

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: ALMOST INVISIBLE

Kateema Lee, Master of Fine Arts, 2006

Thesis Directed By: Professor Michael Collier
Department of English

As the title implies, my poems attempt to convey the speaker's sense of invisibility. Whether musing on landscapes, seasons, or childhood memories, the speaker is most often a reflexive observer. In the poems where the speaker is an active participant there still is a sense of distance and detachment. The varying syntax and colloquial diction give the poems a quiet conversational, sometimes flat tone. Poetic devices such as alliteration, interspersed rhyme and meter reinforce the steady timbre. It is my hope that the flatness of the diction, accompanied by the seemingly aloof speaker, will unearth and emphasize the darker surprising elements embedded in the lines. I think I'm inadvertently weaving together a poetic narrative about watching and not being watched.

ALMOST INVISIBLE

By

Kateema Lee

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters in Fine Arts
2006

Advisory Committee:
Professor Michael Collier, Chair
Professor Elizabeth Arnold
Professor Joshua Weiner

© Copyright by
Kateema Lee
2006

Dedication

*For Jermaine (for all that you've given me), Khalia (lil' sis') and my mother (superwoman),
thank you for reading my poems.*

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

For their thoughtful support and inspiration, I would like to thank Elizabeth Arnold, Joshua Weiner, Don Berger, Michael Collier and Stanley Plumly.

Table of Contents

Riding Backwards	1
Seizure	2
Family Tree	3
My Grandmother in Black & White	4
In My Recurring Dream	5
Metro Center	6
Photo of My Father Korea 1969?	7
An End?	8
My Mother's Beauty Shop	9
Looking at David Opdyke's Sculpture <i>USS MALL</i>	10
Sunday Dinners	11
Talking Suicide & Murder	12
Old Song	13
"Throwaway People, 1927"	16
Weekend Visits	17
Ryokou	18
Elegy For My Cousin	19
Flower Avenue	20
Spring's Song	21
Glimpses	22
Working In Nana's Garden	24
Louisa's Blues	25
Soapy Hands	26
Sunsets with Tom	27
Roxy's Confession	28
Elegy For My Sister	29
Meditations on Falling	30
Gasping	33
The Last Episode	34
We Poem	35

Riding Backwards

In the tunnel, between stops, light
slaps the train and faces lose their color
like newspaper photos: plain, mostly grey.

Between the sliding doors and aluminum
bars sits a woman, hair a rusty brown,
wiry, grazing her shoulders.

Other figures bounce on the laminated glass,
but she has no luster and is as flat
as her reflection on the encasement.

Why is she so dim? I can't help but wonder
did she give up Botanist dreams of hybrid
roses, cerulean petals set above thorn-less stems,

and marry the first man that made her come.
Did she listen to his hypnotic snore
and forget the seeds she planted,

have his babies, then question who pushed fast-
forward, whether she's on the right track?
Are we the same traveler trying to delay our destination?

Is she me? Even now, as I look at myself
flash floating against the current, *I see*
how much of me time's taken.

Seizure

I.

My world seems to spin
counterclockwise, faces blur
and I want to stop,
but like a turntable shortly
after the record ends I continue
to spin until daylight
and hazy images leave me.

II.

I wake to caged light,
meticulously lined clouds
without imagination,
I'm moving
and a crowd of unfamiliar faces
move with me. Someone speaks
and it's my voice mumbling
childlike, "I want to go
home."

III.

I'm a creature crowded
in a cocoon of white sheets,
and I want freedom, not refuge
behind doors that say ICU,
then darkness follows until
I see a nurse with syringe in hand
and my arms with extended veins.

IV.

This is where I died and where
I was reborn--
with the same face,
afraid to live the life I lived before,
scared to close my eyes,
or turn around,
always reliving my death
each time I have an episode.

Family Tree

Some scientists say it's genetic,
circadian rhythms passed down like brown
eyes or freckles.

My grandmother says she stays up late,
because at seventy-five there's no time
to waste on dreams.

Most nights she sits in the living room, listens
to the house settling, stares at old photos
of my grandfather.

My father says his father's heart surrendered
to her Sunday dinners and tyranny;
not one meal was missed.

Like his mother, my father does not sleep.
He thinks about the fires he fought at work
and at home.

He says that we're alike "we love too deeply,"
but some fires have to burn themselves out,
so he stays away.

And I lay night after night, head hard against
the pillow watching slices of streetlights
sit on my ceiling,

imagining birds, wings fluttering in darkness
until some small light strikes them making silvery
imprints on the walls,

thinking of my grandmothers garden and how
I played there while I waited for my father,
always waited,

And needing the massive hands of sleep to take me
to my own flower patch, where I will never
be disappointed.

We all hear the night's song, its cadences...
But I'm tired of the rhythm, and seeing
the sun rise over and over.

My Grandmother in Black & White

Sitting in her garden beneath the dull
yellow umbrella, her face looks sculpted
with curves along her high cheekbones and mouth
shading between lines of white skin.

Blue eyes now an opaque gray set in sullen
creases stare at me and at this moment, now
under my own sunshade handling memories,
I understand why seeing me makes her smile.

When I was growing up she'd buy me clothes,
adorned me like a rag doll in patent
leather shoes, this was my grandmother's role,
to feed and dress, to protect her progeny.

And I never asked why, until the day
I took this photo. She spoke of Kansas,
childhood train rides in the colored cars among
stares and doubt, because "black girls don't have blue eyes."

And of her migration to Tallahassee
where she wasn't white enough for the south,
or black enough for herself. Then she married
my grandfather, she says he was black as tar,

and how they had to flee his lynching
as far north as D. C. Miles and years traveled,
she had five sons, her sons had children
all shades of brown—exactly what she hoped for.

Her story like the shutter on my camera opens
then closes quickly and I knew that's all
she had to give, memories dissolve into moments,
into dreams, then subside unless detained in time

by pictures, so I take mine whenever I can
for as long as the photo lasts I can glimpse into
my grandmother's past and know how I came to be,
with no pretenses, just time immovable
on a black and white glossy.

In My Recurring Dream...

There's a long
highway
one-way
with nude
charcoal trees
lining
both sides
of the road
under
a photo
white sky.
I feel
the force
of the air;
It moves me,
but not
the trees.

Metro Center

Away from the columns with acanthus leaves, the White House and some things historical, she sits deep within the steel labyrinth, prison for the working masses. She finds a place near the rumble and warmth of the subway.

She leans against the cement barricade rattling a song, sad soulful sounds. Snake-like, with scale-like skin and her slithering movements, her hair a cobra's hood, she sings softly, an unnamed tune—
elevator music to hurried ears.

Brief blurs pass avoiding her eyes. Some feed her coins, a small sacrifice for passage to the underground, take the escalator down, wait for their train, hum her tune on the way home. Why won't they look at her face? And if they did would they be turned to stone?

Perhaps they think; avoid the eyes and maybe she'll go find some pit to shed the stained layers she wears and she will not fix on retinas, will not exist.

Photo of My Father Korea 1969?

In mid air, in white, phoenix-like and still.
Black sash, bare feet; how high can he kick,
break the board? He's as graceful as Baryshnikov
or Bruce Lee in *Chinese Connection*,
but this is wartime and he can't be more than nineteen
and hasn't marched down the Mekong, through
black jungles, or smelled Hoi Sin roasted meats.

Behind him in a semicircle,
a scenic backdrop of bamboo huts
and young marines— skeletal Ben from Ohio,
Texas James with hollow eyes and spotted skin
and seventeen more dressed like my father.
They watch, as disciples watch their Sensei,
humbled by his altitude, and gravity's respect.

Have they forgotten about the war,
or where they'll be shipped (Laos or Cambodia),
or about their families in the states?
Will he ever come down?
His foot has not touched--is it oak? Did he
break the wood, reduce it to splinters?
And when he came down did he land

like a gymnast after a perfect vault,
or stumble, fall to his knees, curse the pine?
These are details he won't discuss.
Still, the photo hangs, a centerpiece
with pictures of nature framing it,
naked charcoal trees, branches in snow—
photographs taken by his own hand.

An End?
(After Audre Lorde's *Signs*)

when the worms stop digging catacombs
when earthworms stay hidden after rain
and come out when the sun slaps the road
as their silken skins crisp in sunlight
and surviving worms line themselves curbside
to salute cars linked bumper to bumper
and people stuck in traffic don't complain
but sing "America the Beautiful"

is it time to make sense of the senseless
is it time to become what the mind imagined
orphaned memories find biological ties
the moon and sun meet without eclipsing

and what does it mean
when a woman dressed in a turtleneck
and fur coat lies in the middle of the maze
of Fords, Pontiacs... and smiles
looks up at the sky and prays for rain

so she can bathe in puddles so she can wear the earth
so she can burrow through yielding soil
like the worms
is she digging her own grave

---does she know what's coming
"Oh say can *You* see"
because I can't .

My Mother's Beauty Shop

It's in the kitchen, one window, yellow walls.
The stovetop's a heater for the cast iron comb,
dining chair booths, the sink a shampoo bowl.

This is where she interweaves curls
and conversation, shapes Afros,
arches brows, consoles.

Everyone comes here, waits, and watches
patiently while she strums through someone's hair.
Everybody takes off their heavy mask.

Inside, outside is as old as their bangs;
they welcome the change.
Problems are set on counters.

The background chorus provides
the music, "Um hum, that's right girl!"
They sit back, drink Taster's Choice

with powdered cream, snack on Watergate cake,
listen to the grease sizzle on the hot comb, smell
the mass of hair surrender to the heat.

Afterwards, like a barber she sweeps away
what's left behind, stray strands, self-doubt—
for a moment, she makes them believe

they're beautiful and they are, but beyond
her kitchen no one knows their beauty
just their place.

Looking at David Opdyke's Sculpture *USS MALL*

They're standing on the sculpted edge,
only pinpoint small, looking
over the edge. Are they suburban residents
waiting for a snowstorm, rushing to stores
for salt and shovels, milk? Bob and Janice,
Joyce, Hector —(Enter Your Name Here)—
have shopped, filled their bags with bread,
candles, Capri pants, only to find the world
has left them and all that remains is the island,
the painted foam they surround,
and space vacant below.

Hand in hand they watch, and wait. No nimbus
clouds crowd the sky, there's no eclipsed sun,
just a shopping mall surrounded by people
who don't know how they got there. Do they know
they're being watched, are they watching me?
I think they're afraid that the wind
will blow them off one by one into the void,
or maybe an apocalyptic chasm
will emerge and leave Wal-Mart and the roaches.
For now they stand, tiny consumers with no place
to store their goods, neighborhoods lost
and afraid to take a step.

Sunday Dinners

She likes working in the kitchen
layered in her yellow floral housedress and apron,
feeling hints of sun warm her face from the small
window that looks out at her small garden.
Glossy red tomatoes show their ripeness hanging
from vines interlaced with the gate, marigolds
and pink rose bushes in full bloom, this is her sanctuary
in the crowded city, a place very much like the home
she had to leave (if they'd stayed Sylvester would have been hanged),
her piece of the south, she looks out at it while

she cooks the family's dinner. Today it's lamb and rabbit,
greens simmer in cast iron pots, fatback
lies centered in leaves seasoned like her mother's.
She glides from snapping string beans to boiling
noodles for the macaroni and cheese.
Even when Sylvester complains about the taste
she knows it's his way of saying thank you
because he rarely says anything else,
and their heavy house feels lighter with the smell
of red velvet cake and pecan pie filling it.

These are the days to be thankful for,
the ones when the boys play outside until
it's time to lick remaining batter from the bowl.
When she cooks she doesn't worry
about the fifth child she's carrying,
her ankles swollen, belly rubbing against the sink,
or about the house payments,
the clothes that need washing, mending,
just the pop-pop-pop of the boiling neck-bones
and the sweet smell of being.

Talking Suicide & Murder

Death is my friend
We walk together
Think of cute ways to die
I think slit wrist is so passé
She likes drowning
Eyes bulging as lungs beg for
Air aquatic spasms then
Nothing-- *that's beauty*

I dream of death
I murder am never murdered
I shot someone once
The weirdest a woman without limbs
Floating in my tub
Arms and legs neatly stacked on the toilet
But I never see her face
Is she me

Death told me a joke once
Everyone is born to die
Even caterpillars
I didn't think it was funny
Until I thought of babies
Who live nine months inside
To come outside inhale sterile
Air then die of *complications*

Or live to get cancer
Hit by a bus kidnapped
And killed before high school graduation
There's a lot to love in this world
Trees in fall
Trees in winter
Punxsutawney Phil seeing his shadow
Or maybe not

Death gave me pills
Then came the sudden fear of letting go
Of life when death is whispering
Let go let -- go...
I'd die with my eyes open
Wide enough to see light lose
To darkness and welcome the paramedics'
Words... "it's too late" then silence.

Old Song

He's dying, his weak heart won't carry him
to sixty. He needs me to hear things yet unsaid,
why the old photo he gave me means so much.
It's cracking, colors now mostly hues of green,
he's wearing a knit hat and I'm on his lap;
I'm maybe six months old. We're both looking
at my mother who's taking the picture,
our eyes say, "Now what, you finally have us
together, now what." It was our first meeting
(he was away when I was born);
He says I reminded him of the war.
He'd seen babies like me cradled in dying
mother's arms, crying, most of the time just still
(at least that's how he remembers it now...)

*"War was a mothafucka" is all Ben
and Texas James would say; I'd laugh and daydream
about my wife in school searching through stacks,
backtracking looking for Freud, or some shit
under Day-Glo lights, and about the letters
she wrote I never got. The ones I did reminded
me of our last walk on 12th Street, when the monastery's
choir sang to us, the ghost of a jazzman's song.
The night before my papers came, floodlights
lined driveways, the moon made things bright enough
for me to see her eyes, the silhouette
of her breast, my fear. The days before my tour
I'd listen to records and think of her.
The letters stopped coming, I stopped writing...*

*Scattered light passed through clouds onto
rice water. We leaned against each other
camouflaged near bamboo trees, prayed and hoped
the days of monsoons and mosquitoes would stop,
or that we'd wake up, dry in cotton sheets
and safe behind four walls,
thankful that all nightmares end; but each day
was more of the same, dark skies,
droplets through leaves catching on our lashes,
bodies buried days ago resurfacing
slightly muddy, slightly clean, eyes still stagnate
peeking through muslin. God was on their side
that's why it continued to rain. Mud is cold
and unforgiving, sometimes we felt stuck.*

*We were sent there to plant our flag,
claim someone else's soil. It felt like
we discovered a land not like our own.
To us the VC were volcanoes, magma
rising, pressure building to a crescendo;
six men in my platoon died, ejected like debris leaving dog tags,
a folded flag. You know the history, have seen the films,
they only hover above the truth,
Truth is the names on the wall,
that's why I won't visit it.
I don't want to see lives reduced to etched figures,
or remember how part of the time we slept in jungle,
other times in mud, all of the time in fear of the unknowable answers,
Will I be forgiven? Will I make it home?*

*Sometimes we heard babies in med camps--
some lost, digits, limbs, their mother. I lost my mother,
but that's another memory. They're all jumbled now,
gigantic collages of colors faces feelings begging
for meaning, but it's all the same mess
that insists on terms I wish I could change,
like the war. Instead it's gunpowder in pores, bullets singing,
shrapnel stinging until everything feels numb.
Some things are meant to be forgotten and others
grab a hold of us like a song, a sad voice passing
across percussion and the mind's bullshit,
pushing through every orifice,
coating the skin, writing on the brain,
"Baby Killer" and then years later you were born--*

*How could I hold you with muddy hands?
You were perfect, like the terraced rice fields
in Bac Ha, or my favorite song, perfect in design
if not in purpose and you were mine,
a tune I wanted to hear. Who was I to claim you?
So when I was told I was dying
I wanted you to know about the days
rain bounced on rice water rippling small waves
out and out until the ripples seem to start
over again, and the times the downpour
paused, we cheered quietly. I became friends
with guys I would've hated in the States
and sometimes I saw children play in puddles;
there were good days, and now you remind me of those.*

*One time in camp I heard Chet Baker's song
"As Though I Had Wings," his trumpet's moan lifted me,
gave me the wings he hoped for, clean feathers.
I imagined flying, coasting above
cirrus, scanning ocean and land, looking
for checkpoints, places I'd been, but I saw none,
and nothing's always nothing until something
takes hold and this thought made me come to you
years later. The damage now is minimal,
most wounds have almost healed, some scars remain,
figures fixed in my mind. I lost a lot: your mother,
my friends, family, the courage to fight
for life again, but now I know the war is over
and my hands are almost clean.*

His story resonates, like a melody I'd forgotten,
but he made it home, had the time to make me,
then disappeared. My mother says he went to fight
expecting time to pause and resume when he returned.
When he came back she tried to begin again
--- and I was the end result
an attempt to make things right.
But now he lives mostly alone,
with his music and his Lab
in his high ceiling home near the lake,
with photographs painted on the walls,
he thinks I understand, but I don't understand,

yet isn't there some rule that says I must forgive?
-- Now, sitting in his living-room
surrounded by the things he loves,
he plays "*Imagination*" for me; yes I know this song.
I think of him at nineteen in green fatigues
like the guys in movies, smiling, joking
right before the battle (before me). How could he know
I'd grow up to be a lot like him, listening
to the same sad songs, skeptical of life,
and we'd be fighting our own war.
Then I look at the photo of us,
me in my gown, unknowing, new to the world,
him new to fatherhood, an old song I'd forgotten,
my tiny hand lost in his hand.

“Throwaway People,” 1927

There’s a river now
where there once
was land, acres
of wheat,
crops are washed
away by the water’s will.

Now it’s just muddy
whirlpools of carcasses,
toys, dresses and pants
flowing around then down
stream like gaunt branches
briefly seen before moving
out of sight.

Residents cling to rooftops,
rafts on an angry river,
hoping dry earth appears
before they sink
or get carried to sea,
thousands die
where they were born.

Those who have escaped
migrate up Helena’s hill,
searching for a place while
looking back
like Lot’s Wife, but their
insides are turned to stone.

Where will they
live?
For these throwaways,
homes don’t come easy
and the place
where they were thrown
is drowning.

Weekend Visits

When I was eight maybe nine my mother often
dropped me off at my grandmother's house to meet
up with my father. Quickly, I became
a special agent in search of mysteries
hidden in my nana's home. I snuck around,
found clues in closets, codes in her dresser,
broke into safes behind pictures, got captured
by enemy spies. The grey cat under
the dining room table freed me after hours
of questions and threats. In the basement I hid
tiny microphones in the pastel cushions
so I could hear anyone who sat and talked
of secrets. They never knew I was behind
the couch reading X-men comics. Nana's
garden was HQ, the tomatoes, cucumbers
and collards hid my secret lair.
This was my hidden world where I would wait,
always wait for my father. Inside I looked
outside, through the living room bay window
for an ambulance, listened for sirens
watched for fire trucks (he was a fireman).
An agent always needed backup in the end
and he was mine, or so I thought. Sometimes
he showed up, took me to his home, but most times
the day sun set into evenings purple glow
and my visits ended with me standing
by the back door, so much that I imagined
I was part of the glass, translucent, almost invisible.

Ryokou

Was it the thunder that retracted my wings
and made me dive headfirst,

and land on this tourist's chair,
without feathers watching highway signs pass?

I see faces hazy with light that extends through
the tinted glass and hear voices, monotones

whizzing past, the trees, carbon copy
monuments' blur onto the landscape.

Between exits and stopovers on 95,
the driver announces historical landmarks,

“Off Powhite parkway is Magnolia Grange,
plantation named after the floral trees.”

He plays Biloxi Blues, on nine-inch monitors
scattered between rows, a movie about a writer

who joins the military and complains about
Mississippi's heat, how it's “Africa hot.”

The sun drops like I dropped, but where it lands
I'm not sure, maybe Nara Japan

where Buddha welcomes the day
and unenlightened ones walk through his gates,

but here the moon introduces darkness, brags
it's the only natural light, “forget fireflies.”

Synthetic beams hover, giving everyone
an angelic glow.

and soon my destination isn't that important.
Many travel to get away and others are running

away, but I'm always in transition.
My eyes fall slowly gradually the plumage returns

and I become seraphic, feet covered.

Elegy For My Cousin

She had a laugh as loud
as seagulls after rain,
cancer when she was nine
muted her throaty birdsong
and gave her a bald head, and skin
sheltered in downy fur.
She died in the fall. Leaves,
a canopy beneath
an overcast sky, shook
as new cold stung nostrils,
and inside her home a new unwanted quiet.
There was no sound of her
fast footsteps down the stairs,
or her whispers, advice
filling my teenaged ear,
just silent memories
of our last night alone.
I carried her sideways
up the narrow stairway.
Her legs, not strong enough
to hold her slight weight, hung
as if they'd given up before she had given up.

Flower Avenue

Streetlights buzz on and on
as footsteps, steady as a metronome,
march down the cracked sidewalks of the avenue.
Occasionally a car passes, headlights
not on yet. Cherry blossoms hover
like umbrellas providing shade
from the night sky, but the murky blue
finds its place filling in the spaces
between branches of pale blooms.
Some things fall asleep,
while others awaken
like the buds do every April.
The older woman in her plaid coat
walks her beagle, and the man in tight shorts
jogs backwards before crossing the street.
They all have their own ritual,
stepping out into the warm evening air
like the people in yellow caps watching
the neighborhood. They want to be
visible and others want to be like the invisible man
watching and thinking he's never really seen,
but they are seen over and over again
doing the same thing. One can only
hope for a frost.

Spring's Song

My music
is not melodic,
rhythmic,
or melancholy
rotations of rhyme.
It's secret
synergistic waves
weaving in
and working
within sepals,
seeds and roots,
distracting all as the sound
stimulates—
and then
something grows.

Glimpses

Yesterday I couldn't see the sky.
Perhaps I should've opened the blinds
looked upwards and thought
about dying leaves,
windy winter and future
icicles hanging from gutters. Instead,
I stayed in bed
and watched infomercials
showing buff bodies selling
the world's best ab-machine.

Winter's splintered song tangled in bone,
a brittle lament erupting morning
with flashes of light, while blackbirds,
lurking on silvery limbs seen through broken
blinds, line roads of dead branches.
Sound drains into solitude,
homes vanish in dawns
astrobrite brilliance
and the living trees are cedars
embraced by fire.

Remember the gray little bird---
You scared it with your scream.
He flew around the room
looking for solace, a place
to perch. You forced him to land
on pictures hanging on the wall
before scaring him with the bang
boom of the broom leading
him to the opened screen.
How nice he must have felt
to finally be free.

Today under an orange sky
after rain birds play
on damp branches.
Drops fall from leaves
like a leaking faucet.
There's no hint of sun
or storm,
just the ominous hue
of what's been morphing
into what is.

Last night we made love.
Afterwards I slept in the curve of your arm
and felt your warm breath
on the back of my neck.
The rhythm lulled me to sleep.
In the morning the buzzer woke me
and your side of the bed was as cold
as a home team's stadium after
another loss. Like the fans, no one cheers
or expects to win anymore.

Working In Nana's Garden

Tangled threadlike wires
strangling roots and flower stems,
Nana says gardening is next to God.
Sun stings the back of my neck,
sweat drips on Marigold petals.

A casual wind blows the drying
sheets and shirts on the line,
pots clink in the kitchen,
she yells out the window, "use the spade
to loosen the roots."

I pick the dandelions first, save them
for later so I can make my own bouquet.
She says they don't belong,
but to me they're beautiful, their yellow
heads hiding from no one.

They find homes in the oddest places
in her garden: between violets,
near rose bushes, in the cracks
of the sidewalk. Collecting
them is easier than pulling weeds.

Hands now dark with dirt
"you worked hard child" she says
while pouring me a glass of sun tea.
I sip my drink and count the hollow
stalks I gathered,

admiring how carefree
and fearless they are returning
year after year to the same place
season after season like a child
waiting for a father who never comes.

Louisa's Blues

*Tom loved her too, but working the fields all day ...gave him no chance to show it. --
Cane, Jean Toomer, Blood-Burning Moon*

I hide in shadows and think of sweet kisses,
the two of us walking through wheat at *dusk*
after an evening rain. I still feel his lips
as smooth and soft as the misses satin linens on my skin.

The secret touches when his family wasn't home,
hands on my hips as I sweep the room, we danced
the kitchen girls' waltz. I loved him---

and now his blood escapes into the earth.
And Tom--I remember his hands, rough
as pine bark, scraping against mine.

His smell burns inside me. His flesh
now overly ripe, fruit hanging from false vines
remind me of the sirens song to flee
the *Blood-burning moon. Sinner!*

I can barely breathe in this misleading breeze,
it suffocates blowing the bitterness my way.
It forces me to see

his body flayed by flames under a prison of stars.
I didn't know Tom wanted me---And if I did,
I would've ignored the cuts, the dirty overalls,
and his face reminding me that I'm a nigger.

Soapy Hands

The first time he touched me my hands were wet
from washing dishes. He said he adored me
took my hand in his and wiped it dry. He walked
around the kitchen and I counted his steps,

his breaths, the words he stumbled over
as he tried to explain why he wanted me,
a colored girl that washes and shines his spoons,
who kneels to scrub the floors, a girl who dances

with the broom when no one is watching. I wiped
the counter as he walked and talked. I stood
almost still because I felt his words warm me
like my mama's old quilt, safe and familiar

until I looked at him and her quilt fell
leaving me cold and alone with a white man.

Sunsets with Tom

Most evenings the two of us watch the sun
disappear behind willow trees. He talks
about his day, the way his hands sting from rocks
cutting into his skin. I joke about

pruned fingers and eyes that burn from hints
of lye soap steaming from the misses' wash.
He says the fields are hard and he knows why;
It's the soil's revenge for taking what it grows.

We laugh and count each emerging star as night
takes over and day surrenders quietly.
Thoughts of work subside although we both ache
from the day's labors, but we can't complain

this is what god intends, he works the fields
I work the kitchen, our hands will always hurt.

Roxy's Confession

*Oh child! thou art a little slave: And all of thee that grows, will be another's weight of flesh, --but thine the weight of woes... Thou art a little slave, my child and much I grieve and mourn that to so dark a destiny my lovely babe I've bourne—Slave
Mother's Address To Her Infant Child, Lunsford Lane*

It's the Missouri moss that made me do it.
It suffocates the trees and messes up
*the mind's machinery, makes anything
seem possible.*

Why should he suffer for his mother's sins?
It's not his fault he was born with poison blood.
It's said one drop makes you less than human.
He was my son, white as cane soon to be sold

down the river. I'd fling us in the water,
like two tossed pebbles sinking into the currents
embrace, before I'd let him go.
The moss confused me, made me look at my

son and the master's, both babies with my milk
on their breath. The other difference besides
their blood was what they wore, my son in sack
cloth, their son layered in pale satin,

so I did it, switched the clothes, made them believe
their son was mine. Too easily they were
fooled--how can a mother not know her child,
the signature of his cries, his newborn scent.

No one knew. So I raised him as I was told,
his slave-mother; with my lowered eyes
and pride I served him until he became
like the man that made me, cruel and selfish.
How could I know my son would sell me down the river.

Elegy For My Sister

In the park a red bird caged in dead branches
sits still almost frozen enclosed
in a space of nature's creation.
The elements welcome it by melting
snow, slowing wind, raising the sun
just enough to warm its wings.
Below it on the ground crocuses
blossom, some with a strong purplish hue,
the creek nearby claps quietly against the rocks,
and *all feels right in the world--* right?
But, somewhere deep in the District
my sister haunts hallways and vacant lots,
never taking flight; sand, cement,
and abandoned cars her perch.
She sleeps in high-rise catacombs,
hollow spaces layered in rust,
cold dark places welcome her and others
searching for atonement,
apparitions to their families now.
Many are forgotten, never mourned,
just bones, then dust, talents never known.
My sister was an artist.
She'd sketch every new face she'd see,
shaping eyes, shading noses,
that's how I remember her now,
full tablets with charcoal images,
paints and faint memories of what
it was like to have an older sister.
I never could understand addiction,
nothing ever held me like that.
I wish I had a cage of branches to put her in.

Meditations on Falling

I.

If he made them better, used glue that bonded feathers to flesh,

you would still be flying.

I imagine you skipping pebbles across the sun,

teasing airplane passengers in window seats.

I see you making people, on the ground, duck
as you drop, a bird feeling *the joy of beating wings in air*,

before ascending, eyes closed, into a vacant blue.

And there'd be a journalist questioning
why you won't come down,

why the heavens hold you the way they do.

There'd be: no splash, no busy farmers ignoring a child
who's falling from the sky, no cries to a father,

who wouldn't save you if he could.

II.

He saw you falling, like a pintail filled with buckshot:

wings amputated exposing the shoulder's blade,
a foolish angel forced to be mortal,

arms flailing, trying to catch a hold of something,

anything more solid than air.

You call out in a voice you know he knows;

you want him to become an eagle

after a hatchling who's dropping from its nest.
He's the reason you're free

falling into a sea you can't survive in.

He knew you couldn't resist spitting in gravity's eye,
or the sensation of coasting in the cool clouds,

the warmth of the sun on chilled skin.

III.

When I was nine my mother dropped me off at school;

it was a snowy day, streets of slush, evergreen bushes
draped in cotton. She didn't know classes were cancelled

and I was left to find my own way home.

I had to cross a four-lane highway; cars splashed
sandy ice on me as I stood on the curb looking

for a clear path, a chance to make it to the other side.

The cars rushed by, like waves during high tide
collapsing into each other, a blur to my young eyes.

I stood afraid to cross a violent ocean of traffic.

I could barely breathe, scarf tied tightly around my neck,
I gasped for air, looked up and saw *all the wide sky*.

IV.

In the dream he saves you, wraps your fingers around his talons.

He catches you right before your toes touch
the unconcerned water. This time nothing stops him:

no blinding rays, or sting of melting wax,

no fear of heights, his wide wingspan slicing air
with sharp feathers, resisting the earth's pull.

You hold on tight, aware of his strength, his desire

to protect his young. Ears full, eyes closed a wind
floats you both above mountains,

stoic trees, a sea of smaller migrating birds.

You think about land, a place to plant your feet,
and how you like the feel of nothing under them.

Gasping

The room is quiet, mostly dark, long after
sun setting and television. Light glides
through the mini blinds forming
shadows she tries to describe, name.

Tonight they're birds, flying, singing
until small light strikes their wings leaving
dim imprints on the walls, sleep overtakes her.
In dreams she floats above nimbus until

thunder sounds—
She wakes to complete darkness, her chest heaves,
lungs demand air, in—out—a strain—
To swallow—breathe.

Cotton, feathers, no longer a comfort,
becomes a barrier. Tears soak into cloth,
her cries muffled by the pressure. All she
can do is try to move her head, push away

the hands behind the weight. She struggles
to hear the hum of her mother's words
and tries to ask, "what have I done."
She's ten. She knows the birds won't save her.

The Last Episode

Not quite forgotten dream, I heard you call out
to me during the *NYPD Blue* marathon.
Sipowitz was telling a young widow
he was sorry for her loss when you asked me
why I haven't mourned for you—
why I put you away like a skull?
Percussion filled music and busy Bronx streets
serve as appetizers between brownstones,
camaraderie, criminals and you
in the confines of my mind. I wanted
to tell you that I haven't forgotten,
and how I hoped that you haven't
given up on me. Simone types fives, the case
is solved, sixty minutes of confusion
into clarity or so he thinks
and so I think, how do I free you,
let you be more than an aspiration
or episode without a plot. There's still
room in the pokey, time to fess up—
I'll never give you a voice.

We Poem

We count: paper clips, and pens, the minutes,
the absences of outside air, the absence of sun,
the absence of something, everything, nothing
we count, we wait, we sip warm coffee and eat
stale doughnuts, jelly drips on shirt collars,
we pray for Fridays, think of high-ball happy
hour watered down drink filling stomachs
already full with pretzels and peanuts,
we laugh at jokes that aren't funny, wear low
cut shirts under nicely tailored jackets,
we want a cigarette, instead we wear the patch
and scratch it hoping for a nicotine fix,
a new law prohibiting not smoking,
we can hope for that--

A conference call keeps the skeletal staff
occupied on a Wednesday afternoon.
Florescent light hums in empty cubicles.
phones call-out once then are quickly muted
by doldrum voice mail recordings—*“leave a message.”*
This steel-lined (10th floor) zone holds people like:
Maria, whose son is 10 years old, *“someday
he'll be an engineer, designing cars,”*
she says while eating a Lean Cuisine.
Susan went to Anguilla and sunk her toes
in the island's white sand, *“no tourists go dere,
just celebrities.”* Daniel shares Sundays
with his wife walking their Lhasa Apsos
and later that day they watch recordings of CSI.

But now we all sit in well-padded leather
high back chairs around an oval table
feigning interest, nodding heads, taking notes,
miscellaneous scribbles of agendas,
grocery store list, obscene knock-knock jokes
and cartoons of bosses eating bananas.
We call this life, this self-sustaining nexus
of us busying ourselves for cash, or laughs,
or the satisfaction of knowing we did something
with our lives.
Perhaps “we” is too universal—maybe
it's me, or he, or she, okay we, counting stuff,
wanting stuff, too stuffed to figure out what *it* is,
or who is talking.