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### The Variances

Matthew Devon Kaler  
*The University of Montana*

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THE VARIANCES

By

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Bachelor of Arts, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2004

Thesis

presented in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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in Creative Writing with an emphasis in Poetry

The University of Montana  
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# *The Variances*

*Matthew Kaler*

*America lay to the east.  
To the west, soon one found the void...  
I like to feel I'm living where finding one more friend is difficult  
and therefore very important. Soon we will run out of people.  
Maybe a poem will locate one more friend or even one more self  
before the ocean opens forever to nothing.*

RICHARD HUGO

# I. *A Geyser of Blackbirds*

ON THE FIRST MORNING WITHOUT SADNESS

After night bombing, the city gleams in ruin.  
Through mortar and split fountains you walk  
suffering white embers of glass. You are without shoes.

Your feet are ragged pomegranates, hewn  
and corrupt. Call to them like a broken lock.  
Bombs rained embers, night gleaned ruin.

What endures in your psyche are torrents of abuse.  
What you suffer are fallen walls, ravens on stalks  
among white embers. You are ordinary without shoes.

Unheard, you recite the former city, gleaming white  
embers of babel down streets no longer streets:  
*what endures in our psyche is a torrent of night—*

Because of the embers you need to believe  
in a place beyond your mind, what the heart finds  
as you shut your eyes. You mourn without shoes,

your feet are doors slamming.  
Now all almanacs on human suffering, on ripeness  
will begin, *After the bombing, in the city gleaming ruin—*  
Now you are ordinary. You will speak what endures.

## THE MIDWIFE'S ANTINOMY

I see her now in every human crowd, hardened,  
shoulders like two doves in olive skin  
diving the body—*here's to looking hateful, kid.*

Once on a pier, as I cradled coffee with two hands,  
she told me this story, we were talking story  
waiting for a ferry to cross the Strait of Gibraltar.  
She explained herself as the process of migration,

she was a midwife & also fleeing Morocco. You see,  
the mother could bring rain through an act of will  
which is why the four men followed in the rain.  
During this delivery, the midwife recited  
new birthing idioms, her own act of creation

that helped to keep time between contractions:  
*Conception isn't the right term: syngensis?*  
*Hematocrit proportion? --pulse stable pulse good--*  
*suprapubic mass? volume of exquisite pelvis?*

At 10cm parturition, the mother's heart surged  
& split & the child wailed into life. But this is what I want

to tell you: with the four men surrounding the riad  
the one called Bedlam climbs a rail & breaks through  
the stained-glass window, the midwife pivots,  
facing the death of synecdoche  
as he stalks the marble hall

to claim the mother's body. The midwife escapes  
out of the interior garden, & under lightning  
hides with the baby in a low chaparral,  
the idea from a poor film. There they wait out the storm.

I never was one to doubt so I turned  
to the wide sea, hot with authority,

not once questioning the lovely child  
asleep on her lap. It was easier for her to say  
*fondness* than it was to leave Tangiers.



## THE LOST BOXER

sitting cross-legged  
in the shadow of the alley's mouth, his fists  
called "*Patterson*" & "*New Jersey*", respectively,  
his heart  
a starving ox, starlings in flock,  
once found the boy clinging  
to the midwife's body  
behind a bowling alley on the Missouri,  
resting geese white lamps on the river.

Shiva made a proposition  
from behind the counter of a liquor store  
where the boxer set a plastic pint of vodka,  
his translucent  
    anodyne star.

Shiva offered him terms  
to save the boy. The boxer accepted  
& his heart became a brown trout, famished  
in torrents of larva,  
pointed upstream.

According to the terms  
these are some of the things his heart became—

a gold monument to archangels in Valetta

the enduring record of all that happens  
    into which everything that rises will re-descend

lightboxes: small harbors in ice  
    for arctic seals

among the trumpets,  
a drum struck by a single red hand

one of the horde, storytelling animals  
that carol the mind's many lives—

He vomited yellow bile  
at the first of the boy's cries  
at the sight of the midwife, her cold eyes—

He went straight for the liquor to steady his hands.  
He traded his life, what little  
he thought there to be left,  
to rescue the boy  
from a reed cluster  
circled by black wings, the devourers,  
rosaries spiraling upward,  
a dark twin-helix of birds  
he stepped into,  
that dove for the heart of the man.

## A LETTER TO THE MIDWIFE FROM THE BOXER

Dear M\_\_\_\_,

This is punishment, a geyser of blackbirds,  
a cruel white dog dissolving into ether.  
This is punishment, a rhapsodic animal.

The traffic of ideas is superluminal. A stranger  
follows me through crowds hands white  
as lilies, vespers from a doorway. What fails us  
in this dialogue with the world & its foreign tongue?

Like the wind caught in the teeth of the wind,  
the only prediction is of further predictions.  
Like your spectral narratives acquainted with darkness,  
your teenage blanch at its touch. *Murder you*

*shoot like a love scene, and a love scene like murder*  
Hitchcock said. I told you *there is such punishment*  
under the insect swarm, the yellow porch light,  
you accusing, *You're not yourself lately.*

You're not yourself without carrying the boy,  
now eight, who brings rain. You're not yourself  
in that permanent world of parents shouting.

Punishment is a dark animal that is the best  
of yourself. You're not yourself migrating this early.  
The geese take yearly vacations, mate for life.  
You're not goose. You're not yourself in imperatives,

not yourself demanding my cruelest story.  
Like the night my mom left me at the Waffle House  
when I was six, the fall with a white left sneaker 1/2 size

smaller than the right, how it took days to wash  
the rooster blood from my laces. You are yourself  
biting my lower lip into purple crescents, sun draping  
through pints of beer, white heat in the mind.

You're no longer doubting the Theory of Nonlocality  
where nothing in the universe is disparate,  
falls bedlam into black vertices.  
Where there exists no concept of the lonely.

## TOUCH GHAZAL

Remember the quiet spike in a needle's touch.  
His beautiful dementia, the night's oblivious touch.

The simile *cold as a welldigger's ass*  
signifies the job's mortality rate, not winter touch.

She told me after three years you just live through the chemo,  
but there's nothing those last summer's don't touch.

Dust like gold azaleas bursting. Like August. Morning  
light drapes bright stalks on bare skin. Glare, touch—

After he quit drinking, Pop read the whole bible,  
it was only the Book of Matthew he didn't dare touch.

RELAPSE

1  
Habit fixes our minds entirely, slippery button.

2  
Wolves scratching the door,  
I turn my lock on you  
outside in a khaki petticoat.

3  
How clandestinely  
the Dark-eyed Juncos  
alight on razor wire.

4  
An old woman crying *Ladron*  
brandishes a broomstick sheepishly.

5  
Summers also elapse  
into anonymous stirring,  
a white dress on fire.

6  
As night wells up the lungs,  
brittle howls swelling.

7  
Name me for the profane  
dusk flickering of bats.

8  
The carnal mind thinks itself something  
when it is something.

9

Alone in a single bed  
your prayer  
blooms against a long mirror:  
*Welcome home my heart*  
*give me again*  
*your cruel injury.*

10

You state  
how easy it is to murder  
or sing a man to sleep,  
light trembling the hall.

## CARDIAC ARREST

Supplication, blood quickening.  
The snow. Grass shoots, then goldenseals.

A red finch curates the self, arched,  
prepared. Those who perch are wearing watches.

Cutlery shines into evening, augments  
the lacerations of a hurricane

on approach, where demons recreate  
their failed rebellion in Heaven

(your torn rosary, a riven ornament, snaps  
into droplets over hardwood)

the Morning Star wails again & again. You're afraid,  
you've entertained this dark wish before.

The locust shoal  
a gray wall of monsoon,

a gazelle staggers from petrichor  
through the barren meadowland.

Such spuriousness, this trawling.  
Clap your hand to your chest:

those fingers & their need  
will find darkling schools inside.



AUGUST GHAZAL

Who would embrace birth also embraces awe.  
Who refuses death loses all capacity for awe.

He's constantly falling in love with women wearing black,  
says it's the shade of anomy, the solemn, thunder and awe.

The largest water wheels on earth are in Syria. Like hands  
furling the deep, force gathers against a flat-board awe.

A peach drawn by thread through broken, tinny glass—  
the action of gastric cancer, leafy spurge spreading awe.

Ngozi's silence is fatal. Her interrogator's eyes wild  
as he raises the oiled pistol. She looks beyond its light into awe.

Before the birth of light Raven hid all stars.  
You have no idea now, darling. Your ability to awe.

## GHAZAL DIALOGUES

During confession in *Salinas*, he made a priest shake  
in disbelief. Then Graywater vanished to the desert.

*Miles Gloriosas*, Latin for Braggart Soldier.  
To bore with stories is worse than war.

With the will to never believe it, she  
mumbles birds from her mouth of desert.

That spilling wine-dark blood is an act of human constancy.  
There will always be war.

Last week in Mauritania, a swarm of locusts three-miles wide  
decimated a season's crops, fled to the desert.

## THE VARIANCES

I.

Distant sirens, flowering.

*as in the era of my father, ragtime bands, when you could drink gin 'till sunup*

you say traffic patterns us

the unquiet patterns of brake release    break release.

A beggar clutches coins inside her plastic bag

& they tinkle like water            on the sheet metal of an eave.

We wait it out, rainladen,

the street awash

in obsidian & neon    the engine running    no one at the wheel.

*out to lunch, just like your mother*

you say some thought remains    & will become

what we leave behind.

Casually, you say it is alright, we are all of us like wet clothes on a line.

I want you to say: A Grace Hewn to Small Pieces Remains a Grace

like a title

because it is yours.

II.

A mother's hands palsy

I receive the call from hospice    a phone clatters across kitchen tile.

The white room tears neon slivers from our eyes.

These are images of night settling  
in our bodies.    Her hand observes mine in its grasp,  
renouncing her body. My lips susurrations

the red barn immolated    taillights flash red apples

my mind breaks in its grasp

& I know

you are

& are not

III.

Flickering limpid on a window  
refusing the wind  
one concert poster for the steel pan band  
you identify  
in the foreign subjunctive:

the promise of glass  
over which your cut grace whimpers  
like a slighted child.

one rabid pit-bull clinches    a calf in the nightmare    late summer

    a field of Jasmine prospers    ash raining through air

## II.

*What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure  
Their going hence even as their coming hither;  
Ripeness is All.*

KING LEAR (5.2.9)

## SEA OF CORTEZ

*Excising Metastasis. White ash.*

White ash, she imagines, is pity, & lingers for years.

A builder yells news in Spanish  
from the neighboring beach house,  
its walls sad paper standing roofless, gaping  
for a sandstorm to whiteout the sky.

She imagines blind children obscured, their babble raising the sun  
like an orange-sash, goldenseals bursting  
beside the yellow surface of rivers.

Evening, her legs bronzed. The fish simmering  
*Grouper*, a name like the smacking of entrails.  
Swamped in heat she stares up a palm to white-pinned stars,  
dies on the most humid summer night,  
is cremated & scattered into winds        the desert natal, solemn,

she returns without memory of her mother's hands  
her father's rough eye, her *abuelita* on Sunday morning—  
*Nobody's there*, the mind speaks to its absence  
in the lines of tan, famished hills.

The sky is a gathering ash stirred & brushed to haze. The call yet to come.  
The streaking geese, their cries light foghorns.

## THE ETYMOLOGY OF SHARK

*is unknown*, she says this, touching her hair, because airport vodka is contentious. We sit at the bar, the kiss and clink of highball glasses. Her flight from Lisbon was delayed, and mine a streak over the Atlantic. *A near miss* she says, our fingers fumbling. When I compare marriage to finding water in a desert, she looks to her hands. She is a midwife starting over, waiting on baggage in unseen cargo holds to arrive on another land. If there were time we might leave together, get a room outside, among the rows of neon cheap hotels. We might apologize fantastically, projecting past lovers onto each other's faces. She may describe the tomb inside her, the men she loved too early. She is the shell of her own suffering. We speak lightly of news, weather.



ALL GHAZALS

Hamlet's oracular gift: *the readiness is all.*  
Said to Gloucester, blinded: *Ripeness is all.*

Mama, she kept walkin' the garden path & far off too  
into a field of black triangles. (sternly) & is that all?

Pine boughs waved like rags drying  
that white morning of the Greedy All.

It was a limited joy for the wasp on the tulip pot  
before. Then nothing, & all.

Suffered the longest male adolescence in history:  
Yeats: *A man awaits his end Dreading and hoping all.*

How'd you end up in the ER? I swallowed a bottle  
of painkillers & cayenne pepper; took 'em all.

## THRENODY

The harvest abandoned by night.  
She watches pickers shuffle up the path  
to tin shacks,  
hands blistered from the flail,  
content to find red wine  
on a table  
and not remember their dim lives.  
In the field, a new moon parches  
into whiteness  
that spills through her windows  
like a drunk.  
Her stories get all of it wrong.  
Each scene, each life a lantern  
going out, inescapable abuse  
of the subject, the stone, the heart.  
Inside her, a welling up  
of taut voices. So often  
she rehearses her reasons for staying  
to no listener  
except the metallic, egg-bearing flies,  
blood-oranges spoiling on countertops.  
The panes stripped from her windows.  
A smell of vines drifting in  
as lime trees pulse from groves below.  
Fireflies under the leaves.

It is not the dry Sirocco  
but the morning rising cool within it.  
It is not her great losses,  
but a hurt she loves  
stilling in the last darkness. The island night  
orangng her blood.  
Her legs shimmer as she steps

from Mediterranean sanity, waters like a field  
tilled white with seed.  
Sparrows throng and a red moon  
drowns them  
one at a time.

This island calmed her as a girl  
after the taunts of her rude father,  
its three neighboring cafes, white stone and azure tile,  
where daily a blind man  
strings his wailful accordion  
into green waters. Flecks of salt on her tongue,  
a white film  
clinging to skin.  
She has little appetite these humid mornings,  
her dark hair curling and swollen. The debt  
of her life inescapable.  
Always she questions  
when to finish with this.

## MEDITERRANEAN PROSTITUTE IN SIROCCO

Under lamplights her eyes are orange.  
The whole street smells of rain. She holds  
a cowering star to her heart, lilt her tongue

like a flame imagined in the mold  
where collarbone crooks neck. Enervation: a copper bust  
of self. Dependencies leave her mouth offered

the color of autumn snow. She accepts  
the communion. To this body she will marry.  
A sudden nosebleed like a call out of darkness.

After the desert winds fail, nothing to carry  
inside her, cell deaths flare in retaliation.  
The finishing of doctors' coats: a kind of levity.

Walking from earth one evening she will decry  
the irradiant conceit. And enter the glade of apology.

## KALASHNIKOV STACCATO

*It made a roar like a train at night.* –James Joyce

Darfur gaping. Alarm within.  
The woman kept prisoner in a chicken coup  
mouths the current etymology of her name, lingua franca, to the Western Man:

*Husna* in the time of pestilence,  
her sheared dress billows.

Green militias in uniform wag AK-47's  
like the threat of their genitals  
or the gasoline soaked rag.  
The residue of violence slinks her village ruins.

She pulpits the Western Man's subconscious. In his dream recurring she squats  
inside a wire coup, building a wall from pebbles & mud & placebo  
to keep back the Janjaweed. He stands outside, considering the latch.

Both would agree on suffering as prostrating,  
that it was first an act of rebellion: the body's  
toward the mind, then mind toward the body.

Her hands are tiny against metallic sky.  
The papers spiral his mind like twisting ivory bodies,  
make petulant roars at thought.  
He promises to quiet the compassion fatigue.  
She fuses her identity to *Husna* in exile, to the alarm within.

Alarm; he wakes like a child  
on a porch, the sky thick with magpies  
& the question of appropriateness, the kitchen pornographic with jazz  
opulence of croissants & newspaper.  
He considers the story in print, words like grass waving in wind,

promises himself that this will be unlike those other mornings—

Over coffee-scent he revisits the dubious image:  
a woman shuddering in a hutch for yard birds,  
    made cavity   handed meth & a razor  
to rape the count of days into her arm, scar her censure,

where above her thousands of handwritten testimonies dart in air.

## UBIQUITOUS WANT HOLDING EYE CONTACT

As you pull me from the meridian, I imagine  
the tendons of your wrist as steely cords,  
your eyes an answer predictable as hoarfrost. Even this conversation  
is something dark you desire.

The luminous clock,  
a pall over the apartment, says, *I want to be good at what I do  
as much or as little as it matters...*

Excruciating, this discovery:  
that brass bells knelling, the point  
of a finger against thronging otters, those couriers of night,  
are the things undoing courage,  
the rise above our basest natures.

No glance pregnant as yours across the room  
ever created such wildness  
in the mass of my chest. You entering the apartment—  
How your black motorcycle boots lay beside the bed—  
one fallen, one standing open to the heavens  
to keep the luck inside  
like a horseshoe. Such emptiness we call *Congratulations*.  
Like a plunge at the eye's patina,  
your glance returned

inside a glance. Now as it was across the room, my reasons internally bound.

Now as you call to praise the other coast.  
Other subjects brought up & so on.  
Away from you, water-crossed  
by rivers, lacerations over distance on the map.  
The past empties unto them.

Now, just as that night,  
I look into your absence.

And there you are, poured into black boots,  
always entering the room.



## NAMING A DARK RAIN WHISKEY

We met, then argued on the devotees of obsession. I admitted I was one. I admitted this title binding words I sought over and over in the heart. We discussed color symbolism. You remembered living out of hospital rooms. At the door, in that rain, I witnessed your cancer.

I held

a black umbrella over you. A beetle crossed tips of long dead grass in the yard, and the mind began to sheave all of God's obscure love into the distant green of a meadow. We walked to that field. The green fell out of sight, the bleak sentiment waned.

We made love after you named your parent's farm, the gleam of a shotgun your father used on mallards. As we dressed, you asked me to think on the words of infidelity, *this isn't me*, and on union, its blind Promethean hope.

You said there are loaded guns throughout so many childhoods, miles of disturbing fence-line. I told you my small brother's head snaps back, over and over, in every wind. In every wind the report his mind never heard. What was he hunting so far out there, alone, trailing those long years of barb wire?

Obsessively, we searched for images that meant the mind: an abandoned farmhouse in the last thaw of winter white rabbits, writhing in panic, furrowing the meadow's green a thousand-acre gulch fire, leaping highway

The last morning, you asked for a drink as we undressed. Amber tempered whiskey. You said tomorrow. You said the green that fell from sight.

JANUARY IS LOVELY AS NOTHING ELSE IS

I tear my shirt at the neck  
because agony breathes through cotton.

It is a stitched wound  
like breath after orgasm, or  
strands of red tissue paper, or  
a lush trembling river—

my desire  
to be alone  
like empty drawers pulled open,  
not to be filled.

Over the roof wind rushes  
like the opening of sutures.  
Which color? —it is still morning

\*

I see my father walk into this bar  
named after someone's father.

He is young, well-dressed, & does not know me.

Just outside a bookstore  
a woman opens the new year's calendar  
sitting in her car. Not yet started.

My mother dreams her father's death again  
as he is cremated & poured into a light bulb:

at night, she visits the factory of abandoned light  
to find him. In that dark, thousands of bulbs  
are mounted on a wall  
like trophy heads,  
each numbered in a cipher  
for an equation.

Only by answering correctly can she pick his ashes.

\*

I never bring old lovers into bed with us.

But, remember, when a couple makes love  
there are always at least six people in the room.

& Oh  
the band  
is playing something sweet &  
trivial.

They are like brass,  
these mornings  
we polish to shine,  
but forget  
or fail to name

\*

or try waking from. Now,  
wake in the palm of your hand.  
Among the quotidian. Days wending away like spent leaves.

Sunlight tumbles through the picture window  
glancing off your naked shoulders,  
& as you push back your hair  
one ear glows like a coal,  
the blood inside come alive

\*

Crowning bookshelves in this room  
are sculptures of men running, barefoot,  
from ancient fires. Beyond the window

a horizon steadies, grey-white as a pure horse flank  
now sullied. I acknowledge my shaking hands.

Empty on the bed, your blue dress,  
a first divorce.

A first bride with blood on her palms,  
like rubies glinting  
in vials of glass. So many of them

must have imagined their greatness  
once, men like me.

### III. *Oro y Plata*

*You go out healthy  
on the gray thin road and when you look back  
no one is waving. They kept no record  
of your suffering, wouldn't know you  
if you returned*

RICHARD HUGO

TO A WHITETAILED FOUND BRIMMING WITH STARS

I know your troubled wish. A body we leave  
by returning. Old trade the young their worn hands.  
You recall the earth, its taste. Your body on yellow leaves.

Evening reclaims the valley. I stand  
blindly, to remain by night among your herd.  
Only your breathing sounds. My throat a clamor

of black hooves. Stars plummet. White-azure burns  
a crater in your sleep. There, the naked stench of sulphur.  
Another dawn a star, a carbon fury will glisten

in place of your heart. Celestial, once,  
I sheared a wide field for a stag in my chest.  
Where my death comes. In the distance

I will give my hands hopelessly. Wanting calloused  
& dirt-packed. Now willing, now darkened.



THE NAMING OF ALL BEASTS, A MONTAGE

There are patches of scarlet on a carpet.

A paint factory fire  
flecks the sky for days,  
its windows bunches of trapped marigolds.

*Autistic slut.*

The daughter recalling her mother's gift  
for choleric insults.

The teacher's fractured life  
a gray cat that follows him home  
sleeps in the crook of his legs.

Stripe of hoarfrost along the window,  
the brother of the deceased  
joking on the morning of the wake,  
*An Irishman dies first at marriage.*

Clouds roiling.

A husband stabs his wife  
in the heart, shoots himself  
through the neck  
on a butte-swept town in Montana.  
A Siberian husky gutted in the tub,  
the five-year-old barefoot  
in front of cartoons.

Six days of sleet. The detective re-reads  
the journal of a once teenage girl. One comfort:  
that Jameson is a Catholic whiskey.

Industrial acid in a vial of eye-drops.

A black telephone rings  
in a trailer lab. The councilman's gums slough away.  
The syringe shattered beside a meth trough.

Flashes of lust taste of our blood in our mouths.

Father and daughter count brick  
outside an Abortion clinic, their breath  
a whiteness visible in the car.

A handwritten note  
repeating, *Where will you go*  
*if not home?*

Adam's first task was a creative act—

TO SACRIFICE AN IDEAL

*is pretty much what God asked of Abraham, 'cause, what is a son if not that?,* the transient offers from his factotum throne in the driver's seat of the Vanagon, axle-less, abandoned to the field in which he resides, wind pulsating through rivet-wheat he calls *the gold neighborhood*, above which phalanxes of geese pass over, darkly, how he recalls he was once a doctor down south but lost all his money to a malpractice-suit, Jack Daniels, and an ex-wife he refers to as, *The New Jersey of Clit*. How as a child in Harlem, up by the Fort Belknap Reservation, he endured ritual thrashings from a group of Gros Ventre boys while walking to school, more because of his runt-frame and glasses than his skin, more because his father worked for the Rendering plant, collecting dead livestock from ranchers along the Milk River on a flatbed pickup, and the indigo stain on the wood of that bed, and the night he told his father of the beatings, how the old man handed over his father's Colt pistol, and said, *I don't want to hear of it happening again*, and how those boys never relished so much as a sharp glance toward him after that next morning.

## GREAT FALLS

In the long gold grass  
    of a plateau's tabletop  
    Abe sprung on snakes

sunning their slow blood, inexorable,  
bit clean at the head  
before they coiled or struck,

unaware. The boy too unaware:  
Gas Refinery layoffs later that year:  
his father's three months of winter  
    before swallowing the shotgun,  
one toe on the trigger.

From his knees the boy scoured  
the bloodstain from white tile  
before his mother finished shift—

The recurring tableau:  
he could be a mythical child  
cleaning the Great Hall after slaughter,  
she a hotel maid for drunken centaurs.

The scene forever in chiaroscuro.  
The boy fused his story to imagination.

In the autumn of waving grass  
Abe came on a quill-pig,  
    took spikes deep in his head.  
Whined the notion

of the arcane, violent West.  
    The pistol raised the boy.   The boy raised the pistol

snapped off two slugs

in Abe-the-mutt's skull,

knelt down in a cold field  
(gut-empty work boots)

knelt down  
into the particular guilt  
of destined genealogy,

into weakness for a shade of violet  
unseen beyond the porch.

## CONFLICT

Again as I ask, my father drinks Scotch from a coffee mug, says *sure*, stares at me eyes unquiet, says *meet me in the driveway*, says *you want my permission*. He leaves the garage door open and dark, and throws a half-deflated leather football to me as the yellow floodlight clicks on behind him. I wait where our drive meets the street. It is a short gray evening. He sways before steadying into a crouch, figure shaded by the halo of light above him. He says *now get past me*. Behind him the end zone, the generational vanishing, the collective of inward bent boxes, coping mechanisms, bird shells, the legs snapped off wooden chairs still needing repair. He batters me to the concrete as I run at him, says *Once more*. When I stand up dazed, razors in the soft tissue of my lungs, he tosses me the ball flattened like an orange peel. He wavers in the pose of a man.

## THE PROOFS

Acres splay across a sad green noon,  
that lunatic philosopher's hour.  
In sunlight each birch turns naturally blue,  
some deviance in their chemistry, some loud  
expectation in two pregnant sisters. Black sand spills  
from their loose marriages, billowing dresses.  
One in yellow tears apart the old books, willing  
the one in red to cut four kisses  
onto her hands, thrust them out in rain like worms  
frothing from earth. Tired husbands from the steel mill  
return beside unnamed rivers. Storms  
cambering the valley with no grief to address. Still,  
the red one reminds, We Are Sisters.  
Our eyes were once healed by thieves. And we were sisters.

NOW HARVEST NO MORE THAN WHAT YOU CAN CUP

Also your ears painting this  
are ekphrastic,  
and of this we are most certain.  
The first hearing  
was elemental, a winsome paring knife  
flashing in your hands:  
*Let there be light.*

The second hearing was instinct,  
a prevailing cadenza,  
hydrangeas that hone during midday,  
how it was only your voice  
and a child listing colors no one heard.

In your youth, avoid the stranger's curse  
of white-lipped desires.  
Now in the season of drought,  
what is full falls loosely.  
Do you hear the keening geese? Iridic and fusible

to words only with great difficulty, after years  
of dusking wing beats  
on the iodine gleam of river.  
Harvesters, beware of suffering in excess,  
how sunlight fails  
and I ask which day of the week it is  
even when I know, and I answer  
only to glut the siren's wail  
like vignettes of the dead.  
Remember once,  
the sea rose like linen  
on a clothesline  
in a storm.



To you also falls  
the deceit of a velvet language  
the way likeness sweeps faces  
in a crowd, the task to recall  
all this, distant music,  
the smoke-veiled stars.

I write *October already*, but today, the first  
of November, the leaves curled paralytic  
to shelled skittering, restive  
on this day of their birth,  
how many  
no one is counting.

The Tamarack,  
its fray of yellow needles, bends  
like a bow, the string of sun pulling taut  
another night over sky.