

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

FURROW

Laura Neal, Master of
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Furrow is a testimony of leaving and returning, challenging the quotidian perception of country life primarily rooted in rural South Carolina. The speaker is a silent observer, a witness, and at times an unwilling participant who interrogates the connections and disconnections between family and the natural world.

FURROW

By Laura Neal

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Roadstead

Right now, back home
somebody's fourth cousin
is toting somebody's
seventh cousin
a bushel of corn
around the road
the bicycle tread
winding along
the long clay lane.
Everything has a necessary pace—
those two goats
loose from the pen again
making their own tracks.
My path was already drawn—
heeding as a child
the matriarch advice
to stay in my lane
live within the frame
keep your name.
Even in the city where now
I slumber in houses
built in pairs and such
I know the crickets there
are chanting across crowded fields
out of sync with the cicadas
trying to round out the moon
yielding the sun.

I Heard the Buzzards ShriII

For hours they preyed in masses
on the tips of trees their bodies
blackened and broad-shouldered
casting down a line of judgment
on some lame animal—they are fond
of fawn—breathing it in like stew
as they set stiffly below the edge of the sky.

I watched them set heavily off, roaming
in a series of circles, their beaks charted
through the thicket of air to find
some unseen place where
atop the brambles and earthworms
rests the carcass of that animal
its shadow made darker in the woods.

Late afternoon after the sun
had pierced the fields, the tired axe
leaned against the tree's stump,
the air thinned out, hollowed,
I recalled the familial testament
that if you eat a hog's eyes
you can see the wind.

So I wondered about them,
the vultures, their eyes,
their lashing call, how they wait
the way they don't watch
what they eat, the flesh of that animal
my own body ripe, how they consume
everything—down through the bone.

Heirloom

Here in my family of matriarchs
we don't pass down jewelry or money
only the many ways to use lemon or honey.

We do not collect art
save the baby's first drawing,
an abstract piece where the eyes aren't drawn in.

We don't gather and share stock, apart
from the hogs on uncle Albert's farm, large
and liven their pen, mud-sloshed, a death barge.

We learn to plant seeds four-inches apart
how to cut collard greens and the chicken's leg
from its thigh and the thousand functions of the egg.

Our clothes are hand-me-downs to impart
humility as mothers teach daughters the trade
of pushing thread through a needle—we are homemade.

We aren't hemmed with gold string; we take apart
our threadbare garments, pattern them into a quilt
and we figure out how to best clean up what has spilt.

We are birthed into myth and secret, a head start
and before we were even born we knew the scripture
so in tradition we praise Him that our souls at least be richer.

They Just Come In

We never open the windows—
still, they spot their way in-
side sometimes tilted over
on dotted backs
which always seem heavy
full, packed for a journey.

We're not supposed to pound down
on them like we do the flies. We don't
mind swatting
the ladies, it's superstition
we were taught to fear,

not the gator in the wild
grass of the yard,
not the water moccasin
roping around the lawn
chair's leg,
not the fire ants
who each year build their forts
closer to ours,

No—we fear the ladybug, how
killing it could be
our last chance at luck
our lasting speck of disaster.

For Garden

It was over so suddenly, no more shrubbery to tend.
Without seed, I couldn't replant the squash I tended to take.

I slept through mornings, as my mother didn't rouse me from bed to
hoe the grass from the fertile rows; weeks passed unattended.

I asked my mother why: *Your uncle pulls the harvest now.*
I watched deer and rabbit prod the plot, their natural tendency.

On that score of land that cupped my knees in its icy soil
I was taken aback when I witnessed the felled leaves resting tenderly.

What was a field of vegetables became a landfill of vegetation.
Our yard consumed by fallowness, its roots dying tendrils.

After spring, my uncle ceased his work in the pasture
walked past the patch of grasses once tilled by my tender hand.

We made our own way, grounded in the land, my mother was a master.
Our fingers and toes dug into the earth, tearing weed from tender stem.

But now my mother says to me: *Laura, get up off your knees,*
and I do, standing at the shelf, sifting through browning untended bunches.

In a Small Town with Woods

This is Sunday.

This is what happens
in the countryside on Sunday.

This is the sound of the church bell,
the crescendo of voices gathering
in the countryside on Sunday.

This is the scent of rain
caught beyond the hog and cow
trees cloaked like robes in silver
in the countryside on Sunday.

This is my father
rushing from prayer
after paying his tithes
to catch the first quarter
in the countryside on Sunday.

This is my mother
thinking of what to cook
alongside the turkey necks
and gravy, twisting
his arm to swing by the market
in the countryside on Sunday.

This is me
watching a turkey weave
it's way out in the field,
stepping slowly, with its wide
tilting body, leaning through
the stern hay grasses
in the countryside on Sunday.

This is a gnat finding its way
inside my mouth as I stand,
gazing wildly at this bird
making its way through deer
country, the red of its neck
dangling down, giving itself away
like prey, as it ambles back into the brush

in the countryside on Sunday.

The brush is where the deer
also flee out of sight,
until night where they
stretch their necks from the pine
to swallow the beans and berries
of our garden, where I spent hours
my knees lodged in the ground
tilling and tearing and planting, even
in the countryside on Sunday

.
This is me following the turkey
to find where it was going
or from whence it came,
and found where the hedges
meet the trees, where pine cones pepper
the corn snake plot, the poison ivy,
the thorny weed sloped beneath amber needles,
the rifle—pointed—I grab ahold of my neck
walk back out into the clearing
in the countryside on Sunday.

Missing

I knew a girl that fondled roots
and peeked inside the hollow
ground to see what else was
growing. Wrist-deep in the soil of
the garden she wished for
something more like honey
something sweet to take inside.

What matters is always inside
comes up from the roots clings
like the long strand of honey
to the comb, curled tight
underground. She never parted
with the garden,
and like it, she kept growing

flowering, more complex and growing
into the earth she never went inside the
house again. Her heart was with the
garden. She planted her hands deep as
roots and held the vibrations of the
ground hogging it like a jar of honey.

The girl longed to be called
honey the loneliness within her
growing everyday, her body
the hue of ground nutmeg
waiting to be placed inside a
place that's damp and ripe
with roots that latch and pull
her from the garden.

There was something missing from
her garden so she sat and daydreamed
about honey then stood and paced
among the roots of sweet potatoes,
watched them growing slowly,
waiting silently inside. When her feet
sank into the ground

she couldn't stand anymore, fell to the
ground reached for something to grab

in the garden to keep from being
swallowed down inside. She had
flashbacks, preyed for honey, prayed
for someone to call her honey,
growing wild and worried about the
roots.

She was pulled by those roots underground
where she will forever grow a garden,
absent of honey and hungry inside.

Three Letters

Ma,

September 20, 2009

I don't know why, but my cakes keep falling so I bought some sweet potatoes while the market still had them a dollar nine cent a pound. I figure I can make a pie with them. I remember the ones we pulled from the ground, they were thick, bulbous, caked with soil. I had to buy nearly a bushel here they're so thin. You should see the markets, there's produce for miles, divided into sections: collards, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, but you have to dig for the good ones like we dug in the garden that hot afternoon, pulling up what we put down. I'll be in town before all the leaves fall like my cakes. I'll bring my sweet potato pie.

See you soon,

Laura

January 10, 2010

Momma,

I'm sorry I didn't make it home last fall but I had a good Thanksgiving. I went walking in the city where I met some wine connoisseurs. We strolled along the Potomac and stared silently at the river then we went to the Harbor and stared at buildings large as mountains, statues adorned and aligned like the rows in our garden. We'd gotten full from the sweet potato pies I made (thank you for teaching me). They wanted to know where I was from, so I told them, and when they asked me what South Carolina is like I couldn't quite explain. It was the strangest thing. I miss it there. I will be home soon.

Love you,

Laura

April 18, 2010

Mom,

I've been trying to get away, but I keep getting hemmed up in things. By the way, thank you for the pants you made me, I'll have to find a place to wear them. Life here is good, although everything you told me about this city is true. It's so congested. Sledging through these sidewalk crowds is like trekking through thick grasses, only instead of a wave of people, I'd find you angled on your knees gardening. I hope you grow watermelons this summer or squash, they always grow nice and big. I will make my way down there sooner than later.

With Love,

Laura

A White Bird While Burning Trash

I think it may be a
swan
standing yellow-
legged in our
backyard pond.

At first, I wonder if I am
inhaling too much smoke,
raking leaves into the flame,

but no, there it is, as
soft and white as
they are in film.

I stand, garden hose in hand
trying not to move
though wanting to be closer.

It buffers its wings against its body.

Something breaks in the fire,
loud and disturbing.
A moonshine bottle maybe.
An aerosol can.

It shocks me in this moment, the
common explosion,
the swan flying away.

I go inside, tell everyone
what I saw, but they don't
believe me. They say,

"there ain't no swans down here"
"they don't even fly this far south."

So when evening lowers,
I go back over the slope,
making sure the fire's out,
and I see again the swan.
It returns. And soon after
another. This time, I keep moving

as if they were simple birds,
staring as I reel in the hose.

Leaf-burning

When it's over, I like to level out the ash,
contemplate the circadian waste.
The ground is covered in anthills,
covered in animal carcass and feces,
the stench a landfill. Inside, I stopped filling
my glass with water, too mineral-rich,
the filter filled to capacity.

Last night, my mother prepared herself,
already pulled forward the rakes.
She gets up early in the morning,
the wrens have memorized her motion,
they continue digging for hopper and worm.

I settle on a small glass of juice,
sip it like coffee before collecting
alongside her in the yard.
She's ahead—lit the first batch.
And which is hotter: the sun or the fire?
I trouble the flame until I get a steady hum,

until the flames are riotous. I lean towards it.
In the sky, a buzzard,
always a buzzard. Inside, the rest of the family
slumbers, their heads piled on the pillowcases.
She moves as if the world is on fire,
around me, three piles, a match in her hand.

While cutting grass

a gnat jiggled itself inside of my ear and my hand
left a lash three inches long on my face

trying to get the little menace out. The sun
has already made the day heavy, the brown blades

of grass slouched over in submission, the blade of the
mower leveled toward them, cutting

across their wearied backs, which like mine has
sunken. Steaming, this iron-sun does not press

straight or make things like-new. It creases.
No matter how many coats of sunblock you spread

over your skin you still cannot bathe in it, it's not
meant to be used—I pity the young

bush hoisting its twigs above itself reaching
upward for the sun that will eventually

tan those green leaves a deathly brown. There's
no escaping it—and as it looms over my head

like a clock my feet move forward and my hands
gripping the handle weave in and out of the grasses—

our acres aren't colorful. If my mother wants flowers she
has to plant them, her hands and knees

in the cool soil. Wishing for a cloud to come and cover the
sun, I wince across the field and

right along the forest edge, there's a tree
no taller than ten feet, its branches smooth and absent

of leaves are offered outward, instead of up. Because unlike
the oak and poplar, this tree has determined

to stand in defeat rather than watch the sun
whither its leaves breaking them into their own shadows.

Fire

I.

Because the sun
under its light
is so dangerous
you walk at night
in knee-high grass
unknowingly resting
on a tiny hill
the ants rushing
up your leg.

II.

We walked into it, the smoke
pluming above the pine.
The abandoned cottage old
as my grandmother's mother
is lighted with more life than
it has seen in a century.
The flames, are congruous,
yielding us with abled bodies
to witness this home going,
the lumber still warm three days past.

III.

fly
ant
starter
cracker
wood
truck
work
woman
wall
fight
stone
place
guard
man
power
proof
storm

IV.

How it feels when the sun
licks across your face, peeling
your clothes off the line.

Lampyridae

As a child,
I'd crouch
beneath
a tree's
warm shade.
Eager, I'd await
the light
of night,
my hands
cupped
to catch
the tiny lamps
flying
fluorescent
free
flickering.

Back to South Carolina

You're a stranger when you go home, more like Ms. Sister
or like a distant cousin, cousin-sister.
Folks say you sound like a white girl
your voice an unnatural noise, a segregated tone.

A distant relative, cousin-sister
the weed bush in the vegetable garden
crowding and whistling something unnatural, segregating.
Folks wanna know where you've been and when you're leaving.

Yanked like a weed bush in a vegetable garden
you're plucked and prodded from the southern plot.
Townfolk ask where you went, and when you're leaving
counting down the days before you escape back underground.

You don't outwear your visit,
you're like the hog in the room, some can't
wait until you flee back underground
but leaving sometimes is like knee on stone.

They try to disguise your hogness in the room
but no one can hide the tracks of your hooves.
Once you're there, leaving is like crawling knee against stone
folks always asking, "Remember that song you sung?"

home (v) 1. *(of an animal) return by instinct to its territory after leaving it.* As in, that rabbit-haired girl will *home* when nightfall approaches and she feels the loud clap of thunder on her chest. 2. *To settle or dwell in a place.* Like, she fled the long dull road, left *homing* her way through streets and sheets of people; having to pause pondering where she comes from. 3. *To train to fly a particular destination.* Such that, her wing bears south *home-bounding* in her hounds tooth suit, trading it for a pair of cotton pants and a straw hat spreading out straw in the pen. 4. *To make something the sole object of one's attention; to focus intently on something.* She feels the eyes of that bird *home* the base of her neck, herself *homing* an ants nest.

From the Ground

And what were they considering,
all those black buzzards convened
at the tops of the longleaf pine?

Once, I tried to get close to them
splicing myself around oak and elm
discovering that from below at the thick

base of the tree, they are unseeable, their
ragged feathers shielded by greenery.
Afar, I'd watch them open

themselves up, steady their weight
on the branches before their gaze
again transfixed, my feet wingless.

And was something considering me,
standing bare-legged in the shallow
crook of the pasture, my face angled

as far as it could, eyes squinting
to find what they were pining for
never coaxed to climb a tree?

Long Distance

I take a walk when I come home
after the eight-hour drive down dirt
fastened to my sandals.

I mark the difference in the trees, how
one now leans against the other broken
at the bottom.

There are only so many calls to be made
before I have to come back here.

When I try to leave, this ground catches my foot
tangles in the roots.

I bend to coax the hare
out of the brush, and hear
the echoed voices traveling two roads over—

Lost, they are trying to find the phone.

From the front yard, I watch
my mother hang clothes on the line, the
whites never stay white,
the well water stains them a rusted hue.

Like them, we are plain.
It takes wringing to get out our words

our conversations lined with the same pattern.

Olive, her shirt blends into the landscape,
the trees hovering around her.

She turns, sees me and I wave. I wave the wave a
child waves to her mother.

Seeded

My mother was born on all fives.
She came from the womb hoisting a shovel,
tossing over the rough edge of the soil.

I came out in the shape of a peanut. She
must have seen me digging,
she reached down and pulled me along.

I knelt beside her, tilling,
the sun arching across our shoulders;
she couldn't stop, her shadow screaming—*faster*.

She couldn't stop, her shadow screaming *faster*
the sun arching across our shoulders; I knelt
beside her, tilling.

She reached down and pulled me along, she
must have seen me digging,
I came out in the shape of a peanut

tossing over the rough edge of the soil.
She came from the womb hoisting a shovel, my
mother—born on all fives.

While eating a cucumber

between rows of the vegetable garden
beetle and earthworm saunter,
tip-touching around the soil hardened from
the sun's angle. The worm centers the
tomato, the beetle digs underground, my
bulbous knees sulking.

Besides the winded trees, there's no sound,
but the day's heat could make the field coil
itself like a worm on a sidewalk.
I listen to the land lift quietly,
watch the procession of livestock
ambling towards the water basin silently,
and at the garden's edge, a rabbit,
hungry as I, eats a lettuce wedge.

Domestic Sacrifice

On wooden poles, upside down
hooves tied and outstretched
it hangs, sliced from tail to throat.

My eyes crest with water
as the stench of its intestines
hoards inside of my nose.

Patches of grass divide the gravel
strip of land where I stand
the sun burning my neck.

Shallow puddles are staining
my uncle's boots as he sprays
the carcass scattering gnats and flies.

Nearby, a bucket sinks into the ground
blood-splattered. Though my feet are still,
my eyes step inside the open

flesh of the hog. My mother
sent us away, told us to go home, but
we had walked there together.

I tread backward, all the while
watching as if the hog would fall
down and chase me. I turn to find

my sister already halfway down
the road and I want to call out
to her, but I am afraid. Afraid

to open my mouth. I must be quiet lest
my voice become like the hog
a thing both hallowed and disturbing.

Carolina Choke

Clay bewitches my shoulders into seizures, □
releasing a jostling spirit. I burrow my hands □
beneath, delving into a damp sub-terrain. □
My fingertips forcefully grind grooves □
into this land, this stretch of body □
decomposing in my nose, hands deep-seeded.
Titillating roots impel □
to smother, yet I am enamored with its growth □
its breakdown. It releases, so I release □
with the slowness of a slug □
clogging back across the field, sniffing
my nails jam-packed with a honey called soil □
until my lungs, oblivious to this cross-□
pollination, forces me to breathe □
and I am fertilized by that dead matter. □□

Bound

I can't walk away from here,
the place I call home.
It's tethered within me.
Everywhere I go I take
with me a story
of some dusty old field
in a lonely small town
where over in the plains
just at the point the grasses
meet the trees, I see
the eyes of deer
widen with caution coming
hungrily out of the pine
not expecting a creature
like me to be watching and
waiting. I'm compelled
to tell how I managed to catch a
union of wasps jamming
themselves antennae first into
glass, and that in some ways
I can relate, always banging
my head against a door
the sound barely audible.
I want to walk away from there,
to hear a different story
one with a different history,
one with a different storm.
Wherever I go,
I am followed, by a sun pointing
down at me sitting on a step
feet tied, zoning out
into sun-glazed trees, an August
haze dizzied with sun.

Saturday

I can smell the hog frying in the pan—
it shifts me awake,
my face still wrapped in sleep.

I picture my mother leaning on
her toes over the stove wearing
that electric-
blue housecoat splattered with
grits and grease.

I am rolled like a sausage in the sheets,
listening to her tapping the spatula
on the pan's edge.
I lie there, lazily for a moment more
waiting to hear the ice maker,
the cubes falling into my father's cup.

I can see him too,
making his way across the room to
his recliner. Often

I close my eyes and imagine
something different—
him reaching for a paring knife
to peel the potatoes to be fried
like everything else. Or to dampen a
towel to wipe the grit
from my mother's gown.

Unfurling myself, I open my eyes
and make my way to the kitchen
hoping to see the addition of my father
stirring, slicing, slipping *something*
into a pan. But to see him, sitting there

I am again reminded that this is woman's work.
With a whisk, I grab a bowl
and work the flour into a batter.

Three Birds

There is only one window in the kitchen,
where a chicken is being fried in cast iron, its
meat peppered and salted.

I lift the glass on the front door
exposing the screen
trying to air out the house
from the choking smoke.

I went to sit on the wooden step. Here, I
still hear the popping applause of the
grease, a beckoning of sorts,
a call to feast.

Beyond the yard, I see a deer,
dead behind a line of pines.

Buzzards circle, first two, then four,
then nine, working their way down
cloak-like near the deer.

Watch the way they tear at
dead animals.

The buzzards cling onto
the throat, for a piece of flesh
large enough to lift away somewhere,
the blood of it moving through the air
like a mist of rain.

Like them, we favor our meat fresh.
Deer right from the road.
Chicken straight from the coop.

I can *just* smell the carcass,
the meat left soiling
in the pitch of last night.

I often graze outside at night,
everyone wandering off
to their own rooms.

And I dream. Not about flying like a
bird, but falling like one.

Town of Bowman, *chartered 1867*

The buildings on Main Street
liken themselves to those buildings
printed on a postage stamp, nineteenth-
century blood-brick, broken mortar,
big windows, though the one's here in this town
are boarded, everything
around threatens to crumble. Old
men sit on buckets for chairs
with a cup or cigarette in hand
and on Saturdays people
post along the church's side door
for Sister Glover's homemade
crumb cake.

Things just go on like this—
the rooster's call, the stench
of the cow, yet somehow folks
never leave, never catch
a bus or train to chart them a new space.
Instead their bodies
are laid to rest in that cemetery
just over there, their souls
humming in the cool drum of the earth.
And what noise have I made
other than a few choral testaments? Even
after leaving,
I think of nothing more than walking through that town
greeting those worn-down faces,
marking my attendance
everyday day after day.

I saw no Way—the Bridge was drawn
(After Dickinson's [378])

I saw no Way—the Bridge was drawn
I felt the Shutters close—
The Island changed its Province—
I touched the Continents—

Together they slid—and I alone—
A Dot upon a Plain—
Went out upon Longitude—
Beyond the Slopes of Space—

Pat and Charlie

They are mindless,
yet sure-footed
yearning to roam.
Years ago they carried me
long way from home.

I call the right one Pat
the left one Charlie.
They took me down the road
strode straight pass
the crop of barley.

Coming back now is a shadowed place.
Thought I heard somebody
speak my name.
Like an owl, I crane my neck around
there's nothing found.

Then I look up, see
that big black bird in the tree
thinking this'll be the end of me
straight ahead that judge in the tree
just knew this'd be the end of me.

Pat and Charlie stepping into the steppe
picked a path and into it I crept
darkness falling on my frame.
And will my footprints be the same?
Dark light leaning on my frame.

Landscaping

Here, at this moment,
I live three feet from the street. The
last thing I cut was my hand
reaching to lift a beer can
from the patch of grass the city calls a
lawn, and the sun only peers at you for
moments at a time
like it's on loan from another country,
and the last time I've gotten close
to an animal was to clean its berry-
colored shit from the lone lawn chair
I sit in, tracking with my hands
the planes arranging overhead.

*

There, even on the dullest days—
when the fields are tight and tired,
and the rabbits refrain
from the garden, the sun
never reaching full crest
letting the clouds lift some of the burden of
casting— I managed ways
of keeping my hands busy
under the double-shaded
tree, poison ivy stretching outward
perpetrating a righteous weed,
but I know the pointed
edges of its leaves
and grab the garden shears
and cut and cut them close
down to the roots
a relentless act of cutting
growing and cutting again...

Perched among the cicadas

buzzards bend the branch
with their branding feet.
Along the C-shaped edge
of the plain stands a tree,
holding them at the very top
like a coat rack.

This place is called,
the Lowcountry.
A place made for staring,
never lifting your chin toward the sky
where they linger nearly out-of-view
watching your strange frame below
bellowing and raw.

The sun, master lacquerer
bastes everything a new hue,
their black and blackening
wings casting back at the sun
pressuring the night.

A place where your head hangs
from heat, feet drumming the ground
only bending the grass, precarious of flight.

Peeling Potatoes

Standing, we cut off the skin with paring knives
our thumbs guiding them into the palms of our hands.
Not long ago, they were feet beneath our feet,
waiting to be pulled upon, to be fed on.

Our thumbs guide them into the palms of our hands.
Over a bowl, we carve the perennial crop,
they waited to be pulled upon, to be fed on
slicing them in halves, then in thirds before dicing.

Leaning over a bowl we carve the perennial crop,
soaking them until the water becomes a brown shadow.
We've sliced them in halves, then in thirds before dicing
while outside above the cattails a hot haze settles—

Soaking the potatoes made the water cast a brown shadow,
the breath long in our chests.
Outside above the cattails, a hot haze has settled,
our knees bend steadily side-to-side,

the breath long in our chests.
And I always lose time here,
our knees bending steadily side-by-side,
and I'm never alarmed by the waning light,

though I always lose time here,
learning to master the arc of the blade,
never alarmed by the waning light,
my hands at pace with yours.

For the Captured

Don't even think about leaving home
it won't work. In fact, you might even hurt
yourself. I tried once, until I realized
that I didn't have feet,

my mother's voice shouting, *where you running to?*

Everyone stares, waiting for me to drip
something sweet, like syrup on their bark-like tongues.

I almost managed to press it out when I
awoke to hear myself calling out saying:
Go away, free yourself
but I, like you, am tangled in the roots of there.

Sometimes I wonder about another life,
somewhere I am unable to cast
a shadow in the darkness

or hear my voice echoed back to me,
a rift where a sun curls me into a flower
as I wait stiff as grass in winter, breaking
down but not broke-down
waiting in the swollen ground.

Locusts

after while you get used to the
shrill rings, the sound
no longer an invasion
but more like ritual,
like prayer
people scream:
I'll be alright
I'll be alright,
one voice lifting over
the other until someone
comes over and grabs
their hand, tells them:
It'll be alright
It'll be alright,
lowering them
down with a paper fan
so the preacher can preach
in peace, but the locusts
persist even in the midst
of crickets and frogs
their songs
go on—and on—and on—
and on—until dawn pulls
back the shadows
fallen in the trees
and they fall silent
until they need
like a congregation
to be caught
or silenced
or saved.

Preserves

In the pot
my mother
stirs
the glaze,
cools it
to syrup,
funnels
it down
into mason jars
of cherries
and peaches
where
they'll rest
on shelves
sealed away
from light.

Canning
is a custom
carried down
from her aunt
who lives
across the road.
This morning
the grasses reach
upward
scratching the knee
so my mother cuts
an angled path
bowing toward
the ditch.
She is bulk-headed.
Cooks by the sack load.
Twenty pounds
of potatoes
fifty pounds
of rice
each week
a stew.

She harbors recipes
in her mind and
I'm reminded
of my guestly
frame
when asked
ever so
politely:
*what would
you like
for dinner?*
Showing me
to the sheets,
the towels,
offers a few jars
of peaches
to welcome
and send away
her hands
in constant motion,
mines on the wheel
listening to
the scattered
clatter of them.
On the lid
her pen mark
June 2011.

In Sickness

I.

The devil is beating his wife today,
my grandmother says it happens
when rain falls while the sun is out.

Our clothes are out on the line.
My mother meant to grab them
but she grabbed hold of me
placing a cool rag atop my forehead
my vomit on the side of the sheets.

Heavy as the hog in Uncle Albert's pen
my snout dripping and hot.
I'm more trouble than I'm worth.

We try to heal it on our own,
the spicy mustard slathered
in the middle of my chest,
to pull whatever was in me
out.

II.

I hear the rain slamming down the window
the wind whipping against the weedy bush.

She has cakes in the oven, a bowl of batter
waiting to fill the pan. There are dresses to sew,
pants to be hemmed. The floors need to be swept,
vacuumed, mopped, the trash, taken out and burned.
Then there's my sister's hair, the box of chicken to clean
and a husband to feed.

III.

I feel my burden.
The weight of those clothes upon my shoulders,
the splinter in my mother's back.

I imagine myself hanging up there from that tree,
being let out to dry, the sweat of my brow
slipping its way to the corner of my mouth.

I know she doesn't blame me for all the other times,
not even this time, but I should have been there,
if only to grab the clothes from the line.

When the storm scatters, she slides back the curtain
letting sunlight drown the room. Up in the pine,
her white blouse. She swears, lets out a sigh
that would bruise a plum, the storm brought to rest
in her face.

Quiet

Entangled in the cotton threads of my bed,
there was still a sense of falling in the air
even though the rain had ceased. I listened
to the tap-tap of raindrops on the window-sill,
it was the longest span of rain in months, fields
swallowed in water, the wind whipped and left
me with impressions that if I ventured into the storm
welts would lash my skin. Thunder banged loudly
at times muting the rain. Now, I marvel at the stiffness
of the oak branches that only moments ago swung
violently overhead and I notice we are still,
that something much greater has silenced us.

To catch a bee

 you must be the bee
linger in the tall grasses, hover among
 the dandelion, lean along the yarrow
showing no fear when it considers the cylinder of your body.

To catch a bee

 take an empty can
with just a little something sweet in the bottom
 lure it from the flower
 like the juice of a grapefruit.

To catch a bee

 you'll need to wait—
stay in proximity, stoic, still
 as you can so not to foil the trap
let it see the can as a gleaming nest
 as it does the gutter or lamp post overhead.

To catch a bee

 you need focus—
a precision of the hand and wrist
 swift to cover the lip once it dips
its head seeking shelter from the sun
 its wings powdered in pollen striking the sides of the can.

Bird walk

She walks along and for long,
long is measured by the sun,
how its beams crop. The toads gloat
heavily near the working axe
wedged in a block of wood.

Alongside the ditch, she walks,
water still ponded from yesterday's rain.
In the dirt road, she prints her name,
half of it marked in clay. She bends
beneath the sun, a servile respect.

There are no fences here, things just run loose—
Way out in the field, there are bales of hay.
She wants to roll them,
perch on the tops of trees.
She slides her feet to make a trail,

see how long it'd be there. No one looks for her,
her name uncalled for hours,
her body moving in and out of sunlight,
and she knows when it's time to go home,
how nightfall brings with it, its own regarding light.

Even now I am lost

Even with the grass-green signs
and bulging bright-eyed billboards
I have a terrible sense of direction.

No matter where I am I can't seem to find
where I'm headed. It's like I'm sweeping
along in a globe of dust. Walking brick-

staggered around town I feel my wandering
steps will call the bluff of my confident face
retrace the path my feet have tread and still

the traffic jams in my head shouting
which way, that way, what way, wrong
way. Down in this town, country roads

don't warn, they bend, twist, curve, slide
dirt latching to the soles of your shoes,
pick-up trucks spitting it from the Earth

sending it into the air transforming
into a plume of sepia mist where I am lost
and swallowed in its forceful haze.

Letter #4

Mom,

How long has it been since I've written
to you? It feels long,
but I'm sure that you're well.
Right? Are you well?
I've been meaning to write
sooner, but I'll be down before you know.
I used the sewing kit you sent
for the first time this week.
I was wearing this sweater
and it split at the wrist.
I tied a knot in the thread
sewed the seam, remembered to tie it off.
It feels good knowing how to fix things.
How's church? Have you sung any new songs?
I remember the one that goes:
Pass me not O gentle Savior
Hear my humble cry,
While on others Thou art calling
Do not pass me by.

Love,
Laura

May 23, 2012

Pine Memoriam

Turning the car down the clay road
 first thing I see
are these wide tractor marks
 zig-zagging.
I thought nothing of them
 until the sun sawed my face.
The car and I drift unfamiliar—
 out in the deadened field
pines laid in rows of three
 sharp beside a lone sapling
bent toward the ground,
 where no sun nor rain
would stretch it straight again.

Not Even a Whistle or a Hum

My mother was born on all fives.
Crouching over, she pinches the stringed bean
from its stem with the tip of her thumbnail.

In between us, the brown paper bag
sags downward into the soil.
Her fingers are moving in ritual

when a ground beetle crawls across
her labored shoe. It doesn't hurry.
Its wide and rigid body waits

a moment atop my mother's foot
which grows up from the ground,
as if it were a tree stump

or a large rock. I swat
and shrug the bugs that help themselves
to the peas and squash, digging

beneath the soil, hiding from the sun.
I watch the beetle tarry there, my mother
in a daze. She wears a yellow straw hat

dented and tattered along the edge,
her hands keep moving, her breath steady
as the roots—she never sang, just planted her heels

and tended each row, the stems all honey-green
down the line, right down toward the pine
dripping its morning dew.

Rake

While the lowlands were still hazel
beneath an early sun,
I'd lift my head to the harsh
and humming crackle of leaves, the sound
steadied by my mother's hands,
only one of them gloved.
And I watched, before rising, a woman gather
by wielding her body, combing
through the soil rake-like,
thinking now, how a rake
can be made of a woman,
a hay-bound hellraiser
bending to collect the frizzled grasses,
shift them into weightless piles
until the fields were smoothed over
the rake leaning against the pine, leaves in its teeth.

We take the arm

also known as the wing
cut it from the body
fry it in oil
after being peppered
and salted
its flesh in the flesh
of my hand—
we wait—

*you see how it browns
along the sides...*

I take my station
at the stove
studying her motion
as she turns it over
with a fork, making
sure it comes out
right, telling me

*don't rush it
or it'll come out
runny in the middle*

I'm the middle child,
I walk alone
watching how it and I
would turn out,
parts of me beneath
hot grease, seasoned
under a barrel of oak trees
trying to clutch the feathers
to my back, to catch
a small wind, and lift
from this ancient cast iron.

String

She's headed to the city
away from country sheds
her head overgrown
with thoughts sweeter
than the gum tree. She
hauls her ankles
from the soil
a trail of roots
trailing behind.

She's headed to the city
away from the lowlands
deafened from the pang
of rain against sheet metal roofs
wondering how a cloud
would hang hat-like on her head
her belly full of collards
her neck a stem.

She's headed to the city
away from the fields of corn
and cotton her head quilted
with things less tangible
than the soybean.
She packs a sack of clothes
heavy on her back like a tree
needles pricking at her spine.

She's headed to the city away
from the ring of the rooster
where a machine wrings her shirts
where sirens lean in on her ears
where airing out means to open
your mouth. Away from the looming
vulture lowering itself
a thread hanging from its mouth
her toe tied to the end of it.

Unless I Dreamt I Was a Goat

It was like something yanked
me awake, up and out
from myself, lurching forward
into what I gleaned was mid-
night my right palm latched
to my nostril. I thought it was paint
dripping from my lip onto my breast
but the smell like metal, iron—

all those deer in the road, necks
broken and slung
lugged into a ditch
strung up
the hog hung by its hind legs
leaking
into a bucket
the gator, my father's axe
the rest of the gator's body
whipping around the backyard
the stray dog the trail it left
when dragged into the woods
the mice slain in the mouse traps
snakes slit from the blade of the mower
and here's my own blood,
rilling into my hand, maroon
and forgettable.

Origin and Obligation

I'm not a woman of the sea,
there are no written myths of me.
I dwell in the far field
a rusted metal rake I wield.

Road lined with pine needles and cone,
you'll hardly ever find a stone.
Perhaps the skin of moccasin,
maybe a squirrel, loose hen.

I'm a shaper of the land,
when tools break I use my hand.
With hunched back and feet I furrow,
witness an opossum in the hedgerow.

Long is the journey from here,
the more I'm far, the more I'm near.
Not drawn by an ocean wave
but by the cry of things depraved.

Hog full-grown it's time to slaughter
the eyes go to the eldest daughter.