strange flowers can be harvested
to decorate the sides of disfigured heads, one rat,
the biggest and brownest—his new flesh curve glistening
under laboratory light—jiggles a latch open
and rats tumble out, carpeting the floor with ears.
A wave of fur crosses the street and into the operahouse.
Rats reach the second balcony before their frenzy slows,
scattering, breathing heavily amidst the operagoers,
dodging fallen tickets and pointed shoes. But soon the rats are settling.
Soon velvet grows soft beneath their feet. Soon music pours out and up
over tailored suits and satin gowns. Soon the rats are moved.
On good nights you can see: between every third or fourth set of legs sits a heaving ear.

Death After an Early Morning Commute

The distant evergreens
behind 1260 Wilcox Avenue
are silent with storybook snow.
She slows her car into the driveway,
pauses as the engine rumbling dies,
steps out into the hushed gray.

She walks to the back door,
but stops a moment facing
the flat white yard.
She wanders out into the fresh snow,
lowering herself toward the ground.
It's wonderfully cold as she lies down
in the crispness. Her limbs spread wide
into quiet, small and shifting.
Sunlight blushes onto the lawn,
and when she sits up she sees

what the neighbor girls have made.
A snowman, a snow mother,
clumps of snow children. Even
a little snow dog with marbles for eyes.
She thinks of the family
gathered around a table
eating their dinners.
What brilliant flashes must begin
in their minds
as they settle to sleep,
what joy in the parents
as they hold each other
and dream there,
giving themselves back,
melting out of this world.

Taking Apart My Childhood Piano

My mother and I sit on the back porch,
bare feet in summer grass
as we take the upright down to pieces,
breeze humming through its strings.

I extract each melodic tooth and sort them
in octaves for rinsing, tidy enclosure in boxes,
remembering in each how my young fingers
rioted over them searching for sound

and the way it grows like its own
unruly animal. The old piano
lies open to Sunday morning sun,
swallowing blossoms that drift over like stars

from the apple tree I climbed as a girl.
My mother and I sit here in a quiet
usually reserved for churches,
hands moving slowly over what we gather

—piles of soft hammers, odd coils of wire.
We take up wet rags and wash each wooden key
down its surface, wet music pooling
onto our skin.