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First Psalm: Paintings and Poems

Ashley Mae Christensen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

First Psalm: Paintings and Poems

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This collection of poems and paintings seeks to find the places where visual and written communication intersects, and the places where those two media diverge. The collection consists of poems and paintings juxtaposed, as if in conversation with one another throughout the pages. The collection treats each painting and poem as a separate attempt at prayer. As a reader turns the pages, similar questions are asked again and again, but in different settings and with different outcomes. This collection focuses on finding reconciliation between the oral culture of storytelling and the written culture of ideas, all within the context of prayer.

Keywords: prayer, painting, poetry, metaphysical, experimental, prose poem

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Thesis Introduction

In the introduction to *American Hybrid*, Cole Swensen discusses a recent trend— “whether poetry belongs in the Art Department or the English Department, revealing that it’s a slightly awkward fit in either case” (xxiii). This crossover between the work of language and the work of art-making defines my poetic project because I have found that it is not sufficient for me to work only with words, but that my project requires the conversation created between paintings and poems. I want to find the places where poems and paintings intersect, and the ways in which they diverge from one another. In this collection, I am dedicated to better understanding the differences between the literal image that is given visually through a painting, and the image that is created in a reader’s mind through the words in a poem.

For some time I assumed that the two processes of creating a painting and a poem were equal in construction because they both utilize image. Both media seek to convey thought and emotion through the stand-in of images, metaphors, and a space in which the creator can share with the viewer, either with language or with visual elements. This perpetual moving between the two media has helped me to define my goals and understanding of the capabilities and functions of what poetic language can do, and what visual art can do. I want my poetry to intersect with my art-making so that the combination of the work creates an experience that involves the viewer looking from painting to poem, then poem to painting, and having different questions and conclusions in each way. I don’t want language to be subservient to the image, or vice versa.

The writers that influence me most are not necessarily poets: Marilynne Robinson, Annie Dillard, Maggie Nelson, Eduardo Galeano, James Galvin and Catherine Barnett. All of these writers do not rely on sequence and a narrative arc to uphold their collections. They write

collections that rely on repetition of character, questions and environments. For example, James Galvin's *The Meadow* follows a few characters through an entire century. The short pieces that make up the book could be considered poetry, flash fiction, lyrical essay or even biography. The classification of the writing is not essential because the short pieces allow for time and narrative arc to be lucid and unclear, and the book becomes less about story and more about repetitive images that conjure questions. Similarly, my collection shirks off conventions of narrative arc and linear time. The poems move back and forth between past and present and a cast of characters surfaces and recedes throughout the collection, while continually asking similar questions about God and prayer.

I create paintings by gathering images within a small space where the images are required to interact with one another, but are not placed or created with a clear narrative intention. When I paint, I do not start out with a preconceived notion of how the painting will turn out. I don't have an agenda or specific conclusions that I expect the reader or viewer to feel, though I do have specific concerns or questions that prompt me to write or paint. I want the act of creation to be an attempt at discovery through the process of making something and then revising and adjusting. I want the reader to see evidence of process and struggle in the paintings because the collection is about the perpetual trial and error in trying to communicate with God. I see this method of creation as similar to short, repetitious pieces in Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, or the revisionist, subconscious feel that comes from reading Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Neither my poems, nor paintings offer conclusive answers, but register the ultimate joy in the process of struggle and experimentation. The paintings are different than poems because it is more difficult to take away information without the changes being obvious, whereas, in poetry, the changes can be made on a computer and the evidence of struggle is less visually apparent. In

the paintings there are often parts that have been painted over and the under-layers are still apparent. The paintings are a visual representation of the revision process undergone in both painting and poetry. The paintings show evidence of process and trying out different ways to communicate with God. A single poem does not accomplish this same task of showing process on one surface, though the experimentation with different positions of supplication take place as the reader turns the pages of the collection and reads the poems in succession.

The two poems titled “Welcome” in the third section show the trial and error process in poetry. Both poems use almost identical words and similar phrasing and images, yet both poems differ from one another. They are revisions of the same idea, yet each attempt is relevant to the collection. The painting on page 64 shows this same type of revision process, but all of the attempts take place on the same surface. In this painting there are pieces completely painted over and re-done, as if the original attempt was not satisfactory. This process of revision throughout the collection echoes the actual act of prayer, which is a repetitious and continually modified action. The poems also seek for satisfaction and reconciliation with the right language, rhythm and image, each poem attempts anew. In his essay “Goatfoot, Milk tongue and Twinbird,” Donald Hall quotes Yeats in saying,

The finished poem makes a sound like the click of a lid on a perfectly made box.

One hundred and forty syllables, organized into a sonnet, do not necessarily make a click; the same number of syllables, dispersed in asymmetric lines of free verse will click like a lid if the poem is good enough. (26)

This collection obsessively tries to find that “click of the lid” as each prayer or poem attempts a different stance, set of images or set of words to prompt the right questions for both reader and writer.

The repetition of poems entitled “Prayer,” or a version of that title function in a similar way to the layers in one of the paintings. Each poem entitled “Prayer” is another attempt to reconcile or understand my relationship to God. In the same way that the first layer of a painting may try to explain an issue like prayer with a certain set of images, colors, and marks, and when that layer doesn't fully do the job sufficiently, some parts of that first layer are painted over in exchange for another attempt with different images. Both the poems and the paintings are trying out position after position in search of the best way to understand prayer.

The language in poetry affords the capacity to more directly articulate thought and experience. In 1913, Ezra Pound wrote an article addressing some dos and don'ts for the imagist. I find his definition for the function of an image helpful in defining my own reasons for engaging the image through language and painting. He says,

An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time...It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art. (64)

My collection grapples with finding the right image or images to fulfill this complex. The arrangement of the collection traces a trajectory of sorts: it begins in childhood, moves to a time of more varied attempts at prayer, turns to thoughts of birth and beginnings, and in section three, the poems revolve around what or how the narrator will explain life to her unborn child. I look to John Donne as an example of prayer as question. In writing about John Donne and the metaphysical poets, W. Bradford Smith says, “Imagery is not used because it is pretty but because it fits the idea. The metaphysical poet has a way of making his image and his idea

become one, the image as an explanation rather than an embellishment” (263). I see myself then as drawing from the metaphysical poets more than from the imagists because, while clearly images are essential to my project, the images are to work as “explanation” rather than creating a mood through image like the imagists.

In both the paintings and the poems, the presence of a narrator is important. In the opening poem and painting of the collection, there are two people present in both the poem and the painting, whereas in the following poems and paintings in section one, there is only a single person in the paintings and in the poems. The opening poem and painting acknowledge that the collection is about seeking a communion with God, and therefore it is necessary that the painting would not just have a single person portrayed, but a child figure and an older figure. In the poems and paintings that follow in the first section, the God figure is not yet tangible or fully understood, and the narrator in the poems themselves is much more child-like than the in the other sections. The first section uses child-like questions to introduce issues that surface throughout the collection: “What is God like?” and “Who is God and where was he...?”. In his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot says, “The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use ordinary ones and in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all”(115). I want my poems to function as Eliot describes. I’ve found that uses the meditations on prayer as a segue way to questioning and thus making place for these “feelings that are not in actual emotions at all.” The narrator in the poems of section one, like the figures in the paintings of the same section are childlike and alone. The aloneness is not desperate or sad, but sincere and questioning.

The poems in section two are more aware of conflict as the narrator seeks to communicate with God through prayer, and also through experience. Much of the tension arises

because of my personal background as a writer. I was raised in a family where oral culture and storytelling take precedence, but as I've gone to school, I've transitioned into a written culture that thrives on ideas and concepts rather than stories. This second section actively deals with many dichotomies similar to the tension created by trying to maintain a presence in both the written and spoken cultures. This tension between two cultures also explains why intangible ideas about God and prayer are combined with common, often domestic images and language. Samuel Johnson, in his *Lives of Poets*, speaks of this dichotomy as "The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (143).

Poems like "Commence," "Prayer is Simple," "Great Blue Heron," and "A Prayer" deal with the actual act of praying and the difficulties presented when the narrator attempts wants to pray. These poems fuse common images to the act of prayer, thus asking readers to figure out their own relationship to prayer.

The visual composition of the poem on the page mimics the small, enclosed environments created in the paintings. The poems are compact and not spread out on the page and they never exceed a page in length. "Eighteen Ways to Say Hello In Uruguay," and "You Art Still a Visitor Here" demonstrate this tight composition that looks like a painting on the page. All of the information necessary to the poem presents itself in one glance. Some poems float in a block in the middle of the page so that they have the appearance of the shape of a painting. This creates an enclosed space in which a series of images, sometimes disparate, must be encountered all together and where the reader must consider their connections. Each poem and painting, although related to the others in the collection, contains its own separate set of actions, much like a prayer, although related to other prayers, is its own, unique experience. Both poems and paintings use a single space or page to postulate another prayer.

I have learned then that images in my poetry seek to fulfill the “complex” mentioned by Ezra Pound. I write my poetry about specific moments of time that engage concrete images within a small, momentary space. The poem “Conceive” presents a good example of the necessity of image in my poetry. It also demonstrates that a strict imagist approach, where only images are conveyed, is not sufficient. The images are interrupted by moments of reflection.

Conceive

Before the storm, I swam in a still pond. One colorless fish brushed my calf with his small, strange body. The water swayed, clear and silent. I am often the only one making a sound. The reeds slow-danced all afternoon. Later, I hiked for miles along the shore. Fish head, dying and crooked tree, rusted metal hook, small tent, red flowers. Then the storm rumbled—thunder swelled across the lake. Again and again. This is our earth, I wanted to shout. Like the pelicans callooming on the flat, grey rock—I felt a shining out, brief as the lightning, when I first knew you were coming to the world.

This poem is made up of eleven sentences. The sentences are short and each one conveys an image that teaches the reader to navigate this small world that is happening in the poem. I want the reader to build a world image upon image. Each sentence contains an element that is directly translated into an image. I want these images to offer multiplicities of possibility, while still referring the literal image. The colorless fish that brushes the narrator’s calf is a literal image, but also implies two bodies in motion—mother and growing baby. The colorless fish is also a new experience for the narrator, almost otherworldly. Upon first reading, the opening line, “Before the storm, I swam in a still pond,” is a line that could be taken literally and functions as an image of someone swimming in a still pond; however, my hope is that after the last line of the

poem is read, “I felt a shining out, brief as the lightning, when I first knew you were coming to the world,” the poem can circle back on itself and the image of swimming in a still pond also becomes metaphor for the calm time before something happens. In this case, the “still pond” does work beyond the image to be the time before the conception of a child, the time when the body is still and without another body moving inside.

It is necessary to write this specific poem in words, rather than trying to convey the exact same thing with the visual because I want readers to make connections in their mind between the images and lines. I want readers to construct a painting or small environment where they can question the poem. I don’t think that it would be the same painting that I would create for the same set of questions, but I feel that much of the work that is done with my poetry is a creation of images that are imagined and connected in the reader’s mind. In his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Robert Frost says, “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting” (12). I want my images to function as the propelling force that allows the poem to “ride on its own melting.” I want the poem to continue “melting” for the reader, even after they are done reading, in a similar fashion to the way prayer that does not conclude when the words “amen” are spoken, but lingers in the heart and mind.

I do not want the experience of the narrator in the poem to be conclusive or closed off. I want my images to function as Lyn Hejinian speaks of in her article “The Rejection of Closure.” She says,

The ‘open text,’ by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer

relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. (369)

Language offers the ability to deliver information in sequence, so that the reader builds upon each image as he goes down the page. In a single painting the images are presented simultaneously and without linearity. My use of imagery in both poetry and painting hopes to utilize this idea of an “open text” by offering the reader a place in which he can come to their own conclusions.

My collection contains 37 poems and 33 paintings that are displayed side-by-side in varying order. Because the paintings are not illustrations of the poems, nor the poems explications of the paintings, I did not place all the paintings uniformly on the left or the right. I want the paintings and poems to be in conversation with one another by enhancing and re-informing the other. I want the reader to move through the poem and look at the painting, then look at the painting and read the poem.

In the opening pages “First Step Towards Loss” appears on the right, and a painting on the left. The paintings, unlike the poems, are untitled because I want the visual to do all of the work and I don’t want the viewer to attach false or predisposed ideas to the paintings because they are titled. The painting and poem on the first pages of the first section were not created to explain the other, but rather they were both created to explore the same ideas and questions.

I use language that is accessible and familiar because it is vital that the reader picture what I am describing. If a reader cannot work with concrete images from a poem, then the poem is not useful to this collection. In a similar way, my paintings also draw from domestic or familiar images: children, mother figures, houses and birds. Familiar and simple, these images do the work of creating a simple environment in which prayer might take place. I offer my reader

an entering point through clear language. Once inside, they are free to wander, interpret, and make connections.

In the untitled introductory poem of the collection, the sounds and visuals allow readers to enter a constructed world—simple language and image, revealing intellectual questions about God, prayer, birth, and the cyclical nature of this life. The images reside in close proximity to one another, thus creating an intimate space. Proximity requires images to be in close conversation with one another. The paintings and poems are not simply meant to illustrate pretty things; I want both media to do the work of asking and exploring questions. Because prayer or psalms are experiences in which distinct and deliberate vocabulary is used, and where words are chosen with care and thought, I also want each poem and painting to do the work of careful and deliberate construction. The opening poem “Untitled” sets the tone for the rest of the collection. The poem lets the reader know that the poems are aware of the fact that they are poems.

Untitled

I was once womb empty. Round, hollow organ.
 Slick pink hiding inside, but no body growing,
 no knock of knees in shallow white waters
 Wrap hands and pray,
 because heart-shaped organ is full
 Distort this perfect circle. O—everything will be different.
 We are only beginning to amen—ah—amen and amen—

In the first stanza of this poem I used words that sounded hollow and mainly dealt with the vowel ‘O,’ suggesting the visual of a uterus, round and empty. The letter ‘O’ is empty in the

middle, despite its ability to enclose or to hold something. In the second stanza, I used words that capitalized on the ‘a’ vowel. I wanted to explore the ways in which childbirth and pregnancy are literally a type of distortion of the body, similar in the way that the letter ‘o’ could be distorted into an ‘a’ shape.

I dramatize the tension between joy and sorrow in life experiences. Birth and being a child makes up the first part of the collection and birth and becoming a parent encompasses the latter half of the collection. I want to understand the way that language can represent those experiences. It is not the case in all of my poetry, but in the collection I am currently working on, I want actual words, sounds and lines to be a physical experience. I want the language to make the mouth water, or hurt or ache. I want readers to form the letter ‘O’ in their own mouth, and I want them to feel the emptiness of the actual letter as they form it physically. In the two last lines of the “Untitled” poem, the vowels come together in prayer and end with amen, which means to say that the speaker of the poem is in accordance with the experience of change and distortion.

As I’ve said, many similarities exist between the processes of making paintings and writing poems. A painting, like a poem, creates a world that is beholden only to that specific painting or instance. The environments of the paintings are contrived. The colors, perspectives and arrangement of images do not follow the rules of the real world. In the same way, the world of a poem does not need to follow the rules of the real world, but rather, is a constructed place that houses questions. The girl and the man in the painting are appropriate figures for the beginning of this collection because the collection is about relationships between an older, wiser person or deity and a young, childlike figure like the girl in the paintings. In the case of the painting that accompanies the poem “Untitled” the girl and the man stand in the midst of a

whimsical, colorful world.

In *Nine Gates*, Jane Hirshfield writes,

But if creative making lives in our every mental gesture, both verbal and nonverbal, what then is particular to the kinds of perception we call art? First, art springs from a heightening, widening, and deepening of attention, and a craft-sense sufficiently developed to place this altered condition into the work... It arises from deep structures of comprehension that are continually at work within us but are only noticed when the processes of understanding become as significant as its ends. (111)

I agree with Hirshfield when she says that the “process of understanding is as significant as its ends.” I am interested in all the forms an idea can take on so that when they come together as a body of work, the process of understanding is entwined within the final product. The poems and paintings both take on different forms or modes of exploration. The process is integral to the final product.

In her essay, “Some Notes On Organic Form,” Denise Levertov says, “It is faithful attention to the experience from the first moment of crystallization that allows those first or those forerunning words to rise to the surface: and with that same fidelity of attention the poet, from that moment of being let in to the possibility of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes” (238). I do agree with part of this quote that asserts that a poem (or a work in writing or painting) will reveal itself through the process of creation, and in part I agree that we need to pay attention to the experience that gives rise to the occasion for speech, but I have found my most successful projects to come from intellect combined with experience, not simply experience that is waiting to be written into a poem.

In my work, I focus on process and experimentation in order to find a form that works best for the content of the ideas—one process that requires me to work intellectually, and a different process that requires me to work and think with my hands. I do not feel constrained by medium or genre. I've found that my most successful and fulfilled projects have been when I've allowed the process to guide my action, instead of trying to have a vision of the final product from the beginning. This collection is a culmination of my work over the past seven years. Although I don't feel that I have solved or come up with conclusive answers about the questions and concerns that fueled the paintings and poems, I am satisfied with the visual and written catalogue of attempts to better understand prayer and how the written and visual object can aid in the act of communication with God.

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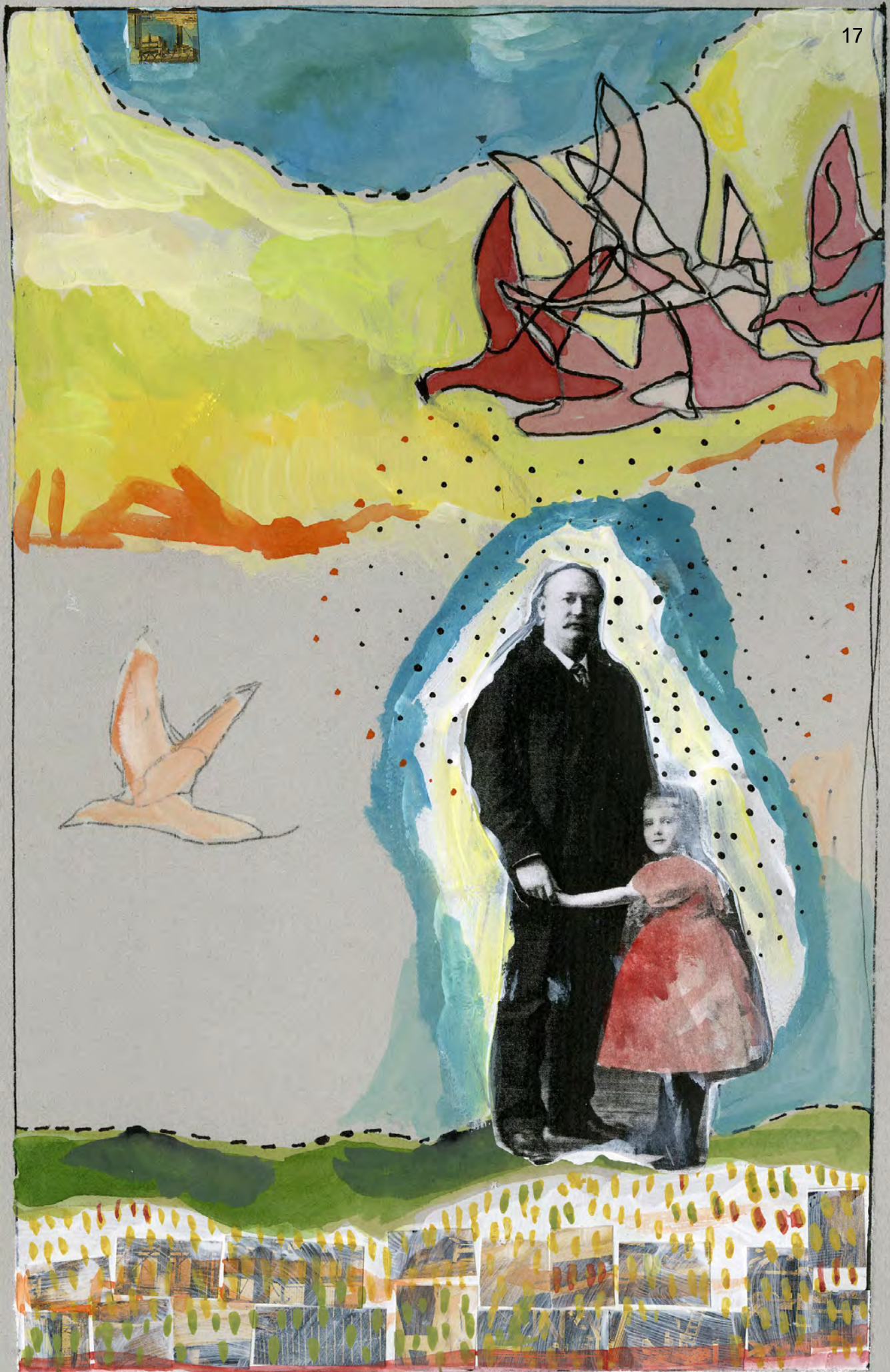
First Psalm
Poems and Paintings

Untitled

I was once womb empty. Round, hollow organ.
Slick pink hiding inside, but no body growing,
no knock of knees in shallow white waters. O!
Now, now, little blossom.
Whole, open me, welcome.
They say I am more than one.

Palm to belly, watch the ascent and fall,
ascend and fall.
Wrap hands and pray,
because heart-shaped organ is full.

Distort this perfect circle. O—everything will be different.
We are only beginning to amen—ah—amen and amen.



SECTION ONE



First Step Towards Loss*The first time I know summer*

My parents tell me to get back in bed. I am six. I stand at the blinds without moving slats:
watch neighborhood kids run cat-footed in fields and dusk. Sun setting silhouettes
christened in purple shadow and wet, wet, wet, sprinklers click on lawns.
orange sky yawns—slow as counting stars. Elephant light through lazy white drapes,
darkness is coming, first firefly night.

God Thought

Age five on the curb
in front of my house
with my boy best friend.
The world seemed so big
and I felt yet to enter it.
We wondered,
What is God like?
His bellybutton is big as a trashcan.
His fingers like tree branches.
His heart my house.

God Thought, Part Two

The roof blowing off in the best storm
anyone had ever seen.
All the men in the neighborhood came
to lift it off the front lawn.
The missionaries came over while
I was in the bathtub. I washed and
stood on the toilet to look out the window,
they were standing on the sidewalk with my mom
and sister, they were all looking at a rainbow.
The night of the eclipse,
we were allowed to stay out late,
and all the neighbors gathered on the driveway
and stared up at the red moon
like it was the last time we would all be together,
and maybe it was, at least like that, with
our pajamas, and beliefs held open like cheap
brochures to read by the dim light of the moon.
The next Sunday, when my grandparents came
and parked their trailer home in the driveway,
my mom told me I didn't have to go to church
because my grandpa didn't believe in it.
I stood at the window watching the
neighborhood walk to church. I couldn't
stand it anymore,
I put on my dress
and ran out the front door,
running all the way to the church building
by myself.



Prayer

The night I nestled in my father's lap
and fireworks bloomed across the sky
a woman in the crowd covered her ears
and called out,

more magic, more lights in the sky!

The ashes danced
like black essays on beauty.

Pieces still ripe from the
the explosion
singeing arms and hair on contact.

Or the skyless day my sister and I wandered
in the blackberry fields.

Reaching into the deep green wall
our fingertips bled,
the plump fruit too perfect
not to pluck.

Let these things be ours.
Small stings we came here for.



Eleven Years ago September

Age ten, in our front yard after the storm,
Tree roots grasped the cotton sky.
Brother stood at the edge of the swollen hole.
213 trees fell in our city that day.
Small sister watched through the screen door.
Mother was working
Father still working.
Straight through the storm.
As dust settled into the corners of earth,
Three kids made dinner
And swept remnants from the porch.

Two days later
Mother brought home a sister in daffodil.



Heirloom

I nearly fused the gold band to my middle finger.
When I spilled the chemicals.
There was a moment of panic,
Then a sting of courage
When I saw the tender white
Ring of puffy skin underneath.



Who is God

And where was he when
the two sixth grade boys
crushed the newly formed butterfly
between thick palms, just as flight
entered wings.

And where was he when
you held onto the rope swing
and jumped from the branch
over the water.
You couldn't let go,
until it was too late,
and you fell, full of knowing,
onto the shallow shore of the lake.

Was it Him at the top
of the hill that summer day,
when you were too tired
to walk anymore,
and you sat on a crumbling bench
and thumbed the book in your
hands, and every page
mentioned sanctification.

A boy asked me on the subway
what I knew about God,
and I talked too much,
so that when he got off
at his stop, he didn't turn
to wave or smile,
but hurried out into the dank darkness.

Coming back home is slowed motion. Like watching apron strings being tied around my mother's slight waist.

Rewind, one year ago—I can't quite put my finger on the reality I am sure was mine. I was a missionary—a regular Paul, sitting in a hot church every Sunday. The people threw me a surprise birthday party, I have the photo taped in my journal to prove it. The children collected rocks for me.

What would they think of me now, lying in bed, staring at stupid stars and ceiling. Scales creeping up over my eyes.



M



You are still a visitor here*Guatemala City, Guatemala*

Do not be surprised when the glass bottle is thrown and shatters on a dirty wall above your head, it is not aimed at you, that man is just drunk, and too tired. This is what you came for. Pull yourself onto the next half-windowed bus and sit on the sweaty green vinyl, that leathered man is giving up his seat for you. The girl next to you is your age, and half your size. Her sparrow eyes say she's sorry for taking up so much room. Sitting so close on this bumpy road, you can see roundness, like a world, pressed against her muted dress. In this poem, you speak Spanish, so say something to her, like how you think she's beautiful, or that you love this place, the green, the hills, the food. What will she name the baby? Hug your backpack. There are women holding children standing in the aisles their fielded bodies absorbing the impact of the winding hills like they were rooted to the floor, and their babies growing from their hips like budding flowers. Glance at the girl, over and over. In this poem, she won't look back at you. What would she say? You arrive in the striped city. The sounds are vibrant. Red, blue, pink dresses. Yellow painted doors. You love this, you feel alive. The scooters pass close, there are wood-skinned boys selling bracelets in the street. Finish the conversation with the girl in your head (English or Spanish). The bus pulls in near the market among a dozen scuffed and huffing engines. The girl looks back once, perhaps at you, as she walks through the settling dust, the heavy bag slung across her shoulders.

SECTION TWO



Question of Faith

After the long drive at dawn,
I walked out into the water
that shone across the salt flats for miles.
Purple sky and white mountains miraging,
as visible and unreachable as the history of this place.
The water rises over my bare feet
I am determined to reach the end,
to touch the place I know is mirage.
My obedient feet move further from the shore,
over every crystal crevice.
The only noise
not of birds fluttering,
but of you,
calling my name from the shore.



I Don't Know How to Pray, Part 2

I saw a cow stuck in a ditch.

Not a man made crevice, but an ancient and narrow gully on the side of the hill.

I saw his bony, black, backside and giant shoulders like tiny mountains rising out of the ground. He faced uphill, his head raised, or bowed, (I don't recall) in patient plea.

A group of cows lay a hundred feet away.

Heads, ears, dumb eyes, hideous knees, hooves folded under massive bodies.

Chewing and turning from the ditch.

And I, I turned my head and we drove past,

said nothing to my husband,

instead, looked ahead at the endless fields and pastures,

then bowed, praying for the cow,

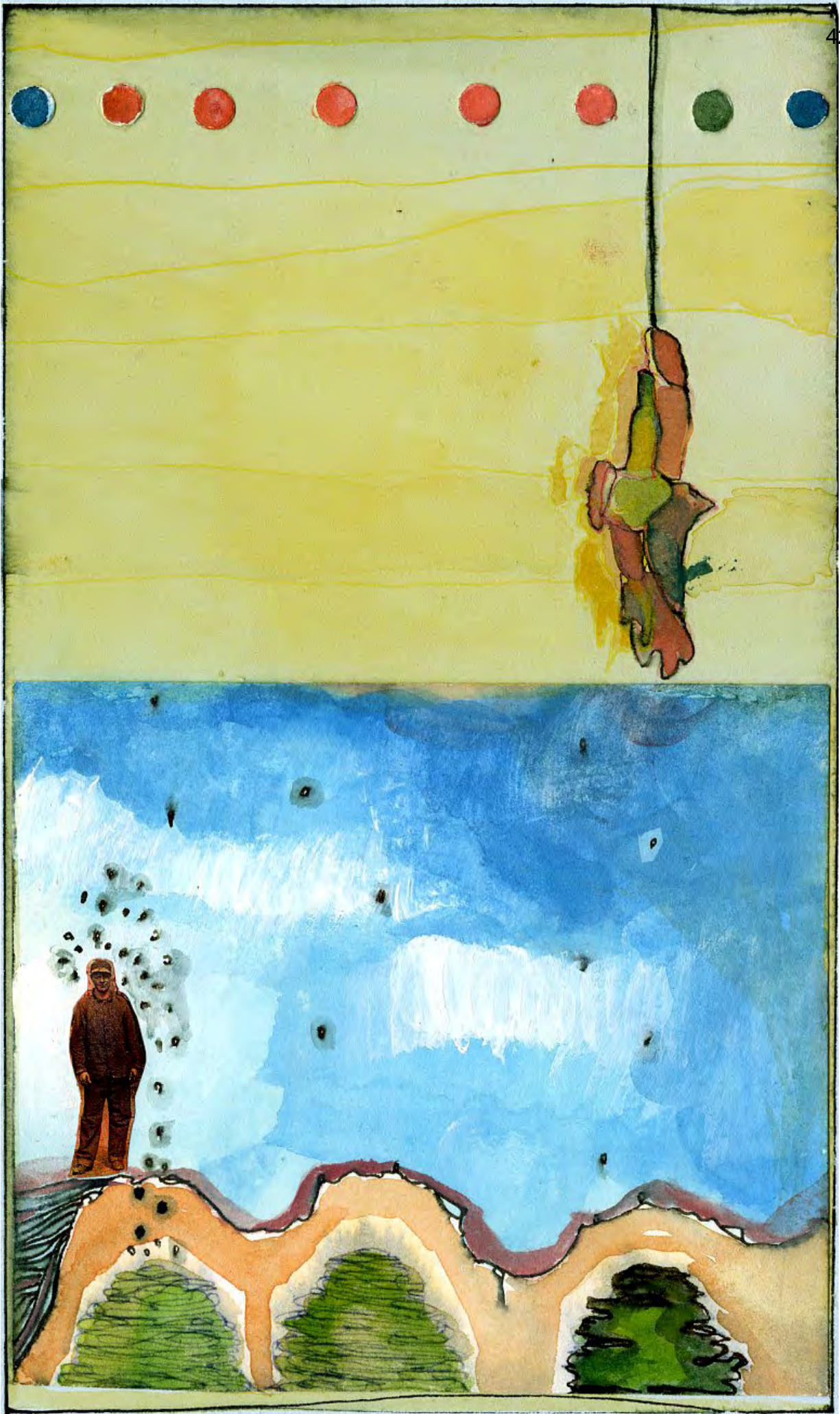
without faith that he would be saved.



For Those Who Believe All Things Are Possible

On a windy July morning we stood in a field like children. There, in the middle of town, near the high school and the hospital, fifty hot air balloons lay limp on the lawn. The announcer tried to keep the crowds entertained, but no one could hear him over the muffled loud speaker, and we formed small tribes on the grass. The wind was too strong for a delicate hot air balloon. Some people walked away. Faithless. The wind stopped as if it had only been testing our desire for the beautiful, and suddenly with shushes and wooshes the balloons grew like resurrected hills of wildflowers in spring. The sky billowed oranges, reds, greens, yellows, pinks, blues and purples. The whole crowd, tired kids, parents with money problems, usually bored teenagers, stood up and praised with familiar language we would use the next day at church: *thank you, miracle, I knew*. The first balloon that lifted off the ground was checkered pink and red. The man in the basket bent over the side and reached to the crowd as if the hot air balloon festival were the most important moment of his life.

There are times I want to record this world,
in every imperfect detail.
Because look here, at these people,
there's me,
waving to the camera. Look at the faces
turned upward in the summer wind.
Look at the man rising
above in his basket,
touching as many hands as he can
before the ropes can't hold him down.



In the Middle of Things

Simple, the way the gold band slid over my knuckle and down into the canyon of my fingers. Our lives grafted like an apple branch to the spring tree in the orchard—you couldn't tell where the joint was made, until you got close, ran skin tips across the scar. The other gold ring my grandpa wore so long the engravings turned smooth: heirloom. I wore it when I knew I would be nervous, when everyone would be watching. Standing in front of a crowd, I rubbed the length of it with my thumb.

But to wear two gold rings at once? People I knew in Uruguay lived in one-room houses, cooked polenta for every meal, and couldn't believe it when I answered that yes, every room in my house had carpet. I never wore my grandpa's gold ring outside in that country.

The older ring housed in a wooden box on my dresser, keep it safe—the way I loved my grandpa. The body, the hand that wears the other ring—the way I love my husband.

Silence

One Sunday, instead of church, we made a game of not talking in the woods. We ran through the silent meadow and up hardened mountain paths. Feet pounding, you turning to me in wild gesture and a lonely bird calling out. In the yard of a winter cabin, we found an old swing, the chain stung our hands with cold. I showed you by putting my palm on your cheek. I watched you dance across the shadowed landscape telling me how easily the snow falls. I knew you wanted me to think it as beautiful as you. It was curious to me, everything without words, so mostly I conveyed nothing.

We came to an old concrete shed, full of corrugated metal planks. We heaved them down crumbling stairs to a bit of wet grass below. Intent on the work, we counted *one, two, three, lift*, with our eyes. I put my hands together in the shape of a bowl, then tipped it to my lips. You nodded and began to gather dry bits of bark from the coverings of trees. On the dirt road far above, I heard some people wondering who was on their property. Because we weren't speaking, I didn't say anything to warn you. Just watched you blowing on the fire you were trying to start in the shelter we'd built.

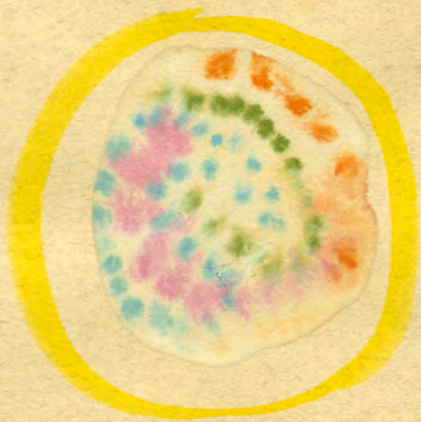


Ode to My Place

The mountains live in my backyard
pressed tight against this valley—
mother wearing an apron of snow
father with a jagged beard
little sister burned in summer—
Tell me, mountains that raised me,
why didn't you warn me
when I was going to make a mistake?

Ode to my place part two

Still, thank you,
for many things:
for long grass in springtime,
the red fox who darted out,
the deer and the steep path,
the stream and beaver dams,
for the time I hiked to your top at night
and lost the trail coming down,
for the way the weeds glowed like gold
under the navy sky as I came down through them—
the way I felt that I too had been alive a thousand years.



Ode on Forgiveness

I wrote it out five times
in just one week,
my apology.
I wrote it in longhand
and on the computer.
Some days it was blue
like the lonely light that emanates from a glacier.
Some days it was pink
and pregnant with memories
whose birth we would never witness
together again.
Yesterday for a few moments
it was yellow,
like the color one might expect
of the words hope
or thank you.
Or the color you see
when you've gotten up
early and hiked a mountain
just to see the sunrise.
The color not anything new,
not anything we haven't seen before.
But in that moment,
the way sunlight peaks up and over the crest of the world,
reminds us that we are so small
and that the world
has been spinning all this time.

Trial and Error

Easy as the black moose that lumbered, loped, and stood in the field. He gazed down the canyon, and we looked down at him. Two calves and a female came out from the fir trees and followed him as if he were a king, pulling the great weight of decision in his strong hind legs. You might think the moose would string along like a marionette, with legs splayed, but some things are not as we imagine them to be. Some things we cannot explain. Later he will run. My dad once saw one leap over a fence in a field.

I once told a man I'd never met before about the things that were most important to me. I thought he wasn't listening because he stared past my shoulder and breadcrumbs stuck to his lip. What a waste, I thought. When I finished, he was crying, he'd recently had a stroke.

Or the time we canoed through the reeds down at the lake. We were lost and the small yellow birds with the black throats called us in every direction. The moose turned slowly to look with eyes that were patient for us. We stood in the sunset, looking back at him.



Eighteen Ways to Say Hello in Uruguay

Nod to the man who sells oranges and weighs them on a scale that is older than his grandfather. Smile at the boys who call you *girl* in English from the trees; later you will love their mother. Put out your hand to the man who lives behind the kid-clambering house. There! A chicken wanders into his single cement room out back. The cracks in his hands are filled in with grease, he wipes them with a dirty rag. Home from work early just to speak with you. Take a picture with a family on the lawn, the moon bigger than you've ever seen. Sit on crates while a man plays a cheap guitar and the woman puts her breast away when the baby is asleep. Listen to Alfredo Zitarrosa fill the empty kitchen, an old woman leans forward in a wooden chair and sips mate. Ask for water, they can see you are sweating, no one skips siesta in this heat. Accept invitation to drink well water, even when dirty. Defend yourself, but with dignity when the full fish is thrown and hits you in the calf. Say nothing. Approach the gate with confidence, clap three times loudly, walk away with confidence when a woman inside yells that nobody is home. Smile, they are all looking at you. Dye your hair black, and let your skin tan, they will think you are one of them. Do not open your mouth and reveal the accent, you can't hear it, but oh, they can! Tell your one joke over and over, the kids love it, and then the accent doesn't matter. Look them straight in the eyes, this should say everything, if it does not work, try again with the next person and every person you stop on the street. Besos Besos! Until your right cheek is sore. Laugh, this is yours forever. Chapped and leathered men lean on sides of buildings, the smell of old tobacco and bakeries; they drawl adios and watch you walk on.



Sum

The elements:

whitewashed wall,
ancient green vine,
star-purple flowers,
flat blue sky,
teeth breaking cold.

A girl, not me,
turning and turning the key.

My face turned upward.

The only movement in
South America—
sixteen white birds
fall upward and over,
the sound—a thousand
wings lighting the sky.



Prayer

At precisely
3:28 last night,
the fan clicked dead.
A waft of sticky air
soaked into the room.
Raindrops through
the open window
fell onto my bare arms.
I lay, watching the lightning,
and thinking of names
for my children.



Resurrection

Emerald pool at the top of the tallest peak in the valley,
I jumped in to the glacial runoff and lost my breath completely.
Just a moment under the water, encased in silent deep, blue glass,
and then shattering through the surface, filling lungs with sunlight,
tiny purple flowers, finally, mountain air. Hikers cheering
on the shore. Suddenly, I was aware of things that are taken away,
then given back so easily. All things on that mountain peak
celebrated my second chance, my first new breath. My body
loved the pounding, paddling and pulling myself up on the muddy
bank, running wet down the trail, past the weathered shack
where I'd slept that frozen morning, while behind, everyone stood
near the rippling lake and watched.



Commence

A long time I stood there in the dark
next to the bed, the night I got home from the beach.

I remembered the tree in the back yard
that split down the middle for no good reason,
broke the fence and landed
on the roof of the house.

We were eager,
walking under the branches,
moving in and out of the shimmering
leaves and shadows of leaves that should
have spelled disaster.
We invited the cousins over,
we'll have a barbeque under this fallen tree,
we'll celebrate the way life surprises us.

Kneel down next to the bed,
shut your eyes to doubt.
There is an easiness in the way
the fallen tree was still graceful,
the slant of the trunk against the house was comforting,
like it had never existed any other way.
Then your asking
was like something you'd already done.



Prayer is Simple

We kissed on the beach until morning.
Should we have?
The fire pit smoldered,
the tide slowly rose, like
quiet hands reaching up onto
the sand, depositing small creatures
into crevices.
In the morning, I rose,
still tired, and walked along the shore
in bare feet. Hoping that just like Moses,
God and I would have a moment.
I turned so no one
would see, clasped my own cold
hands. Praying is simple.
Can be done while walking,
even when tired, or while bending down
to stroke a starfish, palm a pebble,
swash fingers in a pocket of sea water,
look out across the flat blue,
think a thousand things,
ask forgiveness for anything,
but you must know which name to begin with.
So easy.



Great Blue Heron

The bird book said, “you will often see the great blue heron standing patiently in a stream of water.” The description didn’t mention what a heron would do in a snowstorm, however. Sanctify—like a paper crane I folded so many times the paper wore thin and tore; the night I lay in a cold mountain meadow and watched the entire night sky sail over; I held your hand in the warm motel sheets, we pulled over in a snowstorm in the middle of Idaho. But the Blue Heron, he has nobody to hold him, to touch his wing tenderly, to pull his strong foot from the murky, rising riverbed. “They tuck their legs up under them when they fly”, the book said. And so it was, when we drove back to see the bird in the stream, he had already left, we could only make out his great flapping wings like heavy weights through the slanting snow and sleet. His legs tucked up close to him, so he looked small. He flew further away, across the fields and into the mountains. Was he sad? Searching? Perhaps praying.



A Prayer

—is how your body began.
A thought I had at the beach in Oregon,
while three children ran across damp sand.
The grey sky held a red kite,
the seagulls were particularly white.
The clouds—pillows I could turn
my head up to, and dream—
those voices, they were my children.
No, no—your body was yet begun,
spinning deep inside,
whirring,
a delicate machine,
like a butterfly, ready to take flight.



SECTION THREE

Prayer

I.

Like the bee that is born into noise,
among a thousand other supplicating heads,
closing her first utterance
by cleaning the waxy womb
from which she emerged
into this green, grey world.
Intent on bent knees,
repenting *here I am, here I am.*
This is only the beginning of amen.

II.

Cacophony of swarming thoughts
when I wake in warm morning light.
I crawl from the sheets, turn and kneel:
here I am, here I am.
Placid performance, this ritual;
cure the plagues of my heart.
I want to take flight, in search
of pollen, clovers, nectar, nettles.

I came in his long line —
through he did know it yet here



Conceive

Before the storm, I swam in a still pond. One colorless fish brushed my calf with his small, strange body. The water swayed, clear and silent. I am often the only one making a sound. The reeds slow-danced all afternoon. Later, I hiked for miles along the shore. Fish head, dying and crooked tree, rusted metal hook, small tent, red flowers. Then the storm rumbled—thunder swelled across the lake. Again and again. *This is our earth*, I wanted to shout. Like the pelicans calloing on the flat, grey rock—I felt a shining out, brief as the lightning, when I first knew you were coming to the world.



Venus of Willendorf

Who carved the first soft stomach? Sharp tool held between deft fingers, shaping limestone round as sunrise. So small I could hold it in the palm of my hand, or in secret. Was the carver trying to capture the supple hills of a body that moves like an ocean under the surface? Was it hope for child, was it praise?

Now, I am wild with new heaviness. Peonies, full moon, cup my hands together and look inside. A subtle movement outward into the world, and still thoughts move ever inward. I am searching the veins around my heart. I touch my stomach often, rub my hand across the underside. Surely everyone must notice the way I round, the blood in my cheeks.

Maybe it was Eve who made the Venus and painted it a soft earthen red inscribed with the message: *We came for this, we came to be this.*

I hiked through the hills at the top of a canyon where the air was thin. I wanted to lie down among the fallen granite and blooming wildflowers. I thought about the tiny stone woman with no face. I wanted to hold her up to make sure she really does look like me.



Two Bodies

Everything seemed different the day we came home from the hospital, like I had knelt down and let another skin drape and enfold me.

This morning bruised clouds crawled over the tops of snowy, distant mountains. And coming toward that dark heaviness, was the light from the valley, white like a lace tablecloth, but bright and fast moving.

As I watched the two weave through the sky, and around each other, I remembered the way you bent down in the shower with your clothes on, and scrubbed the backs of my knees and the tops of my feet while I sat on a plastic stool. Rain this afternoon. In the distance I saw the smoky cloud of mist billowing toward the ground. This healing: sacred and quiet as the palm of your hand on my forehead.



First Prayer

Corner of fallen hornet's nest
on damp morning lawn.
I could have taken the miniature world,
crumbled it in my palm.
But instead,
I held the grey papery piece
like treasure, and walked home.
Some days I am heartsick and tired
in this sunlit,
dirty-snowed world.
But now first time, a baby boy
moves inside me like a gentle swarm.
Who could have expected this?

A hornet, in one cell, cocooned in white,
legs like commas flutter faintly
a fresh hue of golden yellow,
halfway in the delicate cell, halfway out.
As if at the moment of decision
bursting into this green harsh world
was too much.

*Look here I told him, the way
the spring snow sparkles and the poppies
start to rise. It's okay.*



A Welcoming

Your chest.

Your limbs.

Our seed,

we planted, sprouted, plowed.

Us.

We've heard everything.

We know nothing.

Here, look through this window:

do you see the two people,

lying beneath motel sheets

fingers in palms.

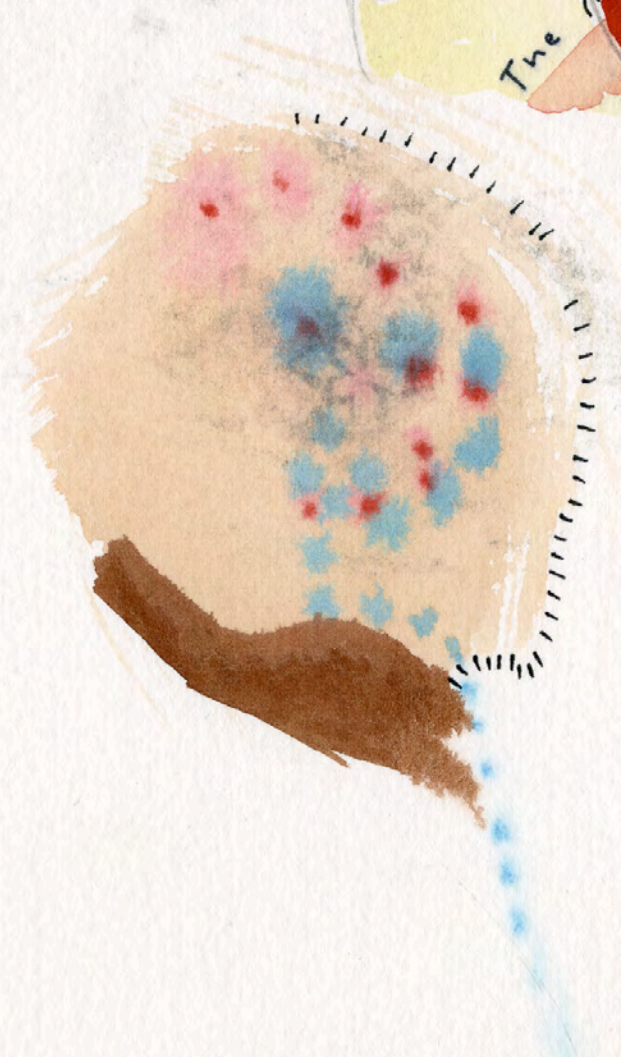
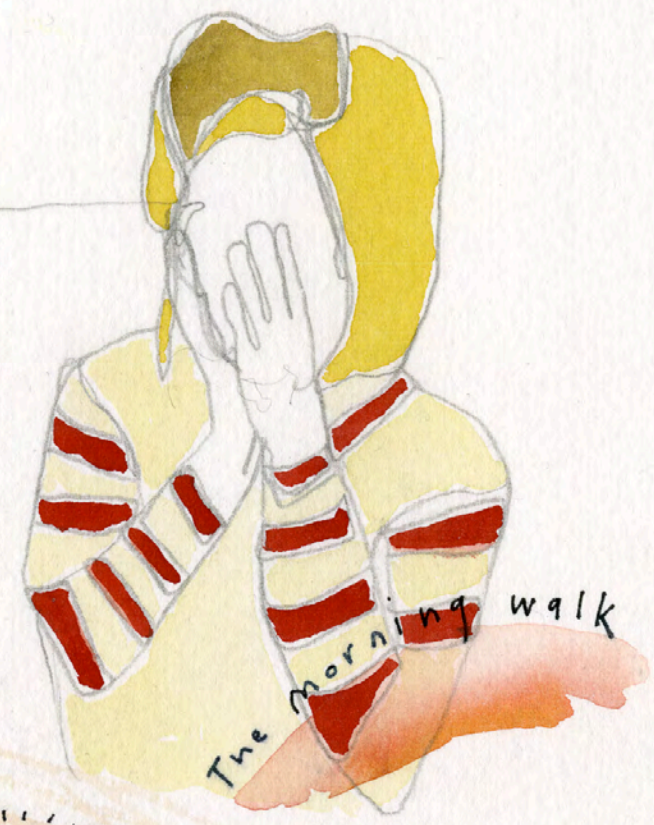
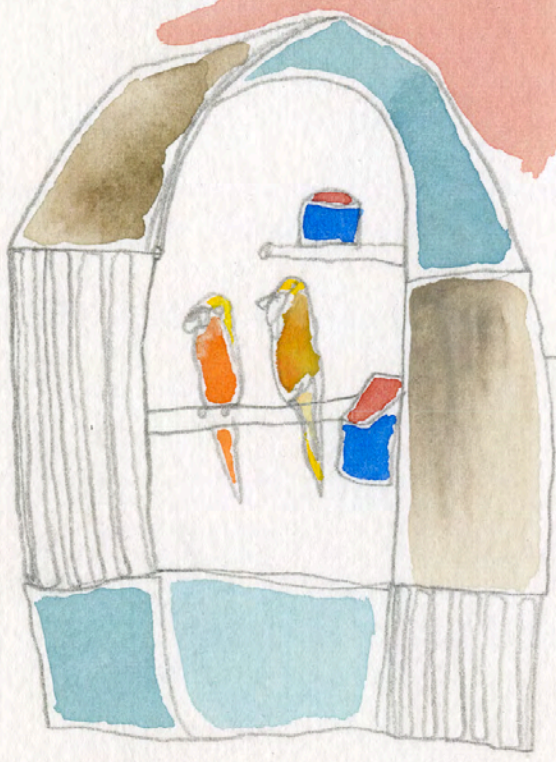
Is this what you were hoping for?

White world outside,

only puffs of silent snow.

A Welcoming Part Two

Snow fell and rose in puffs at midnight
we stopped in the middle of a white world, exit 273.
Your fingers found themselves in my hot palm,
where we lay. Cotton sheets in the motel
and nothing but everything outside the window.
No one in the world could have pinpointed us,
on our way home. This seed we plowed,
sprouted, and flowered, rises between us.
Fresh limbs flutter, I breath.
I see your chest rise and fall next to me.





Sand crabs—

round as my thumbnail,
swashed from that deep sea,
with each wave washed up.

Kneeling on the shore,
I lean over dozens of tiny holes
where bubbles rise and dome on the surface and
sunlight refracts every prayer.
Delivered and already disappearing.
I plung my hands into wet sands.

We race.
Sand crabs
downward
burrow.
And I, all I want
is to pull up a handful of earth
and feel the frantic movements
against my palm.





Two Bodies

For this I give my body:
a knock of knees I feel
from the inside
when I lie in bed at midnight;
things I cannot see;
tips of fingers,
a steady heartbeat,
faster than my own.
Take this body,
bloom with care,
someday soon,
we two will be birthed
to start again.