

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: HERE ON THE PAVEMENT

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Here on the Pavement is an evocation of place, especially in the context of urban landscapes. The collection moves between three cities: New Orleans, New York, and Washington, DC, with excursions into natural landscapes serving as counterpoints. These poems concern themselves with bus stops, train stations, and neighborhood streets—places of transience and encounter—and with the impermanence of landscape itself. Ultimately, these poems question the possibility of lasting connection to place and seek to understand what it means to be simultaneously surrounded by others and undeniably separate.

HERE ON THE PAVEMENT

by

Katherine Hayley Herman

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
Master of Fine Arts
2013

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I

The City/The Seed

This summer the sun burns so hot.
At the airport rail station, planes slide
down through an orange, scalded sky,

scoring lines of exhaust above my head,
above asphalt and divided fields,
over the spreading, clinging shoots of towns.

In a narrow strip of marshy grass
between the platform and highway, water flashes
acid light, a bird probing through drifts of trash.

Over parking lots the sun burns red behind
a pall of smoke, flaring like a bloodshot eye,
but it's not the sun. It's a neon Budweiser sign.

At night, all around, air conditioners buzz:
the city breathing out its heat.
But I can't hear the earth cracking.

I try to sleep with the windows open,
but the sparrows keep me up, and when
some other bird calls—a starling? (but I don't know

a starling's sound) or a swallow? (I don't
know the sound of a swallow)—I spend half an hour
at my window with the lights out looking for the bird,

while above the moon is held like a seed in dark soil—
I raise my hand to the sky, but I
can't feel it press against my palm.

And the stars' million burning eyes—
I can't feel those either. Though they've bored
through hundreds of light-years to get here,

they're drowned out by the corner streetlamp.
Also unseen: a root runs down from the moon,
a fracture through the spine of the night,

like the weeds that push between slabs of pavement,
a reminder of the earth laboring beneath.
How long till it all splits open?

New Orleans, Summer 2001

My headlights illuminate a fringe of trees,
the rest of the leaves a mass of black.
One-handed, I turn the wheel, swerve
around potholes, ride unseen asphalt dips.

It's sinking, this city, it's hanging low,
and Dr. John growls out *Such a night*
on the radio, and *Such a night*
I sing back, to who knows who

through the open windows. The night air
blows warm against my face, but otherwise
the city's only answer is the long horn
of some train or ship. And I'm not caught

in a story of stolen love or any love
at all, but I'm seventeen, and it's always
sweet confusion under the moonlight.
The song clicks and taps its way

out of the speakers as I take the turn
onto my block, and there's the house,
my mother half asleep inside, waiting
for the kiss that proves I've come home alive,

and I don't want to stop, just want to stay
beneath the almost-embrace of branches.
How many times left to make this drive?
Steal away, the song says, as I pull up to the curb.

The Storm, Part I

Back there where the banana tree
is spilling over the chain-link fence
and live oak roots buckle the sidewalk—
that's where I used to disappear
in the swelling chatter of afternoon crickets.
I'd slip beneath the heavy leaves
in the thick, dissolving summer air,
and I think I still can see myself there
in that smudge of dirt on the side of the house,
the ghost of steam rising from pavement.

But if the place I disappeared disappears,
if the waters that built it from silt rise up
to take it back, slip through unseen
floodwall cracks, through levee gaps,
flush the nutria out of their warrens,
which compromise the whole system's integrity,
tear up the banana tree, snap its dangling
purple flower pod—then does she make it out,
that girl, to stand before a TV watching
the radar image of the storm

churn and churn up over the coast,
or is something more severed than roots
just below the surface, power lines
catching falling trees? Some slip in time:
the girl goes on over the levee
to sit beneath the electrical tower,
watch it send its wires to the other shore,
and the floodwaters close in behind her,
close over doors like a hand covering mouths,
covering windows like eyes. Even now

I can't picture the drowned, how they died. Instead,
I dream of the drowning of houses, the things
I see when I come home after: buildings still standing
but gape-mouthed, off-kilter, browned.
I see the false-colored radar image
batting at the crow's foot delta,
much thinner, I know, than the map shows.
I'm back staring at that TV screen,
thinking, *Venice, Buras, Plaquemines*,
naming those places like someone who knows them.

When I was in fourth grade, my teacher asked us
to raise our hands if we'd evacuated for Andrew.
The rest of you, he said, would all be dead
if a storm that big came straight up the river,
burst the levees, buried the city
in twenty feet of mud. It would take
weeks to dig it out. I see myself
in the back of the classroom, beneath the dripping
new air conditioner unit, my raised hand
quivering above me. It turns out that isn't

exactly how it happens—the earthen mound around
my neighborhood doesn't blow apart
as it does in dreams. Instead it's the floodwalls,
never truly built deep, that bend, that snap,
that breach, and let the water into the city.
You can watch it on your computer screen,
and I do, over and over: the canal spilling out
into the space where houses have been
shoved aside, 3,000-pound sandbags
vanishing into the rush of water.

Nothing to do but watch the city fill,
watch water rise to the brown line where it stops
—but where? If news reports say some people
stole a forklift, pried open the metal grate
of the drug store where I used to wait
for the bus to school, that's good news
—forklifts don't work in water.
If a message board says, in front of the Maple Leaf,
a man was seen sitting with a sawed-off shotgun,
then that must mean the ground is dry.

These are the things I search for, instead
of seeking the stranded: They are waist-deep
in the swelter of attics. They are breaking through
their roofs, or not. They are abandoned
by helicopters on the islands of overpasses.
They are losing it in front of the cameras
at the Convention Center while I am holed up
in my Brooklyn apartment, twenty-one, hiding
from the strangers I live with, scouring the internet
for clues to the fate of a house where I no longer live.

Termite Swarm

Caught by the floodlights over the Exxon station,
the mass moves to one side then the other,

not in the wind (there is no wind)
but like a body shifting its weight.

Like the Milky Way, I can look up at it,
but I'm also in it, down here at the pumps

in the smell of gas, fumbling to unscrew
the cap as they fly into my eyes,

my hair, the expanse of my forehead, several
hitting my hand as it lifts the nozzle,

as if they don't see me,
the swarm swirling toward the light

like air toward a low pressure zone.
Does anything that moves that way

in nature see? I hold the nozzle,
gas thrumming through my grasp,

while I'm caught in the thrum of something else,
this cone of light making no refuge

from the night. From where I stand
I can't see past the termites to the street.

In the car I slam the door. Two, three
fall in my lap. I crush them with my palm.

If I carry them on my clothes into my house,
will they consume it? A pinging sound—

they pelt the sides of the car. Overhead,
they look like a horde massing to attack

but make no move. The car noses forward,
and they seem to part for it, but like water

they close back in behind. Nothing they do
speaks of intention.

Outer Banks

Now I would never find the place
where I found the sand changed into glass,
those giant sand dunes since reshaped,
unrecognizable even ten years back,
and now? Impossible to map
that terrain, in present or in memory.
Back then I wouldn't have believed
those mountains of sand could move,
though now the description sounds like a phrase
for the thing that doesn't last. The wind
that shapes Jockey's Ridge is what
the Wright brothers chose the island for:
the curve of land where it began
to seem like we could slip from earth.
Locate it on a map: your fingernail
could cover the island. Switch to satellite view,
and the land looks even thinner, the lie
of cartography exposed: that the earth
beneath us holds its place. Every summer
we used to visit, the landscape each time
visibly changed—a whole strip of houses
washed away, this one leaning on its knees
at the edge of water. The ocean must have
come closer. Lightning, the guide told me,
when I kicked up the sand-specked curl of glass,
had made it from the dunes. With so many storms,
the beach should have been covered,
the whole shore made brittle,
but scavenging below construction crews,
I found only abandoned shells,
maybe a bit of smoothed bottle glass,
nothing that convinced me of transformation.
I used to think it must be hard to rebuild
before I understood it's harder not to.
For now the barrier islands stand
in the breaking of the rising waves,
and a girl stands at the edge of the water
feeling the sand pulled from beneath her heels,
while behind her the dunes, the massive dunes,
move six feet one way, two to the other.
The earth giving way as the surf pulls back:
you still feel it later, in the beach house
or here on the pavement. Can you feel it now?

Most likely, if current trends continue,
I've stood on that earth for the last time.

Hard Freeze

Nights back in New Orleans
when my mother would cover
the azalea bushes with plastic bags
and my father would get up every few hours
to run the taps, to keep the pipes
from freezing, I'd lie in bed and listen
to the pinging of contracting metal
and wait there for the falling, a whiteness
falling through sleep, the landscape
becoming shapeable.

In the morning I thought
a turn of the blinds would reveal a world
transformed, as I stood in the pale
light slicing through, cold radiating
up from the hardwood. In the yard
bare plastic bags hunched, the begonias
looking a little stunned, but otherwise
it was the same window view, same
defiant winter grass, a few dry
leaves blowing.

Still, I knew.
I'd seen it once, even there,
run my hand along a ledge,
scraped enough white for a tight ball
that in my palm grew tighter, colder.
That cold was some secret the world held back.
And sometimes around the side of the house
where the cast-iron plants were going brown,
I'd find a small circle of ice
thawing already around the edges.
Proof, I thought, tapping it with a heel
to see white lines spider through.

Now I live where it's not hard to find
icy patches scarring the sidewalk,
so it shouldn't surprise me, riding a train
out of the city, to catch the flash
of a frozen creek or pond, that shock of white
—it really happens!—or flying over
the middle of the country in winter,
to see the way a gathering of lakes looks
like a collection of paper cutouts,
snow feathering the edges of fields,

the whole landscape pressed beneath the cold—
would I really want that transformation?
Not the smothering whiteout, but the water strider
held in ice that doesn't look dead.
If it has to, let the featureless sky come down
softly, like a sheet or a cool hand.

Montana

The earth folds up and away on either side of the unspooling road. Already a mile higher than the coastland where I was born, this land doesn't think I'm high yet. It climbs in heaps to the bottoms of clouds till they lift and reveal more mountain behind, lift again to show more layers climbing like steps into sky, if there's any sky to reach, that is, the highest peaks still cut off by clouds, craggy, stone-faced, streaked with snow, like the torn edge of the earth. The road rises, but I get no closer to the top of things. Here, lower, near the road, the mountains are softer, grass covered, animal, lying like the cattle that dot their slopes: at rest but muscular. You want to place a hand on them, to feel the land rising with breath. The mountains neither want this nor don't. Would this earth be warm to the touch in early June? Rain rises from it as mist or steam. The cows flick their tails, unbothered. They are no more native to this place than I am, driven across continents, carried over ocean in the hulls of ships, but does any remembered trace of auroch show between their twitching ears? They have fit themselves into this landscape, into its thin air, on the soft curve of these slopes, noses to the endless grass, where no storm will move them.

New Orleans Brass Band

This guy with the pocket trumpet
blows as if he'd lose his cheeks
for the sound, blows to reshape his face,
skin stretching to two bubbles as he strains
to make that small, twisted mass of brass
match the sousaphone, the trombone,
the cowbell clanging out a beat,
and the bigger horn, five of them blasting
out a song by the Foot Locker at the corner
of Bourbon and Canal Street.

But it's the one with the pocket trumpet
I watch, as he leans back,
eyes closed, and the cheeks go,
like the throat of a frog I once caught,
almost translucent when inflated, almost
letting the light through, brass tilting
into the sun. I kept that frog for a day
before it jumped the shoebox wall,
escaped through some porch screen gap.
There's a leap to this music too:

it vaults the buildings, vaults the division
between French Quarter and business district,
calling me away from my inspection
of the derelict, padlocked concert hall
where I used to hear the orchestra play,
calling me around a corner and down
two blocks thinking, *It's a marching band,*
It's a parade, but it's just this little crew
of five in T-shirts, calling the tourists
with their neon plastic drinks from deeper

down Bourbon, calling the cashiers
from the souvenir shops, the office workers
in their polished shoes, tapping here
along with the sneakers, along with my ratty,
home-on-vacation slip-ons, along with the old guy
with the dragging foot who gets down in the street,
hops from hands to feet, and more musicians
keep coming: another sousaphone, snare drum,
another cowbell, two trombones now,
like they've been listening, waiting,

but still only one pocket trumpet player
doing the trick of making us think
we know him by the way his whole body
bends back with the music, the way
sweat shines the bulge of his cheeks,
making us think we know this is everything,
this song, this sound, this afternoon
when the truck drivers stalled by the crowd
don't get angry but lean out to tap the beat
out on the side of their doors.

And you might think I'm wrong to
have fallen for the trumpet player's trick,
to presume to know when I don't know
anything about him really. But isn't
that what we're hearing whenever we hear
music—some life translated into vibration?
When the box goes around, we dance out our dollars,
the man keeps trying to break dance in the street,
and no one thinks, *Get a job*. No one
honks their horns. When the trumpeter sings out,

*We come to party, everyone goes,
Alright, alright.*

Isaac in the Beginning

I didn't know the world then, hadn't been
beyond my father's fields. I didn't know
what the mountain of the Lord meant, but I'd go
if my father told me to. I watched the tents,
the smoke from the fires get smaller then disappear.
The desert fanned out, shot up in jagged steps.
As we rode I rocked against my father's chest.
Father, I called when strange birds circled. *Here*
I am, he said. Was it when we reached the mountain
that the thing in my breast began to flutter?
I carried the wood. They'd already sent the other
boy off. If I knew, I still couldn't name it then.
When did I know what the wood was for? *Father*,
I said. The birds circled closer. He didn't answer.

The Enigma of the Arrival and the Afternoon

after the painting by Giorgio de Chirico

You start out with a swamp green sky,
construct the shell of a town beneath:
a white tower taken from a city you know,
a sliver of an antique temple from dream.

An orange wall cuts between the two,
each building set off, separate, discrete.
Their doorways look straight through to sky.
Shadows fall from things that can't be seen.

Two people stand, posed like chess pieces
at the edge of a board. They don't touch.
Their faces, smudged, turn opposite ways.
The space fills up with the absence of speech.

Leave it at this and your scene would stay
pressed in stillness beneath heavy air,
but allow a wind to stir the pennants
that decorate the top of the tower,

and soon enough a ship arrives,
mast gliding beyond the top of the wall,
white sails straining against the ropes,
no flag flying to show its origin.

I can almost hear the flap of canvas,
the unintelligible voices of sailors rising
with the scent of salt and unknown spices
to your studio window above the square.

Who knew a sea lay beyond that wall?
Do you get up and go to your window to see
if it's really there, as surprised as the robed
figures in your painting who will surely soon

drop their sullen postures and look up
to find what's come into their world?
But we don't get to see that. The ship
keeps arriving forever, or perhaps leaving,

keeps tilting, if arriving, never quite,
always almost revealing itself,
always half hidden behind that wall,
caught in wind and slanting light.

II

New York City Nocturne

Somewhere in the branching darkness,
amid the nocturnal hum of furnaces,
a fire engine drags its circling light
across the windows of a sleeping street.
Somewhere a man stumbles down a block,
trying every doorknob, while your upstairs neighbor
sends cigarette after cigarette spiraling
into the shadowed space beside the building
where dry leaves gather. You don't know this
any more than you know of the creatures
of night chewing their way through your drywall,
but they know, the ones who watch. They wait
till the little fires go out. Settling beside you
in the television's glow, their breath still
comes quickly. Death rustling in the undergrowth
is a familiar sound to them. They throw
each other nervous looks. Their hands flutter
but don't move the air. They're grateful
that you dozed off with the television on.
Some of them have been here too long
to understand what this machine is or means,
but the flickering light of human forms
looks like comfort. They wish the couch cushions
would sag beneath them, that they could touch you,
wake you, scare you, as they once believed
the dead could do, but you go on sleeping,
dreaming dreams they can't disturb,
and they go through all the rooms of all
the building's separate apartments, where sleepers
sleep and breathe warm breath. They go
through locked doors, through the night,
and the living cannot comfort them.
The living don't know anything.

Small Woodland Creature

How do we know it's not a rabbit?

Because it has no ears,

at least none we can see from here
on the deck some twenty yards away.

Besides, it's been in that spot all day,
half beneath the small pine.

It hops between the sun and shade,
the mechanics of the hop the same,

yet the rabbit, over there, moves differently:
It's crossed the yard several times.

It sprints from tree to bush to tree,
dashing for the next place to hide.

It trembles in shadow. Does it ever relax?
It could learn from this small creature—

a chipmunk, gopher, vole?
On vacation from the city, we don't know

what anything is. It sits back
on its haunches and clasps its paws,

its head round and brown like a nut.
When it flops, it flashes a short white tail.

What does it care that we watch?
We don't affect the shade or sun,

especially since, not wanting to scare it,
all day we won't set foot on the grass

but move to the railing quietly,
fetch binoculars, special tools to observe it,

cautious as we are when sliding
the deck door shut at night

not to disturb the stillness that holds
the unusually numerous spread of stars.

The Storm, Part II

It turns out we don't lose the house.
The water stops somewhere around Willow Street,
leaves a narrow sliver of city, the old crescent
floating alongside the river. Three weeks after,
my parents sneak back in, push through fallen branches
to find the house intact. On the phone
I ask how it smells. I've read about the smell.
Fine, they say. Elsewhere oily water still marinates
the insides of living rooms, black mold blooming
across ceilings. I don't know any of this

riding the subway home that August night,
knees jittering in the yellow light
that falls on all the faces around me,
sunk in half-sleep or bent over a book
or talking, most of their words drowned out
by the rattle of the train, but what I hear
isn't about the storm. The rocking
masks my fidgeting feet, and no one looks
at me because I look no different from them.
I think: I'm still the same. Nothing's happened.

Panels of billboards are blown out along Airline Drive,
still advertising tourist spots, blue roof tarps visible.
In the city I can see the line that marks
the height of the flood, see it descend
as we drive into Uptown, light punching through
where trees once stood, but mostly it's still green,
still here. In Mid-City, Lakeview, Gentilly:
dried dirt caked over lawns; cars tossed
every which way; debris higher than my head.
I take a photo of a floodwall breach. No one's around.

I told my parents I wanted to move back
as soon as they did, but my mother said,
You have a job. Then Rita went through.
My parents stayed in Opelousas for two months.
Taking off over the western suburbs
two days after Thanksgiving, I see
how canals cut down all the major streets,
dividing the land into squares. It looks
like nothing but a thin crust of earth
floating on the surface of water.

The neighborhood went on forever
beneath the shadow of live oak branches
and a sagging, heavy sky. There was no sidewalk
trees wouldn't tear up, no tree that vines
wouldn't climb, though my mother pulled them down
again and again, surprised to hear me
banging the porch door, eager to be out
in that heat, a fringe of sweat anointing my hairline
as I kicked through yellow drifts of pollen,
ducking the low tangles of leaves, no way

to keep back that growth, and the air was a thing
with body and breath that I moved through,
down to the park, to the coffee shop, or across
the shell-scattered railroad tracks to the far side
of the levee. I learned how the sea comes closer,
how shipping channels bring saltwater in,
kill the marsh grasses first, then cypress swamp.
The coast loses thirty square miles each year,
land the river no longer builds back,
hemmed in by levees to the edge of the continent.

Further upstream, floodgates and dams,
millions of tons of concrete and steel
clamp around the river to keep it
from changing course. By the levee, bees
browse flowering weeds that push their blooms
above spiny grass; an egret picking through
the green. I used to come here with a book
and watch the water flowing docilely by.
It looks like it's been this way forever,
but even the river wants to turn away.

Hair

For the perfection of the body,
my mother delivered me, at age thirteen,
to the electrolysisist's office where

I lay back while the hair-thin probe
was inserted into the pores of my skin,
down to the root where my body birthed a hair,

and light bloomed behind my eyes,
swelled and withered there, shrank
to the thin crack of the shock of heat

between my eyebrows, across
my upper lip, below the line
of my chin, replacing the stray hairs

that darkened my pale skin with rosy swellings
like in the schoolyard game we played—
pinch the forearm; raise a garden of welts—

so I was introduced to witch hazel
on cotton balls and ice cubes wrapped
in paper towels, held to my face

on the car ride home and hiding in my house
for an hour after, while outside my mother
pulled down vines and tore out weeds

and I waited till my face stopped being angry
at me and I at it for the little bristles
it put out to make me feel

that it was no longer mine to carry
as I pleased so that I kept letting
the electrolysisist lay me down

beneath her lamp and her fine implements
twice a month for years until
the space between my brows was clear

as my mother's yard would never be.

Chebeague Island, Maine

We perched on a jagged outcrop
that jutted into the bay when the tide was in.
It was gray and damp, and pieces of it
broke away in my hand.
Is it wood? I asked.
But there were flecks of color, glints in it like mica,
and it was too large to be any fallen trunk
or ancient root
trailing into the water.
We were tiny there, crouched upon it,
wind reaching into our sweatshirts
as we shuffled out farther until we could see
around the edge of the cove
to where the sun was slipping into the bay.
Ridges of seaweed lay beached
on the shore, brown, heaped, and strange, marking
the line of the tide's highest reach,
and the orange-streaked water
was pulling away,
letting the land that connects the islands emerge—
a strip of sand sloshing out of the waves,
shadows of trees reaching
to fall across it.
Behind us the bushes by the path
had gone all inky black, the path gone too,
no sign of lights from the house.
I didn't know
how we'd gotten here,
where the land reshaped itself four times a day,
didn't know what we
were doing in the landscape.

Union Square Station

The clicking of the tracks starts up,
and I feel sweat spread across my forehead,
the train's wind pushing it out to the temples,
a kind of blessing in this still heat.
I've got a bag of books on my back,
another over my shoulder, their weight
compressing my ribcage, and this is what
I'll take away, through the tunnel
and across the bridge, on this last ride
from this job to this home, what I'll take
through pine forests, past the sudden flash
of inlets, over marsh grass, the view opening up,
what I'll take on buses, in boxes,
a vagabond, toting books, straining here,
the key in my pocket that wouldn't slip
beneath the door of the office where
I worked for five years, the white desk cleared,
its dust stains and cup rings revealed,
what the books hid, faded post-its
still tacked to the wall, fluttering
in the memory of movement, and I'm thinking
these books will hold me down, here
among the hard, black gum spots, in the beat
of overturned bucket drums drowned out
as the rattle of the train approaches,
and we all step forward, shoulders close.
The train is pushing hot air through the tunnel,
my breeze of my every evening,
my train pushing my hair back
as it's pulling in, and I'm getting on.

Note from the New Apartment

I watch alley light,
through screen and glass,
sweep like a slow broom
turning shadows,

sweep past the unpainted
backs of row houses,
a pole gathering the wires
that tether them together.

In the hall I step
over bits of boxes, scraps
of bubble wrap. Winter light
falls through doorways.

The furnace stirs
then settles. Clothes dry
draped over suitcases,
rise in leaning piles.

I'm searching for a spoon
in a box you packed,
finding cups, mugs,
a jar of olives,

the purplish orbs
suspended in oil,
so like you to save
even this.

I'm searching for
some place to sit
where nothing shifts
to not feel so

unmoored. On the wall
next door, branches
climb in shadows,
warp and fade.

I move to the bay window
to wait for the doorbell,
to wait for any sound.
Across the street

the row houses look perfect,
their colorful facades
all in line, perfect
and sealed. Look

how the sunlight has changed
the birds to mere
shapes as they fly
between the trees,

what kind, I don't know.
But you're not here
to see it. All down the block
those same trees raise

their leafless branches
in the same way
—fingers holding
nothing but sky.

Gray Dust

Gray dust fell over everything,
in the jars and the cups on the shelves,
on the little wooden figurines.
It fell in our ears as we slept,
drifted up in the corners of our mouths,
accented the shapes of our bodies
like shadow. We spent the first hour
each morning blinking it out.
When we sat, it collected in our laps.
When we rose, we left its absence:
a map of where our bodies had been
till more falling dust erased it.
It fell in the fields, in the olive groves,
bent the leaves and small branches.
New sprouts in the garden raised
a cap of dust as they uncurled.

When they found us, when their axes
chipped through the buried southern wall,
we thought it was only the pallor
of our skin and hair that shocked them,
the dust-layered mask around our eyes.
We had believed the sky had always
been gray, that mountains were always
shrouded by clouds, that the shadow
we moved in (which we hadn't known
was the shadow of the volcano)
was simply as much light as there was,
and that houses and roads were only part
of the shape of the landscape, sloping out
from the heaps of dust, no need
for anyone to have built them.

Nightlife

They totter out of taxis in the cold, the damp
that seems to shimmer in the streetlights
clinging to the nylon stretched across
their pristine, pale legs, brilliant as ice sculptures,
knees turning in, thighs pressed tight, caressed
high up by hems of skirts, while men
round the cars with wide strides beneath the drape
of slacks, at ease in the warmth of sports coats.
They swing their arms around the women
(huddling close) to help them click up over the curb,
their ankles thrust forward, shapely but strange,
the hard points of heels hurrying for the bar.

Waiting by the bus stop wrapped in the thick down
of my winter coat, gloved hands stuffed
in pockets, legs covered in denim, a hat
pulled down past my eyebrows, you might think
I'd be more comfortable than they are,
but my body is buried here, and I'm as trapped
by it as any of the women moving beyond
the cloud of my breath, not frosty or teetering,
but a clod in heavy shoes, shapeless
in my bundling, my body warming uselessly.

The Runner

First out of the bus, and where is she going?
Sprinting diagonally across the parking lot
to cut the distance, flip-flops slapping
against her heels so I can almost hear them
as she leaps the curb and keeps on running
down the sidewalk, bare limbs flashing between
the decorative trees, backpack bouncing,
sweatshirt caught in a self-made breeze,
not toward the train station, not toward any
ride she's missing or any fleeing figure
I can see, and I don't know her, can't know
what she's chasing down past where the tall weeds
begin to hide the tracks. Maybe just
the feel of chasing—so clearly unplanned for,
that need—but I can't stop watching from here
in the back of the bus where I'm still waiting
patiently for the crowd to unclot as she
disappears behind the green, watching still
with the thrill of one who never even runs
for the bus, not even when I'm late—
too dignified, too ashamed, though now
I almost can't stop myself from pumping a fist
and shouting for her to *run run and get*
whatever it is that spurs her beyond my sight.

III

Heart Echo

Over the slosh and suck, the echo-distorted sound as she shifts the probe, she intones, *This is your pulmonary artery, your vena cava, your tricuspid valve,* while the noise that fills the exam room is wrecking my sense of a river system inside my body fanning out to water clumps of grasses, stands of trees, feeding silt onto fields, the seasonal pulse of ebb and flood. But this is a factory. This is the boiler room where the steam rushes through the pipes so loudly, you can't believe the ship can contain it. The technician slides the cold metal across my ribs. *Lift your left arm, your left breast,* she says. *This is amplified many times, and it'll sound even stranger with your heart rate so high.* I'm thinking, I just don't want to have to tell my mother I have heart disease at twenty-eight, the sound waves passing through my chest, seeking out some defect in the shape that makes the sounds I shouldn't hear, hearing them doing nothing to slow them, though really it's almost cozy in here, the lights dimmed, a blanket draped across my gown, and lying back, I don't feel like my heart is beating at the rate the monitor says, but there's its sound, broadcast through the room. Whitman called the body electric, a perfect system, a thing to celebrate, but what was known then of the pulses inside? How sometimes neurons over-fire. Electric storms run wild. I try to slow my breath to make the thing inside me match it, think of the steadiness of waves against a shore, a flock of swallows contracting and wheeling, but now on the screen, my heart is forming a Rorschach, sound waves revealing shape, and I don't want to look to see what I see when I see inside myself.

Fireworks

July 4, Washington, D.C.

All week the alleys popped and hissed with the stutter-crack of something sparking, an explosion tossed or a light and run, a puff of gunpowder, both sweet and acrid, or something bigger going through the alley, a boom that shakes the narrow space of slanting, cloud-choked light behind my apartment, rolls along dirt-streaked backs of row houses, rusted stairways, tight patches of weeds, along low, warped fences where small groups lean, waiting for a party or a friend or the cops to drive through again or something to light off harmlessly, and past darkened doorways exhaling heat where two or three neighbors sit drinking beers beneath a sheen of sweat while the reverberations break through thick air, their sources hidden by daylight, colors spent unseen from Roman candles, rockets, flower shells, their popping a kind of anger—or so it seemed to me, listening through my windows, the lines of rooftops revealing nothing—or maybe it was joy. Hard to tell with an exclamation. At night, red, white, and blue flashed along the backstreets of the capital, cop cars stationed at corners, but still bursts echoed undeterred, their sources elusive except for a boy sitting on a stoop at the end of my block tossing firecrackers against the bricks, their white flashes insistent, unhidden, as he throws in time with the other pops, this time not gunfire, I hope, not like last month when those shootings made the mayor show up. Maybe that's what makes me think the neighborhood's in lockdown, the illegal fire throwers in hiding when, peering out between my blinds, I can't see any other explosions, but then a flower burst goes up, a fall of sparks over row houses—a rebellion, a fist punching through night from the outpost of an alley? But underneath the bursts Otis Redding sings about trying a little tenderness. When a patrol car rolls down the street, the boy doesn't stop his popping, and the car doesn't stop either. And on my way home in the evenings, passing the line of men leaning along a fence near my building, they don't look in-hiding. They look relaxed with drinks in hand on their own street, so what do I know? *Hey beautiful, hey darling*, they greet me as I pass, my shoulders drawing in involuntarily. I've lived here seven months now and hardly met a soul.

To the Woman at the Crosswalk

I didn't mean to cut you off,
barreling by on my bike, when in fact
you had the light, the white-lit shape
of the walking man catching the edge
of my vision as I sped past. I was only
trying to keep pace with a faster friend,
already half a block ahead, trying
not to toil my slow way up sloping
city streets like the amateur I am,
and when I saw you, at your crosswalk
without a cross street, step forward
with your grocery bags, then, seeing me,
step back, I thought it was my turn,
thought you were letting me through
and even rose up out of my seat a little
to press the pedals harder, to hurry
while I had the chance. But now
I recall your face, how it soured then
as your plastic bags swung back,
their handles cutting into your fingers.
You probably stood there fuming
for a second—*fucking bikers*—
before you crossed, more rushed now
at the end of the light, and trudged
the rest of the way to your house,
transferred all the bags to one hand
to get the lock, dumped them on the floor,
and started to unpack to find half your eggs
cracked, the cardboard carton soaked....
I'm halfway up the monster hill
on 11th and still playing out the scene
as I puff and wobble red-faced while
pedestrians stroll past, imagining
that I could turn around and let
gravity carry me back down,
that I could glide (why not?) graceful
in my speed again back up to you
and tell you I'd never do the thing I did
—like you're standing there waiting for me
to ride back and unruin your day,
like I could re-do that moment,
and like you would care—but I just lurch
over the point where the hill levels out

and continue on on shaky legs,
and, sweaty as I am,
I don't feel like seeing anybody.

The Storm, Part III

She'll never come back here, that girl, caught
on a park bench in a summer storm, the fountain
dissolving into air, water dissolving everything else.
Those who remain have mucked out houses,
lived sealed behind plastic over gutted first floors.
They've been through the mud and the mold,
the long drives, the lines, the siren light
to get this back. When they took to the streets,
I watched on TV. Who was I, then, to answer
the question: How are things in New Orleans?

On my computer the city is emptying,
the few roads out choked with cars.
On stolen internet, I load every newscast.
In the hall of my apartment, someone laughs,
the walls offering only thin protection.
The messages I get say everyone's scattered:
just reaching relatives' houses, finding, finally,
distant vacant motel rooms, still on the road,
or hunkered like me at a computer screen,
everyone waiting, all looking back.

First the mounted cops and then
a beat coming down the street,
and we're up against the barricades
to see the painted men with the Zulu banner,
a brass band strutting behind,
gold bell of the sousaphone flashing,
and even the woman by my side,
just home for the day, no place to stay,
is up and dancing. Eight-thirty in the morning:
Feet don't fail us now. I'm shaking

the beads of my metallic dress, saved
six years, since the last time I was here
for this day, and when a float goes by,
kids go up on shoulders, and everyone screams
for a catch. After the parade we cut
through the crowd to a party at the home
of a family friend, same party, same house
I went to for years, fill a plate, grab drinks,
and head back out. And run into the host,
who asks, When are you coming home?

Late, and the news just keeps showing that same
radar map of the storm, the last
stragglers into the shelter of last resort,
and I click away, type in “Audubon Park,”
scroll until I find just the view
from the spot by the pond where I used to sit.
There—I spread it across the screen,
gold light bleeding through the leaves,
that one incongruous palm,
elephant ears rising by the edge of water.

For several minutes, I stare. It’s past
time for sleep. Nothing more I can do.
I shut the computer down, climb into bed,
pull my arms and legs to my chest,
hold that image, those trees, the light
on the water, the neighborhood streets, the whole
low spread of the city, and all those
who sleep in the Superdome, in hallways,
behind boarded windows, hold them all safe
at least until morning.

Body Made of Braille

from Robert Graham's sculpture Social Programs at the FDR Memorial

If you traced her face with fingers trained for touch,
would you read this sunken hollow as a cheek,
this ridge fading into metal as a mouth?
Inverse of a face, the imprint marks
her absence, a head suspended, turned in profile
or perhaps away, smaller than a palm
(and surely some have pressed one here, her features
half erased) and below, where the neck opens
into flatness, the smooth curve of the column—
a rough torso shape made by the space
where copper's shined by touch, and within it
rows of Braille, patterns of dots that are meant
to speak, though to me they're only texture:
I can't begin to feel their meaning out.
If you can read her, please, don't tell me what
her body says. To me she speaks the way
a body does, like the small, hard bump
on the inside of my thigh that rose from nothing,
grew dark, began to flake, so I was in
a panic for my life by the time the doctor said,
just a benign growth, a mark without meaning,
but permanent, or as when I stand
in the shower with one arm bent above
my head, pressing through the round of breast
to feel past soft tissue, its shifts and clumps,
to the ridges of ribs beneath—can I read that really?
And the bodies on the news—I see them daily
if I look: bloodied, limp, sometimes heaped
or laid out straight and strangely clean,
frozen like the woman in the wall. Shapes.
They speak no words. What do they say?

Broken Knee Poem

From this dent I'm wearing in the cushion of my couch,
immobilized, leg held straight, propped and bound,
from beside this mess of paper, unopened mail, creased magazines,
packaged cake wrappers burying discarded socks,
I send my thanks over the forest of emptied glasses
(too much trouble to carry away on a crutch) filtering daylight
through the residue of melted ice and juice or tea
and out my ever open windows displaying the tops of houses
and the middle branches of finally fully green trees,
to you, neighbor, whom I can't see, and your endless
succession of friends, for your greetings to everyone who passes,
your talk of the latest celebrity death, for ignoring
the "no loitering" sign, for having no more place to go
than I do, apparently, and unknowingly talking me through
these mornings and into afternoons, hidden here
from you beyond the second-story window sills,
and to the car rolling by (slowly for the speed humps)
thanks for sharing that snatch of disco, for really blasting it,
and to the neighborhood party, nightly now it seems,
to charcoal smoke and grilling meat, to the dance hits giving way
to soul as the night deepens, and to the one woman (do I know her face?)
who whoops her pleasure with every song, whom I used to find
ridiculous, but who now I'm glad can't help but shout it out,
and to the tree pressing its flowers against my window screen,
the blooms small and white or going delicately brown,
even though they make me sneeze, their scent filling the room—
sweet olive, I think, though the one outside my parents' house
seemed always to be in bloom, but it was warmer there,
the long summer bleeding into fall and fall into winter
as I sat in the rocking chair on the porch, the tree reaching past
to spill its flowers and shade over the sidewalk, over the dog walkers
and the uniformed kids from St. Joan of Arc School, while my legs
rocked me steadily, outside in almost any weather.

Allosaurus Fossils

A tooth that's not a tooth,
a mottled clump of bone,
a pelvis chipped and warped,
a joint that wouldn't join, surely—

the model beside the fossil shows
the articulated ridge, the rounded
socket where the ball
of the femur's meant to fit,

a shape that in the real thing
is obscure, like a replica made
of unfired clay that's been pressed
with a palm into dirt.

He carried them in him,
these twisted bones, carried them
to the edge of the bog where he laid
down his flattened jaw.

This is what the body retains,
pinned up on display
and neatly labeled: combat,
fall, and daily wear,

fractured elbow, broken
patella, slightly comminuted,
meaning crushed, something to show
(better than nothing) for all this

if I don't burn it up,
if I take these bones
into the earth, if anyone
still digs for what's preserved.

You could believe that nothing truly goes away
when you lay it flat beneath the colored lens—
this stretch of skin, scraped clean and cured, the ram
still doing service a thousand years after the slaughter.

You could believe, when the computer screen
illuminates the trace, in ultraviolet,
of the ink some monk scraped off to make
the parchment new, that nothing's ever erased,

that everything we do, despite our efforts
to discard, leaves a scar, if only a groove
that casts a shadow when the light shines
at the proper angle, that one word never

effaces another. If we can lift this buried
layer from the dark, what can't we then
uncover? But this copyist, this scribe,
this lonely chronicler or poet

of a long forgotten vernacular—they are
the lucky ones. How startled they would be
to speak, salvaged from some fire-scarred library,
beneath the glow of these million dollar lights.

They belie the bones beneath the fields, no longer
fields, beneath the parking lots, the strip of woods
along the freeway, bones that feed the vines
that grow over fences and that have finished feeding.

Ocean Park

after Richard Diebenkorn

It is the light coming through a window,
through several windows in a room where I am standing.
It is the light in Ocean Park, a park
by the ocean or a park that's made of ocean.
It is the particular way the sand catches the light
and the way the waves change the light
with the different ways they move: first one light
then another, light falling on something rough or smooth.
It is the light over the dunes and behind the dunes
and on each curve of the dunes and on the cliffs
that I imagine loom over Ocean Park.
It is the light shining through the foliage of the park
as it moves before the window in the wind. No,
it is a wash of green with gold coming through.
It is the light of each hour of the day
in one room full of windows for thirty years—
can you imagine?—but it is not what Monet did.
This light doesn't change a cathedral
or anything else. It is itself. It is light
cut up and put back together, the way a prism
or water or sky can do, yet not like that:
This light is stitched together with black lines.
Can I stand before this pink and say *morning*,
this wash of blue and say *afternoon*,
this orange and say only *orange*?
Can I stand in the room where he was standing
when he painted all this canvas filling
the gallery around me now like windows,
but not windows, though I can't help but try
and make them *like*. They resist the mind.
They do not represent. But words, words—
no matter how you cut them, they cannot
not mean. You cannot just stand
in them. They are made of meaning.
They cannot be unmeant.

Isaac in the End

When I could no longer see the hills, the clouds
that scudded across the hills, the scrub that clung
to their sides; when my flocks had dimmed to shadows hung
across the fields, and even in day a shroud
fell over the faces of my sons as they vowed
their names to me—I didn't know either one—
and when the last of color and pattern was wrung
from my carpets, when the tent flaps faded and billowed
their last in my sight, that's when I saw the knife,
which all the rest had hidden, hanging still
above me since I'd convinced my father not
to let it fall. Now it floats above my wife
and sons when they come near: a thing with a will.
It turns in air like a promise or a thought.

In the D.C. Metro

I don't want to stay in this half-light any longer
than I have to, don't want to find anyone here
whom I can lead back. The roof arches gray and cave-like,
throws back what little light leaks from the ground.
Beneath this high dimness, the weather's the same
all year round. Cool and dry: the conditions prescribed
for storing potatoes, beets, but there's no eating,
no drinking underground. When I ride the escalator up,
I don't look back behind. On the platform, LED signs
promise train arrival times. This is a space between
places, not a place itself. Still, if I wait
long enough on this cold, stone bench,
sometimes a voice arrives, too resonant and strong
for the face of a boy that carries it, a face too young
to be singing a love song to me, asking, what's age,
what's race, *baby*, when we two meet in this place?
What can I say to him? I don't want to offer cash
or any truer reciprocity. I glance at the sign.
I'm only here three more minutes until the next
outbound train. If I keep my mouth shut that long
beneath the stream of his song, face turned up placidly
in a fixed half-smile, then am I the one who doesn't
belong here, or the one who needs leading back?

Parable

The first time I saw a bone break
it was an arm. The girl kicked and screamed
to escape her body, twisting on the floor.
It was too much to have a body.

Later, when I broke my own, it was different:
I didn't try to get away. I stayed in the body
against the swelling that sought to force me out,
picked up my fractured elbow, knee bone,

and carried my body home. Listen, all you
I love, don't think there's anywhere else to go.
You must stay in the body too.
Promise me this, and I'll stay with you

down here with the prick of grass on our legs,
where our hands can feel, pressed to the dirt
as we lean into uneven roots and trees,
the sun's heat coming back up through the earth.

The Crossing

The air-conditioning cold slides from my limbs
as I come up from the subway entrance,
the rest of the crowd spilling out around me,

moving, at first, together like a cloud
then breaking apart, branching off down side streets,
people dwindling in the haze of evening lights

until I'm walking alone, bare limbs swinging
in summer air, purse slapping
against my side. *Walk with a purpose,*

my mother taught me, and I do, past the last
moviegoers lingering outside the multiplex,
past twenty-four hour bodegas, metal grates

of newsstands, and darkened restaurants, the chairs
looking skeletal with legs in the air, until I come
to the place where I turn, beneath a shadowing

arch of trees, brownstone stoops slanting off
to either side. I glance back over my shoulder
now and then, but nothing moves behind me,

and I stop remembering to look, and then
I'm walking with only my own steps, the sound
of my fingers along an iron fence, and the city

begins to slide away, row houses pulling
back from sidewalks, streetlights drawing up
into the leaves, the sound of traffic fading

to nothing as I float down a long, black tunnel
for I don't know how long, over three blocks,
ten, without blocks, forgetting street and city,

and I might go on this way, but I come to where
the below-ground rush of the expressway cuts
through the middle of a street, dividing the rest

of the neighborhood from the narrow strip
where I live, and the tunnel melts away like exhaust,
and I'm standing in the rumble of trucks,

their vibrations running up my legs,
blinking in the noise of that space
until the signal changes to the illuminated shape

of the man who calls me across, and I step off the curb
and cross over that streaming river of headlights,
past the rusting barrier fence, past the glint

of broken glass, cross against the flashing hand,
and I'm already reaching into my purse,
pulling out my keys as I open the gate
and begin to climb the metal stairs.