

ABSTRACT

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THE WAY TO THE CITADEL

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This collection takes up questions of bodies, the nature of nature, and our precarious relationship with the future. It is committed to a poetics of association that necessarily refuses to operate according to the normative pressures of logic. The collection takes its title from the 1937 Paul Klee painting of the same name which depicts a series of arrows crookedly superimposed across the lower portion of a colorful grid. Much like Klee's painting, the poems included here are able to move associatively because their regular stanzaic patterns—couplets, tercets, the monostich—allow for the cohesion of seemingly disparate things.

THE WAY TO THE CITADEL

By

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Rapture vs. Rupture

Consider the end and everything
we still have to do. Like when
was the last time you saw
a jellyfish? These days it's
normal to feel like a landlocked
seagull. It's normal to be thirsty
and be a beach at the same time.
A beach is just an hourglass
waiting to be turned by your
deliberate hand. I am waiting
for the right moment to turn
into a barnacle. But look
you have a body and how amazing
is that! We are two architects
in love with a sandbar and
each other. I'm asking you to believe
in something like a blueprint.
Believe me when I say
there are many ways to greet
the sky. No. 1—be a steeple.

Contemporary Problems in Ecstasy

You're writing a cultural history of ash at the end of the 20th century. I'm writing a history of drowning in America. Let's meet and compare notes over coffee! Let's tell the luminous truth about living these days! It's surprising what archives we have in common. An oak tree is not an archive until it's chopped down, rings inside of better rings. A volcano is an archive only when it empties itself skyward. Still, here we are, writing in order to escape the drudgery of being useful—and then what? During the earthquake seismic waves moved through the Earth's interior. "They made the Earth ring like a bell for days," the seismologist said.

Occupations of Uninhabited Space

Can a cemetery ever be new? I'm asking
for a friend. Let's say you have two horses.
Let's say one of them is a cow. How
do you reconcile capitalism and beauty?
I don't. I crown all of my possessions
with a magnificent pair of antlers. I come
to the conclusion that the world doesn't need
more points. I don't wear a monocle.
My monocle wears me! One
of the sweetest things you can say
to a person is that you see them. *I see you.*
I see you. Then *Shhhhhh.* *Did you hear that?*
The radioactive wolves are howling.
Even in Chernobyl, they long for Chernobyl.

Impossible Coordinates

You're an expert at waiting for things to happen. You say the waiting makes them happen, stone after stone dropped into the heavy river.

Upon closer inspection, I realized what I had taken to be longitudinal markings were, in fact, lines of ants marching in parallel formation across the map.

Something scatters. The image quivers. What else is there to know? "I chewed the verb, then spat it out."

Erasures

i. from *The Penguin Book of Witches*

I

therefore

came to dwell

in a

great meadow

an ugly place

that
would soon be

discovered

in a

book

ii. *from* The Exorcist

Chris always

seemed to be

Moscow when

reminiscing about

viciously

he

would

ask

“ what’s for dessert?”

iii. *from* The Journals of Lewis & Clark

Small Canoe

Rear Canoe

other Canoes

And our joy in Seeing those

men

in the river

Western

It's kind of like watching a movie
about a place while

in that place. At the saloon, young boys
disguised as upright pianos are waiting

to be played. Outside, a chorus line
of cicadas presides

over the reverse transubstantiation of wine
into water. This is the year

of the drought, meaning everyone's
thirsty. Meaning tumbleweeds rattle

at the edge of a movie set. This
reminds you that anything can make

itself seem more real than it actually
is. It's kind of like a bull

riding a mechanical bull in a bar
outside Tucson, AZ, and

going unnoticed.

Super Bloom

While you were busy telling me about the mechanics of the hunt—how the hunter introduces smoke into the warren, flushing the fleshy rabbits from their cozy hole—my mind was elsewhere. I was thinking a private—but not altogether unrelated—thought which absentmindedly I wrote on the back of a napkin: *Pleasure leaves the body by force.*

Later that night, in bed, I wanted clarification of our roles. Was I the amnesiac, and you the Civil War reenactor? You the underdog in the Iditarod, and I the weatherman forecasting certain thaw?

After we'd finished, we both returned to our respective activities—you to your reading, me to my abstraction—but after a few seconds you looked up and said, “Any object left in a book to remind you of your place in that book can be called a bookmark—don't you think?” I nodded my head in agreement but found myself wondering—quite unexpectedly—where I had last seen my knife?

I Am Ready to Be Sad

Some beautiful things
serve the purpose

of containing other
beautiful things.

Containers are important
because they remind us

there are always more
opportunities for emptiness.

*

Come closer, my shipwreck
needing a ship, and I'll tell you again
the story of people being okay
in a field of dazzling light.

*

Sometimes I need
to be reminded
that the future is
still happening.

*

The right kind of forest
is the kind big enough

for two people to lose themselves in
for quarter-centuries at a time.

What Am I and Why Not

You paint your house like Nebraska
so that no one will mistake it
for a coastline. A secret spoken
into a glass of milk at midnight
is still a secret, spilled
or otherwise. You take my hands
and fold them until they are
shell-like. This is how a pearl
is made. This is you exercising
your right to be forgotten.
The dog tattooed on your shoulder
drools in envy when we kiss.
When you fall asleep I fold
my hands into a different shell
that doesn't remember how
to sound like the ocean.

Venison

You watch a dog chase his tail and think
you know why. You've become an expert

at not letting people know things. In the
fruit bowl, an apple is doing everything but

taking a bite of itself. No one is above
free samples. Someone right now is biting

a fingernail, while someone somewhere
else gets a paper cut and sucks

happily at the wound. Told
like a bad joke at a dinner party, now

no one wants to eat the roast beef.
You were there when the deer jumped

into the zoo, landing among the cheetahs.
How the cheetahs rose to embrace him

with open arms. Even the proud buck
was hungry for himself.

Preamble

Sometimes I cry because I can't mean something enough.

How a bird is more than the sum of its parts. How the Pacific

crashes when it has an audience. Lately I've been having

the same dream in which I fill string instruments with rocks

then watch them sink to the bottom of the ocean. You call this *playing*

the guitar. You say *Here there are cages inside of cages*. For example,

a rib cage is one kind of cage that a bird might one day inhabit.

This idea makes you laugh like you are newly born.

Bluish Animals

Listen. I am sorry
for what I said about

you and the dahlias.
In the most literal sense

of the word I do not
“water” my flowers;

I champagne and
almond milk them!

It’s scary how sometimes
I get lost even inside

my own body, or how
I’ll try anything at least

once—for example,
death. This is why I live

each day like it’s
a TV episode. On

our nightly walks around
the abandoned power plant

you remind me that
the antidote to sorrow

is more sorrow. I am
helpless to respond. I will

never stop being sad
about the zoo. There are

no blue animals there
anymore. The brown bear

sired two litters. I guess
having babies is okay but

I'd rather masturbate
like no one's watching.

Congrats on being a wolf.
Congrats on being a rare species

of deer. But I know one thing
the forest animals don't:

a cheetah in zebra print
isn't fooling anyone.

I'm Not Crying You're Crying

The shower is a good place to go
when you want to convince yourself

you're not actually crying. I admit
I made a mistake when I threw

a handful of dirt on a still open casket
at a stranger's funeral. Now

I'm allowed only a handful
of glitter. Now I'm allowed

only one hand. In this
crowded cemetery, how can

you not have one foot
in someone's grave? What I want

to know is why I
can regenerate some parts

but not others. I get my hair cut.
I trim my toenails. Still, I weep

because I'm guilty of having
a body that does things

without my knowledge. It opens
windows. It closes them.

Nothing but a Humbug Trying to Be a Bugbear

In my youth I was known to recline—on chaise lounges, mid-century divans, waterbeds, the ground—for long periods of time such that, from my reclined position, I could better admire the entire length of myself. At museums I became obsessed with landscapes. I would stare into them for hours with no other ambition than understanding, technically speaking, *how they worked*: vanishing points seemingly vanished for my eyes alone! One day my mother, concerned in a way unique to her face and social standing, said, “But Chris, my darling, what do you want to *be* when you grow up?” I paused and, after some thought, said, “The horizon.”

But by then it was too late. Already I was far away—the farthest curve of the moonlit plains of Scandinavia—and farther still with each passing moment, each dizzy turn of the earth around its constant axis.

Museum Studies

Just because I move too slowly
through this world
to rescue anyone

does not give you the right to ask
who sculpted me

I am not a statue—in fact
I am a painting

*

You said *Landscapes are good*
at one thing and that's
creating distance
between people

We pick up our brushes and paint ourselves
farther apart

*

How many disfigured women did you count
in the Modernism exhibit?

Does geometry make us
better people?

*

A still life so delicious someone's
taken a bite! You
hungry?

*

My birth was a piece of installation art
in a hospital bed

My death will be a piece of installation art
in this very flowerbed—
at which time there will be
no dahlias

*

Pointilism like a swarm of flies

*

How red can a rose be? the docent
asks the crowd

Never red enough

*

I found you sitting in front of an 18th-century portrait,
crying quietly into your hands. “Do beautiful things
make you sad too?” you asked me. I thought for a
moment but, before I was able to formulate a
response, you suddenly looked up at me and—no
longer crying—said, “Do I make you sad?”

*

I’ve never been to the Louvre
I’ve never been to the Musee d’Orsay

Je m’appelle Bonjour. What’s
your name?

*

Don't tell the curator—
I mistook the window
for a masterpiece!

*

How distracted we get, not seeing the art
for the frames
Gilded, gilded, gilded

Second Natures

The complacent chameleon gets lost in the loose folds of someone else's standard issue camouflage fatigues.

A zebra pauses in a busy crosswalk outside New Brunswick before moving purposefully on.

From your perch on the pleather sofa, you count the cattle in the field.

It's true: a porcupine can be readily substituted for a pin cushion whereas the happy beaver waddling atop the Hoover Dam cannot.

A lion mounts the steps to the public library where he is confronted by two marble versions of himself while, nearby, a paper crane glides smoothly on a pond on whose banks a Demoiselle crane closes her eyes for the night, dreaming of one world tenderly replacing another.

Astro turf will never know the pleasure of the lawn mower nor plastic flowers that of photosynthesis.

A trade shipment of cement composite imitation wood is mistakenly delivered to the wrong forest where it will be dealt with accordingly.

Brief Interlude of Splendor

A man clips his nails
on the subway platform—who am I

to judge? In every place I have

ever been (London Paris etc.) I have left
pieces of myself behind.

You who follow in my expansive wake

have gathered enough pieces
to build another version of me,

a shadow's shadow

in a state of disuse.
Big things emerge

from small things. I emerge

from below ground and am
astonished that the world is still here, still

at it: sunlight and its attendant joy.

I lean into the day. I put on
the morning, wear it like a mantle.

Category: Deserts of Utah

A parched bird perches on someone else's
parked car. Taking flight is hard for most people
because of physics. If you say *the sound*
of rain enough times, eventually you'll hear it
because eventually it has to. When thirsty
I think of lemons. I get freaked out by how
my mouth can produce water at a sometimes
faster rate than the sky. While driving
through the desert with you, I read poems
about gardens. This accomplishes little except
to remind us that some places are still lush.
Out of the desert mountains rise up like altars
to gravity. At their base we release
one thousand red balloons only to race up
the mountain and catch them at a higher altitude.
When we return to the car we somehow have
more balloons than before but less of something
else that even now does not have a name.

What Else Can I Burn

At the beginning of each day I set out to accomplish a series of impossible tasks.

I hold a tape measure against a blue expanse of sky.

I attempt to give birth to a number of two-headed nightingales with which to repopulate these lonesome branches.

Are you troubled by all this abundance—honey poured into someone else's pocket—or do you too seek admittance into the future, that strip mall that calls itself a city?

To enter this or any kingdom, one must abide by certain rules.

Nevertheless, I delight in doing what I know I shouldn't.

I question the unsuspecting beauty of trains crossing bridges at midnight.

I turn my back on the ocean.

Radiant Sameness

The doctor held the stethoscope to my chest and, after listening for a few moments, showed signs of evident astonishment. “What’s the matter, doc?” I asked, blowing the cigarette smoke out through the open window—a courtesy. “I hear something,” he said, “but not your heart. It’s a telephone—and it’s ringing!” “Well, answer it already!” I said, agitated by his incompetence; I was a busy woman who didn’t like to be kept waiting. “Hello,” he said, fell silent, nodded variously, then finally said, “I understand.” He hung up and repeated the message to me.

On the train ride home, I watched the radiant sameness of the luxury condos—newly built—flash by. I listened as a father prepared his daughter for exiting the train: “Do you have your shoes?” he asked. “Check!” she hollered. “Backpack?” he asked. “Check!” “Body?” “Check!”

Once home, I sat at the kitchen counter and allowed myself to think, to really think. Of course, everything would be different: no more sundials or Rembrandts, no more lampshades or stable boys. Everything would have to change, I thought, as I picked up an orange—that obscene, bright thing—and spent the better part of the next decade peeling it.

When I Enter the Palace It Is No Longer a Palace

What's one chandelier compared with one thousand?
What's the name of the thing dearest to you?

Get close then get closer.

Certain moments afford the ineffable,
e.g., things happen in courtyards.

I overheard the tourist
recently returned from France say,

“At Versailles we were floored
by the cathedral ceilings.”

Every time I enter a room I expand until I fill it.

Please O please dear reader, do not ask me what
happened when on that fateful springtime morning
I opened the double doors and stepped outside.

The Way to the Citadel

On the steps of a gazebo anything is possible.

You can only be eighteen once or twice.

Coffee makes me an animal.

I am at the center of the map on my phone.

*

All the swans in England belong to one person: the Queen.

The atmosphere exerts its pressure on us without our consent.

I press a hard coin to the center of my palm.

It takes all day to drive around the lake.

*

In Aesop's *Fables*, the bat is neither bird nor beast.

I lay the dictionary atop the tofu, draining it.

Some truths cannot be too plainly stated.

I do not name anything for fear of naming it wrongly.

*

The drama of the everyday renews itself with vigor.

We aspire to an experience unmediated by anything, not even ourselves.

I breathe heavily into the night.

It's an honor just to be nominated.

*

In my language dread is its own pronoun.

Trucks breathe their black breath about the city.

I watch a video of a crow with a knife in its beak.

To be nervous is the best known workout.

*

The present is heavy with the threat of the near future.

We go for a walk, the wind troubling our hats.

You dream of a pistol taking aim at an aquarium's glass wall.

I keep my feet at the foot of the bed.

*

On any given day I just want to look like a garden.

The longitude of the self astounds me.

You don socks patterned with birds of paradise.

I am beyond the reach of any lasso.

*

It is winter again in America.

Somewhere in this house a mirror refuses to do its job.

Spiders newly dead—or nearly—gather in the corners of the room.

When I say *Let me slip into something more comfortable*, I mean *How can I leave this body completely*.

*

Clouds nuzzle the mountain, a tenderness.

Each day is an effort to prolong the present.

By evening I just want to sit among my succulents, thinking a single thought.

I don't remember how I got this cut.

*

Every time I cross a bridge I get turned on.

The river is full of water or something too grotesque to name.

A man once wrote *It would have been different had it been different.*

When he said *Pardon our dust*, he was referring to his hands.

*

I do things in the name of distraction and, occasionally, devotion.

Birds mimic the sound of car alarms in the early afternoon.

Blossoms litter the streets of your hometown.

You interest me strangely.

*

Movies teach us how to be people.

When called upon to express astonishment, one must express astonishment accordingly.

Horses gallop in the near distance.

I get older walking from one room to the next.

*

Longing requires distance.

In Ohio silos contain—or are contained by—dusk.

You look up in time to observe a pack of hens in crisis.

A chateau meanwhile looms on the horizon.

*

True love means finding someone who makes you forget about your own death for five minutes.

Outside, the full moon rises on our hemispheric notions of July.

We share a distinct horror of the non-specific.

No one knows what time it is.

*

At night we get quiet as if by choice.

The house reveals itself to us, room by empty room.

A sudden smoke rises from no chimney in particular.

You're the only one invited.

*

Like figures in a tapestry we go about our business.

A man pumps gas into the hearse before driving to his next gig.

Bad news follows other news which is sometimes bad.

Nobody plays to lose.

*

When one hand does something, the other hand gets jealous.

The generosity of strangers makes me uncomfortable.

A smaller darkness encroaches on the widening plain.

I sit back and inherit the sky.

*

We greet each day like it's an animal of our own making.

The neighbor's dog plays dead, thereby earning a treat.

You say, "There's no such thing as an indifferent omen."

I open my mouth; a bird flies out.

*

I have concerns about the beast and its image.

In this clip, a nun smokes a cigarette in profile.

We drive our truck into the quickly unraveling night.

California continues to be green.

*

I spin the globe in the opposite direction of the world's turning, a gesture of negation.

When two shadows overlap they create what is affectionately known as a time zone.

It is Monday in the tulips of Pocatello.

But it is Tuesday in Venice.

*

I look in the mirror and say *Good morning, Anxiety Machine*, but receive no response.

Usually I remember my own name but sometimes I need to open a telephone book.

Today I will return a handful of baby teeth to their mouth of origin and hope for the best.

I will sit on a bench and wait for a man to approach me, his arms full of flowers lately alive.

*

On a clear day I can see all the way from Rome to your bellybutton.
Tonight rain falls into a book someone left in the garden—an open invitation.
You put on a covered bridge and invite me to walk through you.
In a previous life I was a thimble.

*

Have you ever experienced the wilderness?
At noon alligators walk across the golf courses of Florida.
Confidence is just the performance of confidence.
Some days I am too shy to swallow in public.

*

Emily Dickinson wrote about the Alps without ever having seen them.
To look at something is to position oneself in relation to it.
Plainly I address the hollyhock, the thistle, the clover.
Spring—it is almost hopeful!

*

Selfishly I inhabit any landscape in which I find myself.

A squirrel takes up residence in a nearby birdhouse.

Each new thing will be felt in due course.

In the kitchen the kettle—that soprano—begins to sing.

*

I wear a crown of flowers stolen from the graveyard.

With each successive day I get a little bit uglier.

We kiss in front of microwaves in the suburbs of our youth.

Later, we sound the depths of the fjord.

*

I like men who smell like flowers and flowers that smell like meat.

To perceive the world with accuracy is my highest ambition.

An example: under the ocean there is an ocean.

The word *diaphanous* comes to mind.

*

Upon completing my purchases, I burned the grocery list.

The state bird of Utah is the California seagull.

The moon pulls on the ocean and the ocean pulls on me.

If you were not you who then would I love?

*

Virgil called the edge of his flat world Ultima Thule.

The lone headlight of a motorcycle on a country lane undoes me.

And if all flowers were night-blooming, what then?

I closed the book, then kissed it.

*

Speech is given significance by situation, e.g., the zookeeper addresses his captive audience.

Whose pronoun is “it” anyway?

In school I was taught never to end on someone else’s words.

It’s a girl. Now it’s a dove. Now it’s a glass of milk.

If a Flatter Flatness Were Possible

From a great distance you came
running as if to ask me a very solemn question.
“In what century were you last night?”

By way of answer I shake my fist
at a nearby haystack, stupid and golden
in the afternoon. What creature abides the stillness?

What for? Lately I feel like dancing
to the sound of boats woodenly lurching
in the Adriatic but—alas!—I have no business

being spectacular. Doorways remind me
of my own inadequate dimensions.
When they see me coming, even statues look away.

Confluence

Ours is a coastal kind of love, made for the margins
of a nation: her beaches!

Saturday afternoon, we two stand on a jetty that juts
out into water so choppy

we don't recognize our reflected selves. Seagulls
fly by, eyeing us—they know

we're the low-hanging fruit! Watch how the mouth
of the Columbia greets

the Pacific. I say *How's this for liminal?* You say
Hold me like a surf.

In the distance, foghorns blow, waking us from a dream
we didn't know we were having.

You say *Sometimes a mouth is a home.* I say *Don't be*
silly then open wide.

Sonnet 18

People compare me
to a colorblind matador,
a forlorn peninsula. A lot
of effort goes into these
displays of effortlessness,
clouds in the shape
of clouds over the state
of Wisconsin. And you, you
downright bumpkin dandy,
what's your problem? Latecomers
to the century, we too suffer
the perplexities of the present tense.
All day long we mistake
every available surface—
the bottom of a well, portraiture,
the sky—for a mirror and now,
when finally I go to kiss
your reflection in this here
looking glass, someone else
keeps getting in the way.

This Is Not Goodbye but You Should Go

My heart is a bathhouse where Bette Midler is singing.
She is singing only songs with the word *Goodbye* in the title.
Teach us how to sing, Bette Midler! Teach us how to suffer
better! Between us, the vast desert of America is
getting vaster. What should we do with all this sand?
Let's build an island so that we have a place to wait for things
to catch fire. Let's buy a fog machine and pretend we're in
San Francisco. Let's kiss until we don't have lips
anymore. Isn't it funny how each heart is so different?
Your heart is a carousel that won't stop burning.

I Am Full of Dread

When things come out
of my mouth they come out
a little bit wrong. I left my heart
near San Francisco. Close your eyes
and I'll fist you. Do you
see what I mean? Like any good wolf
nightly howling at the moon, I too
am capable of astonishing redundancies.
Here is a sandbox in the desert.
All around us the trees
are made of wood. But even the forest
knows better than to laugh at my dumb jokes
about the dead. It's not what you say
it's how you séance. Regarding epitaphs
they require precision. Still,
yours is the ghost I most want to meet
on the road to—oh—anywhere.

Polder

In Dutch there is a word
for *land reclaimed by the sea*.
In English we call this *yesterday*.

I was bent on hurrying
the evening to its obvious conclusion:
a breeze at the window, a knife

in the sink. Outside, the hounds
had already sunken their teeth into
the dead center of January.

I meanwhile curled up in the feral
—I mean, fetal—position and waited
for the main event to begin.

Notes

“Contemporary Problems in Ecstasy” takes its title from the Kenneth Koch poem “The Art of Love,” and borrows language from Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.”

“Occupations of Uninhabited Space” takes its title from the Ursula K. LeGuin novel *The Dispossessed*, and its final lines borrow from a Bashō haiku translated by Robert Hass.

“What Am I and Why Not” takes its title from Lorine Niedecker’s poem “Progression.”

“Nothing but a Humbug Trying to Be a Bugbear” takes its title from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.

“The Way to the Citadel” takes its title from the 1937 Paul Klee painting of the same name. Throughout, the poem borrows language from the following sources: Colleen Cable, Dorothy Sayers, Nick Jonas, and Judith Schalansky’s *Atlas of Remote Islands*. The final line of the poem is a direct quotation from Season 6, Episode 9 of *The Golden Girls*.

“Sonnet 18” borrows the phrase “downright bumpkin dandy” from Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.

“If a Flatter Flatness Were Possible” takes its title from the Dorothy Sayers novel *The Nine Tailors*.

The final line of “I Am Full of Dread” reworks a line from James Schuyler’s “Sleep.”

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following journals where some of these poems, often in different versions, first appeared: *Beecher’s Magazine*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *decomp magazinE*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *Whiskey Island Review*, *Word Riot*.