ABSTRACT

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_The Levee_ considers the arbitrariness of our attachments to both people and places, while at the same time marveling at the inevitability and necessity of those attachments. The importance of place in these poems, most prominently that of southern Louisiana, is pervasive, and the insistent description of landscape becomes inextricable from an interrogation of personal and familial relationships. The power of such bonds seems to defy any satisfactory explanation, but by drawing on personal narrative as well as on the natural world, these poems begin, cautiously and in fragments, to approach and confront that power.
LANDFALL

by

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The Field

More than wide, borderless,
with only the sky to match it, the one
laid over the other, night blue on ripe green

(the kinds of colors
you only find in dreams)—
you are a white column, and I am your mirror.

The stars here don't flicker.
They pipe down from their settings, the sites of their own logic.
To get here, I walked a long way

through night, the grasses falling where I stepped
like green hair, the path
blushing dust even as I made it,

and at the sight of an owl I heard
the voice of a father who was not my father, brown
and barred as the owl's wings,

and at the sight of a flower I heard the voice of a child
who was not myself, pink
as petals dropped in glass, and the voices rang

like the tongues of great bells – terrifyingly solid
through the black silence,

yet somehow my feet
set down one before the other, as when,

in the department store where I'd hidden
inside the circular rack of clothes,
that forest of enormous skirts, I'd still watched

for your shoes: plain, low-heeled,
sensible on the balding carpet.
Now the green field stretches in all directions,

bodiless vessel for a voice I listen for
as the stars grow nearer, the sky cupping down
like a hand ready to pluck.
Crawl Space

Lipizzaner stallions on TV
the night my mother writes that the dog has died.

She says my sister kept watch, hand
laid on the abscessed side to monitor

the lungs' rhythm.

Now the stable hands trick

the young stallions through a barn door, separating them
for the first time

from their mothers.

It is very early in the morning when this happens.
Their alarm dusts hay fiber up into the marbled air.

I wonder about the breeders
and the dressage riders polishing their knee boots

in bicorne hats bestowed after years of service,

men who must

think more of the horses than farmed meat.
As for the black horse eye, inscrutable, rolling in the white head–

the handlers say they know what they are,
like dogs with a sense for death know

what a crawl space is for,

but what they know
of why they go alone–

My mother says

the younger dog keeps making the rounds,
looking for his companion.

Now the mares,

pregnant again, packed haunch
to haunch in a long stable.
The cinematographer's done his job
with the muzzles and their functions,
and I know
that fine-haired horse lip
is the only thing in the world that feels this way
as they rub their spotted abdomens together,
bellies so full they glow
a pale orange
from the heat of their contents,
the dawn barn swollen with orbs,
swinging,
lanterns of foal.
Father's Shoulders

When did they become so small? The rest of him spilling from them like a shirt from a hanger. It isn't until we return to the motel that I notice. All of us undressing, all of us undoing

piece by piece the things we'd done
for the wedding, though for all our efforts my sisters and I appear, so like our mother in the end, a hair shy of what was expected

by the jewel-toned ladies of the South.
All of us. I take cheap pins from my hair.
He sits on the stiff bed, shoulders so lean
I could wrap my small hands

almost around them as if they were handlebars,
as if holding them I could make the pedaling tip
into the dry ditch off Mulberry, the neighborhood
dare he'd once forbidden us from–

lean as the local girl’s arm must have been
braving the ditch’s steep drop
before it broke. The day he buried his father,
after the flag had been folded and the last

shot fired, he found mine was the nearest body
to hang himself on, the weight of his torso
sinking me like the soldier’s boots
in the cemetery mud. Would it be so terrible

to tell the lie that we were the last mourners,
left alone with the marks of boots
in the ground? or that now at his earlobe I could pedal
into the space behind his right shoulder, into someplace

older than this motel or the endless string
of beige-walled Baton Rouge strip malls – instead I’ll say I see
tire treads, slender and regular as snakes in new skin,
captured and hardened sometime after the last rain.
I've decided it's pigeons, not squirrels or worse, responsible for the ruckus –

pigeons and some kind of metal fencing, chain link, jangling under what must be

a half dozen of them every morning doing who knows what. Rabid copulation?

Is some perverse neighbor dangling feed just out of their reach? Whatever it is, it finishes for all of them at once. On turkey hunts, my father liked to point out dust bowls, having me kneel to see, his hand just skimming the bowl’s lip, where a tom had rolled itself clean, where the stiff-spined wing feathers and hooked spurs had brushed and scored the dirt as if needing to mark the place red earth stops being earth.

He never wanted to disturb what they'd done. He loved how he could see and not see the bird in abandon, like the painting of Bacchus that looks more like an imprint of revelry than actual sex: broad blue and grey brushstrokes implying the pile of naked bodies and the god they prop up, drunk and potbellied, proud to the point of glee at what he's made.

That's the story. But all I could see in the museum was a figure contorted to wrench himself from all that flesh, the groin
twisting into the distended gut, the hands bearing down from tensed shoulders;

and on top, where the paintbrushes must have been the most furious,

the whitened head

indecipherable
like something scratched at, frenzied

as a fistful of birds, birds in all their racket –

Lord knows where I'm from, we'd march out back in the name of mercy and shoot them.
Game

I no longer have a hard time believing a hunter can love his killed. I've seen the old man's hands as he arranges his bagged gobblers in a patch of bluebonnets so the sun will best show the blue in their feathers, will paint the red wattles unbelievably red. And the troubled walk he walks to track a trail spattered onto trunks and low branches by a deer he failed to kill cleanly. At his camp, a wooden plaque displays a set of vertebrae, horizontal as when the doe still stood and shot straight through by the arrow tapering toward the ceiling. A one-in-a-million shot, worth immortalizing on a wall the crossing of skill and luck – not some myth of the animal's sacrifice, of a mysterious confluence of wills. Worth sawing through bone for. If ever there were a reason, it would be his as I picture him lifting the spine from the deer with the same wonder he lifts the weapon from its case.
I choose this of all things while waiting
for Jane to leave the ER, since,
as it is, I'm already useless.
Shouldn't I have been woken too when she
began to bleed, when the little pod of her ovary
began to contort like a live wire?
Shouldn't our bodies, still so similar,
have coded over the four states between us
like the flashlights we'd beam across the hall
after bedtime? Instead, the phone's ring rolls her back
onto the operating table. Still, I imagine
I could've felt it, the skin of her abdomen palpitating,
the way a thumb pressed over an eyelid
feels the grape rolling in the socket,
quicker than a rabbit's panicked heart –
Outside Melbourne, a woman who rescues fruit bats
reaches for one hanging from the ceiling of a cage.
She found it wrung up
in wire fencing along a highway.
Carefully, she pries at wings whose hinges are unsure
as a broken umbrella's, that are black
as rubber and thinner than beaten leather.
She unwraps them, confident, and in the furred interior
the infant, clinging, unwilling to be sprung
from its mother. If I were the documentarian,
if I rewound and replayed who knows how many times,
it could go on, the wings
folding and unfolding, the folding
seeming to be what keeps the infant alive

the way a bedroom door shuts to finish the job
of keeping a young child – I feel I need this scene – safe;

as if the tuck of a blanket into her neck
(more delicate than sheet

or the underside of a bat's wing) is sure
as the bed's edge knows

its affordances, as if the door's closing keeps her
not just asleep but breathing,

or could it be the other way around?
The girl breathing it closed, with each breath in the girl

lapping shut again the always opening door.
On Being Asked to Select a Reading for a Second Wedding

–for Lisa

What to say for our crooked hearts? I am unsure
if I can look this time to my own love, which came to me
easily and as a hand in the night,
or at least that is what I see, the hand approaching
through the distance at my back as I rinse
my face at the bathroom sink, the hand
tethering me to the room by my shoulder blade.
My love, simple, neither special nor the love
of others, too simple, simple as a child holding a pebble

when I am the child, or the child is
remembered, small and with knees dusted in dirt where she
crouches in the shadow of a house or a stand

of trees, strayed from her family to listen alone
to the running water, to smell alone the pine
bristling in the spray, to select then scoop the pebble

so warm and round as to make her grasping of it
a given. No, not for me to circumscribe the smattering of hurts
two people have offered one other. These two,

my friends, of whom I've seen so much, and their people
of whom I've seen less – the bewildered relatives,
the ex-wife, the friends excited or nonplussed – not for me
to enclose them as if drawing a circle in dirt
with a long stick and then standing back to look;
but what I have is what came to me

unasked for last night as I sought sleep from the dark
pool of my bed, what the damp evening sent
in place of that sleep, and what I saw was

a sheet of rock and cool water coming down it,
bringing the silt of other places, and the white where the light
enters and refracts, and the green where
simple kinds of life insist themselves
into what alcoves are amenable, and the black where
the water shows how it wets the rock, how the dark expanse
that again and again so coolly and clearly
fills my vision is itself filled by water which is also cool
and clear, within arm’s reach and perfectly lucid.
To Emily in Hard Times

Your letter before me on the desk,
I watch the alley life through
the window– the dumb bombs of pigeons
plopped on the eaves of the next street
over's houses, the squirrels that rush
from roof to tree to ground and back
again, fighting over whatever
seeds and nuts and bits of twig they may
fight over in the process. The fire escape
runs like train tracks down the window
so that each squirrel that runs its stairs
seems to plummet straight from roof
to earth, feathered tail brandished skyward
like the fletching of an arrow. Your letter
says your world is unspinning. Two pigeons
move on to the next rooftop. A squirrel
hops from somewhere in the neighbor's yard
onto the railing, its entire body
hooked around the rust-spotted wrought iron
and trembling with the work of keeping itself
there and upright, and I think of the time
you scaled the mountain outside Anchorage
and got pinned by the wind and your own
panic, only a set of ropes batten
into the mountain's sides leashing you
to that knuckle of rock at the top
of everything. Without warning the squirrel
slings itself at a tree that must be
six feet out– it can't have leapt far
enough, and a vision of its fall
blinks into my mind, the little limbs
pinwheeling, trying to right the torso
before impact; but the nearest branch,
the branch limp but flush at its tip,
is blooming with grey down swelling
in the spaces around the flat waxy leaves,
and they are waving up and down before
the brick wall of the house across
the alley from mine, hanging
suspended at each peak of their arcs
over this small piece of a world
divvied into its rectangular spaces
for living, the squirrel and the branch
together, they are wiping themselves onto
the brick, and Emily, it is enough.
Driving Over the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge

Scattered at the base of the memorial
are little white things—
flags, or handkerchiefs,
easy to see, brighter
than the sky and the mist that coats the sky
like grey moss on rock
grey as the stone blocks that rise
from the water to my left and right to prop up
bridges other than this one, other cars crossing the river.

I throttle forward, and the white things
begin to inch in the grass,
and as they move among themselves
grey spots begin
to bloom on their backs like stains
spreading on cloth napkins,
and sprouting from their fronts:
the heads of gulls
bobbing at the sightseers’ shins—
gulls I realize, almost across the bridge

when I see on the water's surface

a canoe
and myself in it,

arms raised, kneeling and facing away and
already receding:
so soon the bridge will be past,

and the canoe with it, rocking with each
reach of my hands, the water
sloshing over the boat's lip, cold
and cupped in the hull like sky
overturned at my knees.
The Levee

If I'd seen it in a photograph
it might have appeared smaller,
but from the bend in the road I can say
with authority that this is the place
where we stopped. Mid-morning
in summer, no bathrooms nearby,
the zoo minutes away. I don't know
how old I was. The road's white
cement peels off in each direction
the way the even scales of a belly-up
alligator narrow towards the tail
and snout while seeming they
could, if they so desired, repeat
without end. But the same sun has
the same land by the throat: untrimmed
azaleas flattened to the eye
like cardboard discs, the green belt
beyond bright as a strip of felt
and buttressing the sky, monolithic
as law. A perfect incline, a thing made
at a desk with a pen and protractor,
from where we must have heard
the untidy rising and receding
noise of cars on the cracked road
when we ran up, rejoicing in our
release. The grass grew in spirals,
each blade bursting from its predecessor
flat at the base, knotting the rosettes
that caught our palms when we
dropped to our knees short of the
summit, short of the flattop trail
that would have shown us the river
that forced the white road to bend.
Why so suddenly, so clearly have I
remembered this configuration:
three stomachs flush with the ramp
of lawn and aimed at its core, three
backs exposed to the gusts off the road,
our mother watching from
somewhere behind and below.
I didn't need to see the river. Already
at my navel I felt the tremor of the
soon to be brackish, already the thrum
of a thing always passing and never
past, and already I leaned at it
like the traveler who, having arrived
too late to the crossing to have
heard the freight approaching
or to have seen the first cars break
from one patch of brush and vanish
into the shrub at the other side,
perennially waits, living
and reliving the segments of machine,
and thinks of the invisible conductor
elsewhere pushing at his levers.
How many times have I waited
at tracks, eyeing the stalks of weed
closest to the break,
at once harbored and barred
by what is more and able?
And would that I had myself
achieved stillness in the dust
that kept me from the silver current,
and let whatever will it was that
drew her hands on the steering wheel
from the road to the white
roadside be the same that pulled
down our knees, that bent us
before the sun branding the backs
of our necks, all of us
leaning at the thing like small
fish at the gills of a larger fish.
Cotton Picking

She cut her hands their first wear the summer she turned sixteen, digging her tanned fingers into the bolls' sockets to tear from them wads of cotton coarse as burlap. Now all my mother has to say about it is that the sweat stung in the cuts lacing her hands, and that the pay was pennies. But the gunny sack she dragged behind her down the cramped, furrowed rows to the weighing scales, the heat it must have radiated, licking its matte trail into the red dirt – the same dirt I loved as a child, sought at the bottoms of ditches so tangled with honeysuckle and blackberry that I relied on touch alone to learn them, emerging with my arms and legs, pale skin of my father and his father, streaked in red to prove it.
Camellia Scent

We breathed it through the back porch screens
    playing with the old toy farm
and its champion toy stallion, while our mother
    sat inside with her father. We loved the horse

because he had been her favorite too,
    and because of the way age had whittled
his white plastic extremities, the long nose
    polished like old bone, one ankle

so thin the foot had snapped off,
    which only made the muscles in his shoulder,
tensed perennially mid-buck, that much more
    magnificent. So we gripped

him by the extraneous flap of plastic
    where he'd been snipped from the mold,
and thundered him up and down
    the porch, slapping all three hooves at the wood;

pleased how he clamored at the wire screens
    and wicker furniture, and pounded
through the floorboards to the space
    between porch and floor, and shook

the camellia scent from the camellia
    bushes, growing louder,
flooding us, until we were all of us running
    for the front of the house

to the woman who'd run her blue jalopy
    off the road, through a camellia bush,
and into Old Papa's ditch, clambering
    hollering from the ditch to the highway shoulder.

Later, I'd ask my mother why she hated
    when my father came in cupping camellias
in the crook of one arm to float them
    one by one in glass—

—They rot too soon— she'd say scooping them
one-handed and lobbing them
water-logged into the trash. That day it was
her hands at our small chests

that pressed us back toward the house
as smoke rose from the rusted hood
and the white and bright and light
pink petals settled in the yard,

and the woman's breasts loose under
her t-shirt as she shouted, and the woman's
wild hair, frayed and fanned
around her head like unspun wool.
Severance

_The war took our youth_ was your response to the reporter who asked how you knew so early that you wanted to marry my grandmother, as if the day you rose from water to beach you'd waded the shores of your boyhood.

But it came back for your old age, the last months you spent suckling an eyedropper for its sedative and mistaking me for the British nurse. You told stories you'd never told but that had lodged in you, stark and complete as lumps of metal or the German words you barked at night. There were three sparrows at her bird feeder, competing for the blank pellets of birdseed, the morning you confessed that when the elderly couple tracked you down after decades to the hear from you how their son had died, you lied, and didn't tell them that if you'd bent to lift and take him back to them, his legs would have simply fallen away, like half of a book split at the spine.
The Louisiana Compulsory Education Act of 1916

Now when I see old cane
  yellowed and leaning off
  from newer stalk but still stiff, hollowed

and hardening
  through the dry joints, I wonder
  was this what the English-speaking teacher

used on my mother's parents
  when she called on them in words
  they couldn't understand to stand?

The lowered eyes, so failed
  by the ears, the mouths so
  ready to be made example of

for their bastard tongues. No doubt
  in the whistle of cane whipped down
  wasp quick. Now when I see old cane

I see in the stripped fibers
  the frayed binding of the Cajun
dictionary my mother kept hidden

in her drawer. Only when she
  thought no one was looking
  would she take it out, hunch

over it splayed in her lap,
  and choose two or three strange
  words to mouth, to mutter to herself.

Once, I stole the book,
  hid it in my closet behind hung
dresses. Did I look as she had

holding in both hands
  the unraveling red canvas cover
  rougher than raw cane? Thinking

I too should learn, alone
and in a whisper, guessing
   as best I could at pronunciation,

until the big book disappeared
   and the season ambled on, the old cane
      leaning as its shadows leaned.
Falling Game

My mother taught me the route not by
the aluminum signs planted into the crushed
oyster shells at the roads' shoulders, but by
its landmarks: the overpass at the end of the straight
shot through the swamp to Labadieville,
the whitewashed church and the auto body shop
straddling the bridge over Bayou Lafourche,
the hand-painted pro-life billboard of the faceless
pregnant woman with a full-spectrum rainbow
erupting from her gut – always laughing at
that last one the summer we made the two hour
drive down two-lane highways to the city
to visit Papa, who was dying. At the wheel
my mother told and retold the story of the day
in 1974 when he and her mother-in-law
sat her down at the kitchen table,
passed her a mug of coffee, and explained
why a nurse from Marksville not
a good enough woman to marry their son.
In the passenger seat I hated her for it.
It wasn't until she got to the infants
passed into her hands at every family gathering,
left to her care, and I pictured her dark fingers
darker in the lines around her knuckles
on the pink and white skin of my cousins' fleshy
middles, that I remembered her nightmare:
her mother-in-law takes my sisters and me
to the top of the state capitol building, steeple
of Baton Rouge, and dangles our small forms
over the balcony of the thirty-fourth floor;
and how Jane and I, cross-legged in the back-
yard, had made a game of it, our hands
locked like mollusks over our eyes,
squeezing a color out of the darkness that would
tell what happens to us after Grandma
lets go – for example, if Jane presses a bright pink
into the backs of her eyelids, her lanky little self
lands on the hood of a pink parked car.
On the Tenth Anniversary of Katrina's Landfall

Eleven years now since I left. Today
the disaster plays out again on television
just as it did the first time, when I'd
purchase a coffee from the campus cafe
just to sit and watch on those days
I went with no word from anyone I knew,
phones on the fritz and no cable yet
in my brand new apartment, so that in public
I sat to listen to these same clips
repeating, these same sounds spun
from reporters' mouths like an electric current
out of anyone's control. The brown water
rose as I watched other students
methodically stir sugar into their coffee
and gather their bags – yes, the water rose,
as it rises now on every network
unreal as the flawless blue
of the tarp-covered roofs that reappear
each time I fly home, blips like patchwork
or a poorly programmed video game.
I am disgusted by the attempts
to memorialize, the I who writes this,
who thinks of walking in the middle
of the weekday into a church;
the I who doesn't even know her mother's
father's name, just that he went by Bubba,
and in the flood of '27 saw his belongings
cartwheel downriver, Gulf bound,
and never forgot. How could he?
He was there, he watched it happen.
Live Oak

I’d always liked to think it had been split into its halves
the first time it was struck by lightning – our old oak with its
diverging sets of limbs, so prone to being struck, solitary
on the point. Or not solitary at all, as my father is explaining,
one of his rough hands pressed to the rough bark
where the latest fork of lightning’s left its mark. We don’t have
(according to the Parish arborist) one tree at all, but the merging
of two seeds taken to ground too near one another, seeds whose trunks
each year rippled a new ring until they touched and then kept on,
their skins melding as they grew, and it’s true, I can see the ridge
they braided where the met, where the brindled bark turns darker
and furrowed enough to cut a climber’s foot. For this
they won’t be saved, two oaks that share a girth and therefore
aren’t old enough to be preserved as historic, as my father had hoped.

Instead, the tree that spouts towards the canal will die
slowly of the sickness the lightning licked into it.

The bark on the stricken side of the trunk is molting, bearing
the bleached wood beneath the crust, and we huddle to touch
one by one the char that scribbles down the unlucky limb
to the yawning fork then down the trunk to the ground,
each of us quietly inspecting, as if our less than superstitious palms
might make the difference. Overhead, half of the leaves are grey
and brittle, and I am suddenly unwilling, I am casting
my eyes to the roots for the colored shards of beer bottles
embedded in dirt I once imagined the first stones
of a house I would build. The old water tower is gone
from where for years it stood rust-speckled on the far bank, made
so small by distance I might’ve reached across to lift its orange cap
like the lid of a tin box, to peer inside for something unseeable
as the bowl at the place where the two trees break loose of their trunk,

the heart I climbed towards so many times without success, my bare feet
scrabbling against that line in the bark I took for granted.
Fly/Flown

–after W. S. Merwin's “Fly”

I suppose we were cruel to an old mallard
Who pestered us for a summer
He'd only wanted younger women and an easy meal

We were trying to raise ducks
From the egg the damn ducks every one but him
Picked off by the alligator or the pair of hawks
One by neighborhood dogs on the loose
Before they could fly

Shoo we said but he waited on the doormat
Hobbled after us honking
Obstinate always snapping the horned beak
At the backs of our heels
Until we poured cracked corn in the grass
Until he wasn't afraid even of car tires anymore
We shot a snake in the pond he barely looked up

Disappeared the first week

Of duck season a steel
Pellet I bet in his belly full of corn

We trimmed the azaleas then put a pot on for supper

*
All the while his mate had been waiting
Out on the point for his return
Her nest smartly tucked under the tallest oak

She'd come with him to our place on the canal but never
Came around us the way he had always sat
Squat on the nest eyeing us anytime we came near
Someone had tagged her a cheap
Tin band shackling her left ankle

Her wedding ring we said
Must have been around the time he started
Eating corn she stood up
We weren't looking she stamped
The eggs and left but we'd forgotten
Was it weeks before we discovered the eggs
Stinking to high heaven

Flown probably

Across the canal her sticky feet pointing
Back at us as she flew

We who had always believed so much in husbandry
The Great American West

It was quiet on the mountain when my father said she wasn't the woman he'd married anymore. We had the hiking trail to ourselves, but more than that it was the alpine air, so different from what we were used to, cold, thin, and dry, bracing in our lungs as we breathed it. “She's had a hard life,” I said. We'd stopped at two pines whose roots had wrestled themselves into the rock. From the knot of rock and root, their trunks swung out snake-like from the cliffside, dangling poised limbs over the canyon. “What's she had to be unhappy about?” he asked, the thought never having occurred to him, and for a decade after it never occurred to me that she didn't tell him about the poorly hand-sewn dresses, the wads of paper stuffed into the toes of her shoes, the hot cotton, the great-aunt dying and not-to-be-disturbed, the rickety ladder in the yard, the rooms left untouched and un-dusted after deaths, the flight from the Church for which she was never forgiven in that tiny town by kin with whom she didn't share a language, the corn husks, the stolen, hacked-off stalks of sugar cane, the sticks for toys, the walk to school, the wink of a penny in her daddy's palm, the clamp of authority's hand at her nape. We were quiet then. I knew this landscape meant something to my father because his own father had brought him to see it despite vowing, after the war, never again to sleep on the ground. A chipmunk darted in and out of the rock at the base of the pines, scavenging no doubt for the kind of soft, dried things that line his burrow. I could smell them from where I stood, the sweet, urine-dusted hollows where winter would be waited out, fastidiously tucked away from the high blue that swallows the bluebird's call, that sky we'd come to see domed over its wide plains.
and its range of mountains whose backbone we thought we could feel beneath our boots.
As You Drove Me to the Metro Station at Dusk

I told you the story of Sarah's wedding, held in an un-air-conditioned wooden house on church property, which meant the reception was dry, and while we sweated through our pantyhose, those poor men bore white tuxes and wool cummerbunds. We ate the gumbo anyway, and I watched my own name blink around the room on placards bearing the names of the wedding party, glued to handle sticks so the guests could fan themselves. That August, as did every, swaddled us in wetness, in the smell of wet cypress and the ripe muck at their knees, all the while Sarah at the center in white, belly already growing like a face turned to the light.

And I told you how that evening the young people gathered outside a cousin's trailer that was far enough down the bayou to shake the brassy orange of town light, stood around the bonfire her brother had built, even in that heat, to keep away the mosquitoes, and let the enormous damp of that night, drenched in the clicking of all its insects, contain us. Until the boy who'd lost the bag of pills came stumbling out of the neighboring pasture, alive with panic; and so we took up our beers and whatever flashlights the cousin had and set out into the pasture spread over by a marsh fog too low and flat to have anywhere else to travel, and too thick for us to see anything but our feet before us and the haze of the bonfire behind. I walked through the shin-deep damp weeds, mosquitoes beating off my skin as I parted invisible curtains of them, and found nothing in my cone of light but discs of cow shit large as dinner plates
facing right back up at the moon.

When I told you these stories had no place here, where mechanical ticks signal when a train nears, the cars stacking neatly as they pull out of a curve in the tracks to take me back to my apartment in the city, you disagreed, and I left your car. Then on the raised platform: a praying mantis, its six wire legs immobile as the tile at my feet, its angular body washed yellow under the station's electric lamp. A draft rose off the rails, and the mantis unfroze, began an odd, slow sway, a shifting from one set of legs to the other.
Glass Triptych

From the third floor I watch the sunlight
slap your shoulder like the flat of an oar as you turn
the corner. The ceiling fan pointing its four directions
is incorrigible as a burr, one blade

tilting into shadow, two the same shade.
Your friend has died. When you first found out,
you sat stiff in your chair and failed to answer
my automatic what, you for whom
talk is so often less necessary than touch (your own
form of gentleness), while I was, in that moment,
annoyed at the inconvenience
of emotion. When our dog felt her first hurt,
the yelp froze her mid-leap, her hind leg going rigid
as it jabbed at the ceiling, and when she found
the floor again her eyes found mine,
round, black, pitching their wordless question to me,
no different from my twin cousins
when they, flicking doubloons palmed from the old
copper bowl to ricochet down
the wooden stairs, broke the picture frame holding
our grandparents. The glass
was like rice after a wedding, and I turned away
as my sister with steady hands gripped me and drew
the prism of the longest shard from my heel.

*
The entering quicker than the extraction,
quicker still
than the seconds we spend contemplating

or not contemplating the next flick
of a fish at the cusp of the water's surface.

The Gulf, the Gulf:
   how it seemed our giver,

amniotic, mothering, brown water
soaking brown sand

and teaching scores of Louisiana's children who we were
by the soles of our feet on sandbars.

But it also conceals. Take the Champagne girl
who stepped on something
   she shouldn't have,

take the rusted metal
that spiked through her calf
   and the resulting

infection. For most of the fourth grade
we did our part to honor her

at slumber parties;
we broke the tines off white plastic forks

and used them as needles in our play
at surgery, half of us
   sprawled on the floor, the rest

perched at the feet of sleeping bags,
clicking away at

imagined gashes
   thrust from nightgowns.

Like caught fish we arranged ourselves,
long rows of girls made important
by our proximity to grief.

*
Pressing my hand to the little table  
I painted green I feel  
the scar on my palm and inside it  
a small shard of glass. When it happened,

I'd tried to clean the cut well;  
I held the slit open under a running faucet  
and peered inside and saw  
nothing left to pick out, but still I sense

the splinter buried there, wrapped  
tight under the white lump, the mark  
the lines of my palm disappear into  
and reappear from at the other side. I try to align

the nick of glass with the grain of the wood  
the way sometimes, my hand  
on your arm seems to just  
be going in the correct direction.

All around me, your plants are growing  
slowly, leaning at the sun  
slanting through the windows.  
Remarkable how close we could come,

as time and the power of my own cells  
wear away at my piece  
of fire-blown sand, the once-foreign now dissolved,

glass into skin into painted wood, flush  
as the crepe myrtles blooming  
beyond the window that keeps  
me from them and no more.
Nonsense Lines from a Rented Cabin Complete with Sauna, or, Pennsylvania

I guess even the trees are fighting each other.

*

Our Russian host taught us how to sauna “like in the old country,”
to shut yourself inside a wooden box
before someone else has to do it for you.

*

In Tokyo I went to a modest bathhouse. The women's beautiful bodies
slipped like sardines into the tubs, familiar as that.
I knew I'd stayed too long when a child began to bawl
at the sight of my pink skin, shaking her tiny fists until the mother,
eyes averted, moved to a different pool.

*

It's possible the woods are meant for the stark of heart.
But even the woodpecker's twiggy little knee
has to contend with the red crest blinking through the branches,
showing off. When one pine leans to another, the slice of sky between
them disappears if they are close enough. I swear
they do it on purpose, they are winking at me
because they know I like them.

*

The Russian showed us how to build the fire so hot
you can hardly stand it, and how to stand it long enough
to lose your breath
so you can run gasping into the November morning,
plant your feet shoulder-width apart,
and pour an entire plastic Penzoil container's worth
of ice cold water down the top of your head –

*

Instantaneous, the steam cloud, massive
and billowing from your body with a ridiculousness
greater than the pull of the tides,
sending wave after wave of you into Pennsylvania
all in the time it takes for the shock of cold to become

* 

the sound of the water slopping from you to the ground
like progeny – splat! Brash as the male woodpecker
scuttling red spirals up the pine.

* 

May it be nothing simpler than you, buck naked and absurd in the middle of nowhere.
In Winter

On this gravel road through these woods where I've chosen to walk far from the people I love, my own blue-hatted head is a solitary orb over the landscape, moving slowly like a target on a digitized map. The season hasn't yet unclenched, still holding onto the cold that I used to despise. Everywhere there are cold branches and the sound of wind through branches, and the morning light filtered through the wind as through a sieve.

Small redbud trees line the road, shoulder-height beneath the taller growth, wrapped all up their trunks by crawlers, wine-colored and snaking their way to get their leaves to sun. At the end of this road, I'll find a shallow, widening tributary of the Chesapeake. I'll sit on a decomposing pier and watch the waterfowl in their element: a kingfisher quiet and discerning in the low branches to my left, long-legged egrets momentarily at ease on the sun-struck bank, Canada geese stomping down a still-frozen stretch on the river’s far side. I'll wonder if I've spotted a bald eagle, or if above me the wide-winged predator's white head is a trick of the light. It will flicker like a tossed coin, and I'll have no one's opinion to ask. Now, on my right, a redbud reddens towards its tips as if making a frame for the vine spiraling up its center, the vine that does the opposite of shine, that deepens, hardens, makes of itself a fact darker than blood.
Walking Home After a Night of Work

I'd walked to the museum to see its pale stone walls rising from the floodlights, as bold at night as in day, because the sound of my shoes on sidewalk bricks still holding the day's heat so long after sunset reminded me of myself. The city finally gone quiet, cars and crowds giving way to the silent time-keeping of traffic signals – but in the gallery yard's trees, I found a host of brown sparrows, all singing,

so high-pitched, whistling, I thought at first through the thistle hum of their wings they could've been a colony of bats. Tricked, must have been, by the lights into thinking that all the night was an hours-long dawn,

always its own verge, and so continued to sing for it, and yet I could hardly see them, the lamplight etching an orange frieze of bird and leaf and bark, only the texture of movement to suggest the blurt of a wing or the pivot of a head and its blackcurrant eye, or the occasional fall, as one, too crowded at its perch nearest the light, dropped from a branch and flew back up to perch again.

After that, after finding them swarmed in the floodlit, curling tree limbs, squawking for morning, how could I not, coming home, go to the room where you are already sleeping, and rest my palm on the bit of foot you've kicked from under the blanket; how could I not imagine myself, immutable figure of a woman standing in an entranceway, quarried, in her need to reach the sleeper, from the light the door lets in?
To the Cockroach My Beloved

It's the root of the Korean word for Korean, this syllable you say doesn't translate but blame when you lose your temper. When pressed to explain, you grin at me crookedly. *We're like cockroaches – worth nothing but you'll never get rid of us*, and across your eye glints some sting of a history I could learn to describe the way I can learn to read your face, so close to mine as you speak. What accomplishments of geography that this is loving; that what rouses me in you should be so unsayable.

*  

The last time I was apart from you the insects protested. A swarm can begin slowly: at night, attracted to the light, Formosan termites began to creep in however they could, slipping through the door cracks, crawling up the pipes. The wings they dropped were petal-thin tapers, and looked like what I saw when I read about linnets before I learned what linnets are. We turned out the lights and sat, my family and I, near each other in the dark, listening for the nothing sound of them getting in or not.
To My Mother, Cancer Patient

When my back is turned you still love me.

- Frank O'Hara

My brother-in-law called today
to talk about our respective spouses, two siblings
who can't seem to show
how much they care for each another.
Not so long from now,
their friendship will be the only proof
their parents ever walked this earth, he says.

Unemployment doesn't suit him,
but he has a point. How would you react
if I called you like that, out of the blue,
talking like a Bible verse, you
who only told your children you were
losing your breast after your husband
mistakenly opened your mail?

Out back, in our excuse for a yard,
Ryan is working, painting an old truck,
clearing stubborn weeds with stems
like rope, while from my table by the window
I feel the day's warmth
gradually filter through the glass.
If I were out there now

I'd kneel at the neighbors' low iron gate
and peer through the bars into the bushes
where the cowbirds and sparrows
get up to their bird business
sneakily in the shadows. I can't remember
ever having felt so fond of them,
the way they perch in the azalea's

dim interior, tail feathers
levering away, little heads cocking
precisely with each slight shift of light
or new thought or non-thought, the way they sit
in their own bodies with the inevitability of breath. What better way to explain it, that today

I can love the turned back of the world
the way I love the thought of the sun
flat across Ryan's broad back
bent at his task, all the while the small birds around him, and his hands moving and moving and moving. Your good news today, like weather, has colored everything in reach.
I Found a Pair of Barn Owls

I found a pair of barn owls, juveniles, afloat on the water hyacinth clogging the covered boat slip, black eyes buried in white, heart-shaped faces and bobbing in the brown wake. They must have flubbed their first attempts at flight, must have careened from the rafters, from where they perched small and ringed with down, to the muddy canal, the half-formed wings not strong or skilled enough to sweep them from the drop: they must have spun like weather vanes. I took an old net hooked to a hollow aluminum pole, scooped them from the water, and drew them sopping onto the dock, as I'd pulled, from their parents' pellets cemented like tar to the ground, rodent bones–toothpick femurs, orange teeth in skulls white as the heart-shaped faces that hover on the dock, that watch me, who'd saved them, dumbly gripping the crooked pole and frayed net and watching them back, watching the little hooked beaks breaking through the drying down, hard and live as separate animals.