

ABSTRACT

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In these poems, I explore the distances between two people, in either a literal way, or through memory. Through the spaces between people, I examine the speaker's relation to them, and consequently, the focus turns inward: the poems about other people ultimately become about the speaker. The knowledge gained from the focus inward becomes problematic, as the insights become ethical complications that the poems must work their way out of.

POLAR BEAR

By

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I

AQUARIUM

You want to keep feeding the fish
inside you, but you keep

eating the fish because you're hungry.
This is not the way it should go.

No one said you would not be hungry.
You knew the dimensions of the aquarium

inside you, knew it was inside you.
She who fogged the glass didn't know

that you'd eaten the fish, but you did and do.
You hear the aquarium inside your chest

crack, and before you know it, the carpet
is soaked with bleached coral,

plastic kelp, and multi-colored gravel.
This is not the way it should go.

This is not how anyone should go under—
the water that you contained now contains you.

BECAUSE BECAUSE

Because it wasn't exactly breaking and entering,
because it was your friend's house, because you knew
where they hid the key under the rock by the mailbox,
because you were supposed to feed their cats
while they were gone, because they were your friends
not mine, because when we fucked on their couch
we cleaned up after, because the heat was turned
almost completely off, because you were shivering naked
against the leather, because it wasn't exactly stealing
when I opened their bottle of Cordella nestled behind
the cat litter, because I knew we were both only home
for the holiday, because we were there almost
two hours before we remembered to even feed
the cats, because you smelled like cinnamon, because
I was trying my hardest not to add weight to our actions,
because now you were living on the other side of the country,
because when you tripped over the Christmas lights
I laughed, because it wasn't exactly drunk if you could
still walk a straight line on their hardwood floor,
because the worn grain felt smooth against my socks,
because your friend's cats needed feeding, we fed them.

SECOND DATE

I didn't know how to stop
 or even if I knew how
if I'd want to.

 We walked back
 from the coffee shop and all I wanted was
to hold your hand but I didn't
 know how or if I did, how to stop
so I didn't.

 With the station two blocks
 away, you pinch then unpinch your fingers
in the air, saying *Sometimes all life*
 needs is a little salt. I didn't stop you,
 but if you knew how to continue, you didn't.

I showed my teeth, my shyness,
 said we should try that new Thai restaurant's
coconut soup sometime soon—
 the air something I could almost
hold in my hands. You said
 Yes, we should, and I didn't
 stop you but you didn't continue.

IF THEN

If she could just do it on the inside
of her inner thigh, then maybe no one
would notice. If she could do it on a small
enough patch of skin, then she could cover
it up with most of her shorts, even
the shorter ones. Then, if someone did happen to
see it, she could blame it on a slipped hair
straightener, because it'd be small enough
to make sense. She wore jeans most days (even
in summer), then when she got home, if she
needed to do it, she could. If the moon
was up, if the clouds pulled back, if her
mother's station wagon shone like a bullet
in the driveway, if the rim of the
basketball goal gleamed like a halo, then she'd
know no one was awake to hear her.
She wanted it to be an ocean, if
she needed an ocean,—then a river
when she needed a river. With her naked
body around my own, I could turn her
face up toward mine if I wanted to see
a face, empty then as before, empty as
my own. If then I kiss it, I'll feel the raised
edges of the little lines. Then if
she notices I've lingered too long
on that one little place and my pacing
has slowed, she'll pull her legs up toward
her chest, and wouldn't know yet I've seen
it—red at first, then healing pink almost like
a burn—but if she finds out, I'd lie, say I
never knew. This, then, is not something
you bring up if not brought up. It's said
that if you cross a line you've never crossed
before, then you're more likely to cross it
again. She wanted it to be a forest,
if she needed a forest,—then a tree when
she needed a tree. If then, then. Then if.

CARTOON

Two hundred frames in, you decide the sketches
are too shaky once set in motion. You throw them
in the garbage, dump your spaghetti on top so
there would be no way to salvage them. This repeats
again, except the second time with a filter of
wet coffee grounds. Trace paper on top of trace
paper on top of light board—you decide that in
order to finish by morning, you'll have to
shorten the story. Yes, that's it. You'll skip the part
where the bag of flour walks into the party
full of other bags of flour. There, the jock.
There, the princess. There, the wallflower. There,
the group of bags serving only as backdrop. You'll
shorten the story because there isn't time
to show this bag all alone, no other bags talking
to him. There's not time to develop out this bag
of flour's character. Let's call him Harry. So you
jump to the scene in the kitchen, in the room next
to the party. You jump to where Harry cuts himself
open with a steak knife, white powder spilling out all
over the linoleum floor. Harry doesn't bleed out long
before you sketch him scooping himself up into
a pan, pouring milk, raw eggs, sugar on top
of himself. You jump to the scene where Harry puts
himself into the oven, the part where the other bags
of flour smell something they don't recognize at first,
where they walk into the kitchen, see
an empty bag and a cake on the counter
with a note that says *I made this for you.*

OLIVIA

When I wake up
next to

you, we
are coming back
from separate

places
together

EGG TOOTH

Any way you face me, you're still naked.
Tell me about your father, his drinking,

where he is now. Tell me why you don't talk
to him. Tell me more. What I thought

I knew was wrong. My egg tooth breaks through
the outer membrane, lets me breathe. Finally.

The grace that comes with honesty—
I've been here before. *I love you, too.*

But do you? Be honest. This is the first time
you've stayed the night. Every piece

you share becomes, somehow, more important.
The first details always are: your hands,

your scent, the hair stuck against your neck—
new as light. My egg tooth pushing through,

blue shell cracking enough for me to feel
the smoothness of your legs against mine.

Your body unfolds like a ballerina. This new world,
our world. The sharpness of the tooth splintering

what kept us apart, what protected us.

SCRIBBLE

You sit close to me on the floor of your studio apartment, show me your newest sketchbook, its nudes caricatured with oversized nipples, fingers, lips. Then, two old sketchbooks:— self-portraits where you're never smiling; dripped watercolor outlined in ballpoint pen; decoupage receipts, movie ticket stubs, and fortune cookie fortunes basted with one thin coat of white glue. I know you just well enough to not have to say anything right away as you turn each page. The next is filled with scribbled quotes from your most recent ex beside penciled etchings of his face: *You, the song I want to sing but can't.* Him in acrylic, him in charcoal, him behind words you drew over and across him, words that run into the neighboring page: *You, the drink I want to drink and do.* His nose is stronger than mine, his eyes softer. But with each portrait, his features become more exaggerated, sharper, turn into something grotesque, something far from the first entry of him: a photograph messily lacquered in and framed with colored pencil. I want you to look up from the page toward me but you don't. Outside your window, an oak branch casts our reflection yellow. You're tracing the binding with your finger. You're in them again.

LEARNING TO SHARE YOU

To be fair, he gets weekends, doesn't know
he only gets weekends, but I know I have you
for the week. You take the red eye after work
on Friday. We section you up, off—he takes
an arm; I take both your ears and the thigh

with the birthmark in the shape of a duck;
he takes your mouth and hands. I wanted the mouth.
But we can only pull you apart for so long
before you decide who gets the heart. The head
is god knows where, or whose. When I make you

come and come again your head leaves your body,
you become only a body, all feeling. Every first night
we spent together unraveled the same. When I pick you
up from the airport, you say I'm only allowed to
kiss you on the cheek. This is new. You pulling

your face in like that. So I take your left cheek.
He must have already taken your right. His history
versus my proximity. It must be tough, two people in love
with you—one who says it but doesn't mean it;
the other who doesn't say it but means it. You're just

not sure yet which is which. You multiply as you
divide like a cell on a microscopic slide too small
to be seen by the naked eye. I drive you to your
apartment. I've brought some coffee, ask you how it went.
You say the weekend alone must've been good for me.

BIRTHMARK

When ducks come in to land on a lake,
they cup their wings inward to slow themselves
down. I told her that's what the birthmark

on the inside of her right thigh looked like.
A drake mallard. A wood duck. Its outline
against the sky at daybreak. She traced

my kneecap with her finger, said she was trying
to memorize every detail of me for when
we wouldn't see each other again. I didn't tell her

I was doing the same. My father used to take me
bird hunting, back before I moved away. Doves,
he said, flew different from the rest. They didn't

flap their wings quite as fast, or as frantic; they flew
more smoothly than finches or sparrows. He made
sure I aimed ahead of the target to make up for

the space the bird would fly once I pulled the trigger.
Leading the bird, he called it. Don't aim for where
the bird is, he said, aim for where the bird will be.

PYGMALION

When I can't have you, I have your idea.
There I make you mine. Your idea in my bedside

lamp, your idea in my coffee cup. Your idea floating
on my ceiling, the glow-in-the-dark plastic stars,

the firefly in my mind. You, somewhere in the idea
of you. I want the idea of you. I want you.

Your idea walking in through wooden saloon doors.
Your idea walking out through my bedroom door. Your

idea the bubble and the breath inside the bubble. The nail
in my tire that if left stuck, fits so well it holds the air in.

Your idea the gold coin I can't spend. The hairpin chip
in my windshield that never fully fractures. Your idea the wet

oak leaves I rake into piles in the yard. Your idea in every
crosswalk laced with sunlight. Your idea

across the street, around the corner, on the balcony
overlooking the pool. Your idea the pew I fell asleep on.

Your idea the black bear pawing the old meat
in the oil drum, who smelled me downwind. The brass

casing of every bullet I've never shot. The removed
lead, the crimped end, the sulfur of the powder all over

your fur. The real you I have tried forgetting, but every door
I close you open. Your idea I will give your name.

CALL IT BY ITS NAME

If you were here in front of me, I could use the help.

I can take a four-pane window out of
the wall, nail four small logs onto its corners,

call it

a table. But it's still a window—

I can still look through it
and see the floor. I can board up the window with a piece
of wood the same size.

I can paint it to look like a window
painted on a canvas, but as soon as I turn it sideways
it's a piece of wood again, and then

it's a window again,

only this time, there's nothing

on the other side. If this is like
a movie, like all life is like a movie,

then I'm behind the screen
making shadow puppets until out of your periphery
you notice me.

I could use your help if you were here.
I could use a window,

a piece of wood,

a light that casts

a painting of a window into a movie that I can stand
behind. I want to look through

that window and see you
on the floor. I want the paint so thick even the wood
forgets it's the screen

I make shadows behind.

I want you here in front of me, all dressed up and perfumed
like I was really taking you out to the movies,

because I could use your help.

You could say,

*Call the window a table, the wood
your face, the paint my skin,*

*call the logs my hands,
the screen your eyes,—and I,*

I would believe you.

NOTES ON BRIDGE BURNING

Make sure to point out her flaws.
Character flaws cut deepest. (Physical flaws are also good.) How she's just as emotionally weak and cowardly as her mother, who never would leave her alcoholic father. Point out inconsistencies in her speech, when she says untrue things just to hurt you. It won't be that you can't believe her; you just never could trust someone who loved you. She loved you? When you find Billie Holiday lyrics scribbled in the back of the Faulkner book she borrowed, don't let the melody get stuck in your head. Make sure to betray the secrets she told you in confidence. Maybe the one about how each night she had to turn the TV to a static channel, then cover the screen with a shirt so she could fall asleep to the white noise. Tell her friends. Invent a rumor about her cheating on her new boyfriend with you, and then deny ever starting anything. End everything by turning her words against her. *How is this selfish—my wanting space—when you're the one who left?* Use short declarative sentences. They're most effective. If she calls to tell you you left your red cardigan at her place, tell her she can keep it. She can give it away. Tell her you loved that sweater, but burn it, give it to the squirrels. Remind yourself: she was too tall; and you're too unstable. When you run into her in public, look at her as if she just bombed a hospital, or look straight through her, as if she existed like a window. When you meet her new boyfriend, smile at the way he looks surprisingly like you. The same stupid haircut and the same stupid boyish love-glaze plastered on his face that you had only a few months before. The same empty longing in his eyes, like swimming pools drained in winter, staring back at you like a mirror. The same futile need to control the conversation. He won't shut up. Maybe

you should shut up. Or maybe for once,
this time, you shouldn't. When you start to
miss her, miss her. Tell her *fuck off* can,
in fact, be a mature way to end a conversation.
No it can't. Change her name in your phone
to DO NOT ANSWER. Don't feel too bad.
That's what she would want and this is
not about what she wants anymore. Tell her
she is and was and continues to be a mistake.
Always have the last word. Never take back
anything. Never give anything away.

II

AT MONTAUK

Here is the line you drew in
the sand.

 Here is the line I try
to cross for you. Here, the shells,
the starfish
 of your hand at the end

of the arm you close
 then open.

This was the day snow covered
the sand. I called

out to you
 down the strait.
You didn't turn around.

You never turned around.

Here, your hand brushing
grit off itself,
 your hand bright red.
 You sway
your arms with the waves, and I want to follow.

THIRD DATE

You take me by the hand,
then you are leading me by the hand up another
set of stairs, then another.
The mint leaves beneath
crushed ice in my glass. The shades of painted glass
instead of neon. If the light seems
too bright, it's because it is.
Then, through my teeth, I feel the sound of my shoes scuffing
the bricks underneath.
Then the lights again, distracting me
from the bricks, the two points fixed or moving up or down
the slope. But there is nothing to explain.
It's all there:—in your hands,
my hands. You're boring me and I'm stupid. We make
a terrible combination.
Let's rewind to where
we walk in, back to where the light felt too hot,
let's rewind to where we order our drinks and pretend.
Here we are on our third drink,
I'm not even sure if we had a second,
and I thought we were only staying for one.
You, my pinwheel, my arrowhead,
you're busy flirting with a lamppost
when I realize we're outside;—I strike a match, light mine first
(which seems rude, I know) but I'm burning off all
the sulfur so you don't taste it.
I look down at my glass;
it's empty again, but I'm not sure how it happened.
Then, we're driving.
You hit a bump, the CD skips. The choice is in my hands.
Your hands disappear, just off camera.
Hey, what happened
down there? I don't know what to tell you anymore.
The present feels too uncomfortable, too bright, too warm,
but it's not your fault—the constant
doing and undoing, my inability
to stop everything
from slipping when it all starts to feel like a spiral.
Hey, why do you make that face? I get out of the car
and stand in the street.
It's almost silly, how fast you disappear.
Then I walk back in

alone, and it starts raining bricks.
 I exit out the back door, look for the street,
 can't stop sweating.
 I'm losing myself to myself
 and have lots of catching up to do.
 When I say I'm making a handgun sandwich,
 what I mean is:
 you take it, you stick it in your mouth, and you swallow it.
 What I mean is: it's a joke,
 and you should take it and laugh.
 But no one laughs; the back door leads to nowhere, no street.
 This is what happens when you stop pushing dust under the rug
 and instead throw out the rug itself:
 things get dusty.
 Then the lights swirl,—my hands against the brick wall.
 The whole scene's collapsing, piece-by-piece.
 I never even had a fourth drink.
 Give me back your hands, holy in all their longing.
 Give me back
 the mint, the light, the clink of glass. Give me back the taste like river stones
 in my mouth.
 I stand in the middle of the street, I wait for you, but no cars pass.
 Take worry and set it on fire. Then you'll be here.
 If I had a word to call it I would, I'd pin it down,
 I'd hold it in my hands.
 When I say I'm not sure (even now)
 what's happening or where this is going,
 what I mean is:
 I'm so good at pretending and you're back again.

POLAR BEAR

I am standing on the edge of
a boat dock in Orange Beach,
Alabama, and I think of
the word: *polar bear*. Furthest thing
from here, but now the closest.
I have spoken it into being.
I think of all of it: of *paw*, of *fur*,
of *teeth*, of *fat* as insulation.
I think of all of nothing. Then I think of
all of polar bear and it's terrible.
Two or three boats go by—
a speeder with two women
(one, a red bathing suit, the other orange),
and a man driving. But I am with
polar bear, of all polar bear is,
and it, with me. I must put myself
into the arctic into the ice into the water.
I have a friend who has a
wintertime lake house, sauna,
gazebo overlooking a snowy creek,
and she told me how,
after sitting in the sauna for
an hour, she would go jump
into the frozen creek. The rush would
kill her. But I am nowhere near
snow. I am at the beach. Neon and car
horns from across the street, red
and green navigation lights of
boats reflecting off the water. I think
of the ice sculpture of a swan
in my condo lobby: how it melted
within hours, back into the form
it came from. How to get to a swan
out of ice, one has to chip away at
what it's not. But I am not
thinking of swan. Rather: polar bear.
I am thinking of all that is not polar bear
but should be. I must contain all
of polar bear, and all of polar bear
me. I just want to see it
the way it was meant to be seen.
I am standing here, at the end of

a boat dock, thinking of polar bear.
The dock's posts extend into
water, its posts covered in barnacles,
its posts looking almost like dirty white fur.
I am standing here at the end of
a boat dock thinking of polar bear
and of a sculpture of a polar bear,
but the ice (that I don't have) is melting.

COLLAGE OF MEMORIES THAT FORMS A BOX

I forgot the things I kept: the ball dropping on New Year's,
the diesel trucks humming
the name of a sad old love song
my grandmother played me once but now I can't remember
how it goes...

circling the city for an hour looking for a parking spot,
your body spread out
across polyester bed sheets, a footprint
in the mud that says *Hey, I'm up ahead, I'll meet you there,*

the birthday cake with your name spelled wrong, the vanilla candles
you smell in the store but don't buy,
the largemouth bass we released
into your swimming pool that died an hour later

because we didn't know it couldn't breathe chlorine,
the furniture we assembled together
on the living room carpet, the fertilizer tossed in the backyard
that caught the light
like tiny emeralds, the bus with empty seats
but still we both had to stand,
the woman who took down
our order wrong but we ate it anyway, you taking the first bite,

you tripping on the cobblestone street, the tape you pulled
off the cassette spools,
the suitcases that took years to unpack,
a yoga mat tucked under your arm,
the chum bag dragged behind the boat
to draw fish to our bait, to whisper *Come closer, it's safe.*

Once the pine trees grew tall enough,
we cut a trail, walked barely under their branches,
the bed of pine needles soft under our feet, the machete sheath
bouncing against my thigh.

And the year we planted the seedlings, each a foot long:—
pulled one from a tarp bundle, pressed it
into the soil, your hand covering then uncovering.

And that time walking you home in the first snow,

the wine bottle you grabbed
when you said it was your turn,
the DC zoo in mid-summer when none of the lions
would come out from their plaster rock caves,
box after cardboard box of your things
I carried and loaded into your trunk
when it was space you wanted,
the flatbread you rolled up and dipped in olive oil, said *Here, try this.*

Your bed we had to push against the window overlooking
the street—its intersection we could barely see,
its light playing off the wet asphalt—
because the air-conditioning was broken
and it was too hot upstairs.

That was one I kept. The forgotten staircase,
the forgotten box
hidden underneath one of the forgotten stairs in the staircase,
you prying up the stair with a hammer,
pulling out the cigar box I hid
when I was a child—filled with bottle caps, plastic coins,
baseball cards, a water gun.

Let's make a new map. Let's put the box back, but pick
a new stair, one we'll both remember, one I won't forget.

I'll let you pick: the ocean still cold in April, the red bird
flying into his reflection on my kitchen window
and doing it again,
the bike you bought me that I never rode,
the rock ledge you jumped into
the lake from because you knew there were no rocks
underwater
that you couldn't see from above,
the letterbox on my front door, the sidewalk covered in salt,
all that I was waiting for, the letterbox on my front door.

LUMBER

There were no plans: you constructed
as you went.

Two-by-four by two-by-four;
nail by nail.

First, the foundation:—
leveling the concrete, flagging the beams

for the next floor; why bother?—
no need to caulk the tub
or wait for

the sheetrock dust to settle before
painting:—each step done out of order.

You climbed the ladder
two stories
with a fifty pound bag of tar-backed shingles
on your shoulders to drive each flap down

with plastic-capped ½” nails
on a roof you had yet to build.

Then, you stood back and sketched the plans
based on what you had built.

You had no idea how to
craft stairs mid-air from one level down

to the next. A two-by-four, if placed and nailed
here, makes a step; if here, a gate.

But your father
was in your ear the whole time, accusing

you of not tossing the scraps out the windows
right—(it was right arm lower than left, then

use the leverage
of gravity to heave upwards)—
but you didn't listen. He was wrong.

You hung wiring around the fiberglass insulation,
skin itching from its shards—;

your vision that was the lack of a vision:
the constant leaks from rain dripping in

through cracks between sheets
of particleboard,—

and your father, outside, yelling

at you over the noise of the miter saw,
a voice you could almost now not hear.

SUGAR

The summer my father swallowed bees
the honeysuckle outside our house bloomed

longer, larger even than usual. In the heat of June,
he pushed the mower back and forth,

always matching the lines the wheels made
in the grass to the edge of the next row

as he came back, his dirty white t-shirt draping
only where it wasn't stuck to the sweat, his arms

powdered with clippings. My father wiping his
brow. My father saying the varmints are back at it again.

My father saying we could use the rain,
saying I should go outside more.

My father saying a lot of things. As he
worked, he left his open can of sweet tea

on the porch railing. Sugar is sugar to any insect.
He took a break for a drink, didn't stop

until the can was empty. Later, he said
he could feel them inside stinging all the way down.

ONE TIME HE MADE SPAGHETTI, BUT HE'S NOT IN LOVE WITH ANYONE ANYMORE

One time he followed a recipe to its end, knew a recipe would always take him somewhere if he let it. The recipe would take him to spaghetti. Two cans of canned tomatoes, a tube of tomato paste, one chopped onion, four minced cloves of garlic—all mixed in the pot she left over the time they made popcorn on the stove because she said *Real popcorn doesn't need a bag—just oil and heat and salt*. This was the first time he wanted to make a meal that worked, and he knew he needed a recipe. He trusted in the steps, found comfort in not having to choose how much olive oil to pour in (two tablespoons), how many pinches of oregano to sprinkle in (one or two, depending on taste). He was on his way toward spaghetti:—the ground beef thawed and browning, its crackle when it fell apart in the pan; the angel hair noodles looking like kelp swaying; a voicemail she left asking if she should bring over one or two bottles of Chianti.

AIM

There was no target, at least not at first.

*Push them hard into the clip, and when it's full,
you can fit one extra,
but it's got to be in the chamber.*

Over and over
I shot into a bank of red clay a hundred yards down a strip
of bush-hogged pasture. My father paced behind me
with a sock full of sand,
said *Here, set it on this.*

I smiled at the puffs of dust that rose and dissipated.

Eventually, there were targets: paper plates at first,
X's he'd drawn
in permanent marker, then empty soda cans he filled
with water, hung with fishing line from branches. Once hit,

water sprayed out, the cans blossoming into metal flowers.

What I thought was, wasn't. I really held the gun in my hand,
shifted it to the other: the swirled grain
of the oak stock, the sling's cracked leather,
my reflection a warped
blue shadow on the steel barrel.

Then came phone books. They didn't move.
Opened up, the holes on the cover no bigger
than cigarette burns
but sliced through the pages in waves,
ripped up whole neighborhoods of last names,
half of the alphabet busted into yellow confetti:

*Goodbye Peterson,
Richards, Ryan.
Goodbye Baker, Bennett, Berkman, Brighton.*

Goodbye.
Inside, real bullets mushroomed no larger than olives.
*Goodbye Anderson.
Goodbye Derricks. Goodbye, goodbye.*

A WHITE-TAILED DEER

In a photo of one of your more recent kills
you look as if you're not sure if you should
either smile entirely genuine or stare.
The back of the photo, scribbled in pencil:
January 1998, Wilcox County, the edge curled
out as if someone left it uncased in sunlight.
You still looked strong then, no grey yet.
You'd measure base, brow tines, spread.
The animal beneath your straddle, you held
its antlers like beams of light. I almost
envied you there, for the traits I wished
I had but don't, or do and deny:—the ability
to sever off feeling from action like a switch.
I remember you taking me on these trips,
how the kick of your .270 put me on the ground,
and how, after my first kill, you smeared
its blood on my face, its sour scent cracking my skin.

FOR MY FATHER

When, in over a year since I'd last seen
him, I get his letter—at first I don't

recognize his handwriting: clunky
all capital letters, almost dug into the page.

before even words, we didn't speak the same

In sharp passing, he mentions the bender
that put me in just after last Christmas.

He, who got too ruffled most
phone calls to keep calling.

my sound without echo, his without limit

I type him back a little something—
don't send it. But could've—.

It wasn't so much that he couldn't
understand as that he wouldn't.

the constant constant of his opinion

In another one of his usual fits, my mother tells me
he'd thrown something at my sister again,

then crumpled down into the couch like
always, eyes full of fury, almost-tears like a child.

promising a future I won't participate in

Those thunderstorms in spring,
the heat-lightning silence in between—

back again, more frequent. We all knew
they'd come, just not when.

that part of me apart from me

The rule, not the exception, when he
made me feel guilt—in what

used to be my house, too—
over this distance, neither of our faults.

my anger at his like a top spun spinning

I remember him helping me move
out of my apartment. He swept a broom

across my popcorn ceiling, knocking down
dust that fell like ash, fell like snow.

his papier-mâché face layered thicker

Some Sundays too when I'd visit,
he and I would get stuck

riding back after Mass. He took his breaths
slow as if the air was his to take.

the fractured person he left leaving him fractured

Questions spooled off, filling the car—
dull balloons. He, who asked only

to fill the silence—because he never
knew exactly what to do with silence...

the space between defined as

—but the words moved out before us like a stone
skipped across, then sinking into the lake

behind the house, which by then, in the heat
of near August, had to be down at least a foot.

ELEGY FOR MY BODY

As you age you change and take
me places I can only get to

by giving up something else:
the tearing down of a body

to build a better one in its place.
Give me a way to be proactive

and I will: that time at Orange Beach,
thirteen years old, refusing

to wear sunscreen. Or, at
twenty-two, drinking for twelve

hours trying to erase her;—
I locked my keys in my car

twice that week. The you inside
you is held back below veins

and nerves and muscles like wires.
In sickness and in health

I only wanted a way out, a reason.

ON YOUR WAY TO WORK

Let's say I hand you an X-Acto knife
and you cut me out of cardboard. Let's say
you throw away all of me except for my heart,
which by now is really just empty space
and an outline, the shape not even anatomically
correct. You choose to take the outline because
you needed to know: *here are its edges,*
here is where it ends, it can only go as far
as it can be filled. I stenciled my heart on the side of
a building so you'd see it on your walk to work.
(But it's hard to say *heart* and have it work right.
You say *heart* and you could mean anything.)
So let's say you're on your way to work.
The air smells like water because it rained
last night, and it's too early for it to have faded yet.
Let's say you're wearing a houndstooth peacoat,
the one I bought you last Christmas, and maybe
a man on the street asks you for change and the time.
This morning you choose not to wear your headphones,
so this morning you can hear the street beside you.
Because of this, everything else feels more real.
Let's say the rest of me is just now waking up
in your apartment. The bed smells of you,
the kitchen of stale coffee. You're probably at work
by now; you've probably passed right by
my heart and didn't notice the stencil because
it's on the side of the building that faces an alley,
the color of the spray paint the same as the bricks
behind it. But I don't know what to do with
what's left of me, so I leave your apartment to try
to find you, to try to give the rest of me back to you.
I walk the way I thought you walked to work,
but it leads to the wrong building, the wrong street.
By now, you've gone to work, and I should
let you go. Let's say I let you go, let's say that,
let's say that I meant exactly what I said.

III

CLEAN THEORY

Every morning, you were supposed to
light a candle, look at the flame,
and think of nothing else for a whole minute.

Every night, you were supposed to sleep.
This was mindfulness training. But every
time you see a flame, you think water.



You walk the edge of the ocean,
jeans rolled up, wind rippling your shirt.
Here, the best glimpses of yourself,

and here, you erase them. All the ways
you tried to love but couldn't. How once
you were good enough. How endless alone

has been. Broken glass cuts the inside of your
left foot, the blood smearing on your skin
like watercolors with every step you take.

LOVE SONG TO THE DEMON-POSSESSED PIGS OF GADARA

Brave and grazing, the grass tread almost to dirt,
you took on what was given to you.

Teach me to sleep, and I will teach you to swim.

The demons asked to leave
the man—naked, shackled
then unshackled,
living in a sandstone cave outside of the city,

his long hair knotted and stringy, his torso and arms
cut with stones he wouldn't unclench.

He begged only mercy, begged only to be left alone—
but the Good Lord chooses who to save.

Maybe it's one of those stories:
you in the wrong place
at the wrong time, heroes only because you had to be.

Show me how to be blind, and I will show you how to resist.

Just offshore of the Sea of Galilee, it was overcast—
the air humid, full of electricity.

The soft sound of your hooves pressing into dirt,
your hoofprints holy and blameless,

—I swear, in the light,
you were beautiful there on the hillside
becoming filled
with them, the whole of your bodies shaking.

Give me your courage, and I will give you my name.

The silence just before and just after,
and the black eyes as you leapt—
no protest, no acceptance either.

You ran almost in unison,

a dance without music,
a curtain call,
and the crowd standing knowing this is what happens
once we find beauty:
we must watch it leave.

FIG LEAF

Another dream of you, fig leaf. The same almost
every night: I'm naked. And cold.

Underbrush, thorn brambles, pine trees, hanging
moss, the mist of early morning
streaming all the green veins.

Beneath the canopy, I lose my sense of direction.
I thirst for no one,
fig leaf, but you. But you're too difficult to find.

Your branches don't bend like they used to.

I take sinew and a bone needle,
sew you to you. But you don't hold together. You

never hold, and I have to start again:—
here, the fig leaf;
here, the covering with the fig leaf.

The Lord made me naked but I don't want to be the way
the Lord made me.

My eyes have been opened. I know good and evil and you
are good.

For the first time in years, I'm ready to live
the rest of my life. But it has gotten harder to hide.

I'm naked and afraid. I need your covering, fig leaf.

I need you to hold me,
as your branch held you,
forever in future tense.

Don't leave me alone with the Lord. Because
I can't take you with me. I'm awake.

I awoke. I still wake up each morning.
Cold and afraid. Kicking off the sheets.

COMING TO TERMS

in a recent visit with your therapist the new one you realized
you only have so much time as someone feeling okay
for once as someone unafraid or not yet afraid or still as if up

in the attic of your parents' house the boxes of Christmas lights
that safety sleeping underneath a wool coat you outgrew the year
before the year she passed the year you got the call while in a meeting

she had passed and you missed it the moment the year of her
leaving you had to decide how quickly to book a flight home
because yes you wanted finally to see them but Christ she's already gone

past the point of never again returning as you return again and
will to her always having left before you had decided it was time to go

COFFEE AFTER SOME TIME

Remind me of the potted ivy plant you killed by accident,
how you waited almost two weeks to throw it out.
Remind me of the curtains in the kitchen, the light

they let pull through, remind me of the chipped paint
on the wall in the shape of a pistol. Even three months later
we still found sand from Margate City under

your car's floor mats—remind me what color grey it was.
Remind me of the salted lime and the butter knife,
how I wanted you all out of order and you just wanted

me backwards. Remind me to pay the parking meter.
Remind me of life in the present tense. Remind me of your hands,
remind me of your hands fumbling for your house keys

in the dark, the *It should be this one* when it's not. That was
the buckshot night your car slid into a bank of snow on the side
of the road, the impact so gentle you laughed. Remind me

of the black suit I bought for your grandfather's funeral.
Remind me how, when the sex was good, we rhymed.
There is a fluorescent light above your head, flickering.

Remind me to look you in the eyes when I talk to you.
The wooden stair that always creaked still does. Remind me
which one—third from the bottom. Remind me of

the September afternoon at your parents' lake house.
You spent a paragraph of time in my arms. Remind me
of the air mattress in your bedroom—before you found a real bed,

before our love outgrew itself—remind me of how slow
it leaked, remind me of the air it took to get there. Remind me
of all the names you used to call me, you remember, don't you?

CARVING

Before the cancer, my grandfather would sit
in his converted-garage workshop after supper
with a block of pine the size of my forearm,

and whittle away at it, a carving knife resting flush
in his palm, pulling the blade back to him
in long smooth motions. When he switched knives

to start the features, he would take a sip of bourbon
from a BAMA jam jar, its purple flowers almost
completely scuffed off. Each block slimmed down

into an outline, an outline into a figure, a figure into
a person. These imitations of German woodcarvings,
these caricatures, really: a woman in a blue dress,

her exaggerated breasts; a man in unhinged overalls,
bulbous nose and gaping mouth stained and painted
in crude reds and yellows. They smelled fresh as

death, as far as I remember: the sap of a felled tree,
the chemical flush of wood stain. *Little uglies*,
he called them. He preferred soft wood—

basswood or walnut—something that would do
what he wanted it to do: to take the knife
as blessing, to accept the prayer he pissed away at.

YOU DREAMED IN ICU

the doctors drilled holes in your chest
in a line from the bottom of your collarbone

to your heart, were able to remove the fluid still
in your lungs lined with fibrosis. Your frail

hand seemed to trace the path across your skin.
You couldn't take in enough oxygen, couldn't absorb

the 100% O₂ they had masked around
your mouth and nose, the valve bag floating

like a third lung. You dreamed of sinkholes
that swallowed whole houses, like the one

in Ocala, Florida that drained a small lake
in a matter of hours, or the one in Clermont

that collapsed a resort condo like it was a dollhouse,
leaving just a hole and the heap of a broken frame.

THE SCALE

Some mornings gently shaking you
awake, his hand like a pillow

you tried to forget in sleep.
This was supposed to be kind.

This, he thought, is what a father
was supposed to do.

Other mornings
his hands pulling you up by the opening

of the neck of your t-shirt, ripping it down
the back.

This happened, he said,
because you embarrassed him:

seventeen
and caught by a local cop drinking behind
the Hoover Met.

The crack quick and
familiar as your father slapped his hand
against his desk.

Each time he chose
a different object as example:

a jar of pencils, a wooden chair,
the lamp you gave him for his birthday.

But to predict how his scale chose

to reset itself through you
would be to know the measurements he used

to unmeasure the weight from him
onto you.

This you found impossible.

Then the time he kicked a trashcan against
the wall, called you names not your names.

This he believed you deserved, earned even—
fair to make you fear him over

what you'd done.

 This is what fathers do,
he thought. They love their sons.

OPEN LETTER

To the grandmother who left me eight voicemails in the past five days as she sat alone in her modest town home chasing her Valiums with red wine: I'll call you back tomorrow.

To the squirrel nervously waiting to dart across the sidewalk: I don't see you.

To the woman in tears on the couch next to me whose leg won't stop shaking: it's not you,—it's not me either.

To the car behind me wondering why I didn't wave *thank you*: you didn't let me out; I let myself in.

To my mother napping in a beanbag chair beneath a wall of taxidermied animal heads: don't be afraid to wake up.

To the therapist who fell asleep during our session that one time: I had run out of important things to say, mostly.

To the girl with leaves in her hair who took me one summer behind my house in that field with the spruce pines lining three sides: you didn't know you were my first, did you?

To the eighth-floor beach condo balcony railing I could barely look over: it wasn't so much your height that scared me, it was the desire to jump.

To the woman in Starbucks who caught me looking over the edge of my laptop at her and initiated conversation: I didn't know what to say, I didn't know what to say.

To the ambulance drivers who came after the call about a heart attack: it was just a panic attack, there'll be another one.

To the Bengal tiger separated by a moat from the spectators at the DC zoo, who gave a bellow that resembled more of a moan than a roar: I understand.

To the window that leaks every time it rains: I've run out of clean towels and sheets.

To the raccoon trap my father assembled out in the barn, because without a project he couldn't sit still: you weren't meant to catch our neighbor's cat.

To the woman who threw up in the doorway of the Metro last Thursday before she had time to fully exit: I support your decision.

To the young boy who almost drowned in the Olympic-sized diving well because he thought the stairs at the edge led all the way to the bottom, that he could just walk them up because he couldn't swim: I was there, but didn't dive in.

To the younger sister I had to buy a pregnancy test for: I hope that narrow grey strip reads only one faint line.

To the grandfather who by the second stroke only had use of his neck, head, and left arm: you had more faith in me than me.

To the afternoons that slipped away because I was too distracted trying to locate the real reason why she left: I won't miss you (once I forget you).

To the friends who carried me up the stairs, into the car, and into the E.R. because I was too drunk and high to stop throwing up all over myself: really sorry about the Persian rug.

To those recurring dreams of natural disasters, the ones where I have no choice but to flee with others by going underground, deeper and deeper: you are the ones I remember.

To the waiter I ran into after rounding a corner too fast, who spilled a tray of crab cakes, mashed potatoes, and soup all over me: thanks for the excuse to leave early.

BIRDS

You cut a hole through
the screen that covered
your bedroom window
in that two-room
farmhouse. You were six
or seven maybe, and would stick
your wrist—(hand clasped
around birdseed)—out the hole
to feed the sparrows
that darted about
in the Chinaberry tree.

Nurses, you called them.

The cool night air
pushed through the opening
until you were sure
someone else
must have felt it
inside.

—You knew
what the birds knew:
that the sky was still blue
even at night—just no one
could see it.

—You knew
they had eaten
most of the fruit
off the tree, and came back
night after night
for your birdseed.

—You knew
to cover the hole
with the edge of
the curtain to hide
what you were doing.

When you told me,
I didn't ask about
how you surely could hear
your parents one
thin wall over;—or how your
father so drunk
most nights

he'd beat you
if he found out
you spent half
your lunch money on birdseed;—
or why your mother
and your two sisters
would just sit there
never saying a word;—
or how, when your thin arm
would reach further and further
through that hole,
you'd get scrape marks
so thin that your father
would believe you
when you told him
it was from briars,
just beyond the creek.

SOUR WINE

I didn't want to believe the Lord
when he told me I wasn't
guilty anymore. Because I knew
better: I was there. I saw
the need for the blood. I was

the sponge soaked with sour wine
—raised on a hyssop stalk, pressed
against the Lord's lips—to make
him feel the need: the purpose

for his death, my death through
his death, or how I'd already died
a hundred times before, back into
that stilted rebirth.

The French
call the orgasm *la petite mort*,
or *little death*, right?

But all our sins have been annulled,
have been covered by the guilt—
its weight necessary, its poplar
yoke wore my shoulders raw.

I've felt the guilt grip me more
passionately than I've ever felt
the love hold me. All the barley seeds
I scattered among briars—
but my burden of conviction
must be equal.

Guilt is the love
I've been given from the Lord.
Therefore, I've loved,
and love.

Some days I feel
you've never left me.

SINGULARITY

This was all I knew
how to do. I took

your face in my hands,
ran my fingers through

your hair. You were lovely.
Light fell like sheets of glass

in all your pictures.
I loved all of them, too.

POEM AGAINST MY POEMS

Each time, you tore down the hull
of the ship to build a fire at its center.

Your friends worry that after a while
there won't be any ship left.

Is that your worry?

That when you don't have
her, all you have is

yourself and you

don't want yourself any longer.
Or, what you're burning down to...

Every sculpture you make

only illustrates the *her*
you never had, that you never had her,

that she was, for you, illusion.

•

So you burned your hand. Who gives
a shit? Your instinct is

to lick the wound. You
still have your arms, your hands.

Now what do you do
about it?

Are you scared, or just sick
of scriptures formed to look

eternal but never are?

•

What you wanted was a definite

pattern. Who wouldn't? In a field,
your father's, you built a fence

to mark the property line.

Suicide is the beautiful girl
surrounded by daisies

that litter your neighbor's property.

You can't remember her name,
but she looks familiar.

OF NO CONSEQUENCE

when you didn't leave him for me I rented out
a loft-style cabin on Lake Martin spent the rest of

the holiday there didn't tell my family where
I was going just that I was going this is what people

do I told myself when their love isn't enough they
retreat each day I split firewood on the trunk of a pine

the width of two men's waists that motion
after a while the heave of weight behind me its perfect

arc through the air I got lost in this is how you can
forget the past I told myself by repetition in the present

the air through the sawtooth oaks came as if
it was given to me to breathe something I took and gave

back took and gave back I set the next log up and took
it in as the next swing could take me away

AUBADE

All we have is a pasture opening into a finger
of woods. We don't have pockets full of cherry
tomatoes so ripe they look like they'll split.
If I made you a place out of the rain, would you
stay? Would that be enough? Let's swing
from rusted chain-link fences and forget our
life expectancies. The trail you left in the snow
last night is still there this morning. If there is
no Heaven, what do we do? Our legs are still shaky.
I asked for a fork but was given a spoon. When
I kissed your neck, I had only begun to speak
to the little animal inside you. This is not Pensacola,
when we were young, building pyramids out of sand.
Our buckets are bottomless. I've pulled the anchor in,
even though there were jellyfish caught on
the chain, even though my hands were covered
in welts. Let's leave in the morning, our bags still
on the splintered dock. Here I am, calling your name.
I thought if I could just make a sound loud enough,
I could drown out the other noises, I could hold you
there. So I tasted the bitter root, I buried all my mirrors.
Dust to dust. A new home is not where we come to
at the end. When we arrive at the gate opening
like a secret, we'll see something better, hand in hand.
Throw out yesterday's newspaper and meet me
at the creek at dusk. I have something to tell you.