

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THIS NOTHING: POEMS  
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This manuscript contains forty-two poems, written in primarily open forms, with some use of meter and measure in the line. One focus is to balance aural aspects of poetry—to transcribe the music heard in the mind—with visual aspects inherent in a written art form—to be interesting, beautiful and clear on the page. The poems follow an arc of momentum that seeks to convert the remembered moment into a map of the voice. Where they loosen, linger, or are halting, they hope to direct the pace of the breath. Any development in the work has been toward the idea of a measure based on my own breath, which incorporates an understanding of the tendencies of the language, while trying to remain faithful to an idiosyncratic voice.

THIS NOTHING: POEMS

By

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## **DEDICATION**

To Christopher, for everything.

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## WHITE SKY MIND

As the sky fills with rain,  
in the middle of the median  
a ghost of a woman stands biting her nails,  
holding her child's hand.  
Our heads turn past,  
eyes missing.  
Rain begins slowly  
tapping on my windshield.  
The sky holding back slightly  
—for her maybe.  
Wipers fog dirt and water.  
I don't want her to see in my face  
I think I'm better. I don't.  
I hate the sky  
when it gets like this.

When gray naked trees  
barely hold leaves,  
brown grass like wheat cut short  
echoes sadness, under white skies,  
skinny black birds fly south  
in shifting lines,  
I'm a girl at a lake  
where geese bite knees.

Everything is wet but it's not raining.  
There is mud but no puddles.  
The sky is empty, haze touches my face.  
It's been this way a lot lately,  
winter touching down.  
It's how I remember my childhood,  
the parts I don't remember.  
The gray lake and the goose,  
the photos of me with my brother,  
our small dark plaid coats,  
parents missing from the frame.  
Quiet but for water  
which is never quiet,  
and memory

which was trying to tell me—  
Hold this. There is meaning here.

## SUICIDAL IDEATION

I can almost see the cliff, see the man  
staring with eyes lowered as mine now.

I never knew him, my mother's old boyfriend,  
but his name was Michael. He ended it

off a cliff in a state park, the day before  
his wedding, and because

there is no sense in this world I can see  
but something else certainly that's everywhere,

a friend of my parents, someone Michael  
didn't know, was there with him that day—

this friend who used to sit and play  
his flute in the mountains, to be alone

with music, had seen others too and so  
he knew when Michael stood so quietly

alone at the edge for hours. They talked  
but what is there to say—and eventually

alone again he fell away from it.  
He fell and from his feeling of falling

something extended out and silently  
laced my grief to my mother's mourning.

That day she learned something I already knew—  
you can't love a suicide and you can't stop either.

## WE WERE ALL BORN AT HOME

Before me, Vermont, and more I don't know.  
I was born in Jersey, in Lawrenceville,  
in a small house that my parents found again  
after I moved away, when they sat on the steps  
and cried. Most of the rest in Pennsylvania.  
One brother came a year later in Bedford,  
and next year, the next one, at the Cow Palace,  
a commune they left because my mother  
hit my father and yelled that no one would  
wash the dishes. For five years, in Newtown,  
before the developments, before all the farms  
were gone. In the first of our years there,  
my sister was born, so there were six kids  
and four parents in the half of a duplex  
we shared with my Dad's sister's family.  
Then back to Jersey for one more year,  
to Allentown, closer to the nursery where  
my dad dug trees with guys from Trenton,  
Guatemala, Mexico and El Salvador.  
The kids at that school didn't believe we lived  
on that street because black people did,  
and my sister beat the boys in foot races  
and I started to remember these things—  
The Indian man down the street who gave  
my mother a turquoise bracelet she would  
always wear and wish there was something else  
held so closely, so my sister and I could  
each have something of her when she's gone.  
When I pull it on, I can't stop thinking  
it will get caught on the veins of my wrist,  
so my sister will get it. I can't remember  
her without it but can see her happy the day  
she got it. I wondered how my dad  
would feel, another man giving her jewelry  
while he was working in an empty field alone.  
After that, they built a house in Gravelpit,  
and my dad had to live east during the week,  
where there was work, for what it was worth.  
Two years of that before we were all  
back east, living in a house my grandparents  
owned in Bristol, down the street from where

they lived. They rented it to us for six short months before throwing us out to get more rent. The next six months in the cracker-jack box in Levittown, where we had cable because it was free, and my mom drove us every day to school, so we wouldn't have to change mid-year. Then back to Newtown, until I moved away, to live on the last farm left, in the middle of million-dollar houses. They've been there now for seventeen years. How do you move after that? The attic, filled with prom dresses, doll-house furniture, papers from so much unpaid nonprofit work, books from every level of education, things young boys would never think to save, the wood of unfinished work, empty boxes etched with dust. It's as if they can't leave. I've moved ten times now while they've stayed still, in that old stone home alone.

RIGOBERTO

As he paints my landlord's house where I live for now I stay inside blinds down  
listening to the persistent scraping  
unsure of whether he's ascended to the second story climbed his ladder to where I am  
standing naked about to shower

I can't explain my need to know him and my greater need to hide that his shy square  
face his voice that speaks Spanish  
in English he admired my choice of paint color asked whether I chose it this is in fact  
quite embarrassing for me

standing naked in the middle of my bathroom listening to the banging of windows  
and the quietness of this man  
and without resistance he becomes the men who unable to drive walk home from  
work across the highways I drive

I know nothing about these men seeing their faces in the backs of pick-up trucks  
exhausted and looking expressionless  
at what passes them by as they are driven job to job around this sprawling suburban  
work site

outside in the calm green day painting perfect straight lines like it matters Rigoberto  
thinks something  
about which I know nothing I know nothing I know nothing

WITNESS

He's not believed—

his memory now  
comes in fits.

At middle-age,  
having taken the stand, having since

it happened  
served in the military,

learned to sit straight  
and stare forward,

he testifies today  
facing an old man fading,

about his rape  
as a boy.

What came after? What  
began his forgetting?

A girl maybe.  
Or something less.

Maybe there was no memory,  
for years never a thought.

Why now in waves,  
scattered sharp parts—

Why would anyone listen  
and believe

something forgotten is less true?

NO FEAR OF WATER

They've moved the snow  
back to Tuesday. It's Tornado Week  
on The Weather Channel.

*It's Coming*  
the ad announces. You couldn't  
watch if you knew. But I don't.

Once, there were sirens  
and my mother, thinking of fire, didn't  
stop at the bank. We would have been

in the way, she thought, in a town  
that small. Maybe just minutes  
later, the town was under water.

We had to find another way home.  
I was ten when my parents  
built a house in the-middle-of-nowhere,

in a town with only a church  
and no work. We were trapped  
when it snowed. All the Storm Stories

seem the same regardless  
of wind or water. Damage is done.  
Everyone is crying and grateful.

I almost drowned when I was young  
but my father saved me. He was also  
the one who flipped the boat.

I watch the weather  
every ten minutes for hours  
to see what changes.

## THE SMELL OF DIRT

As I sink heels down in mud, as I hold  
soil in my hand, if I even think of dirt,  
with every breath, my father is there.

Mud padded and seeped through  
the knees of his work jeans,  
ten identical pair, ten dollars each,  
bought at the beginning of each season.

Soil nourishes plants he labors,  
sells for ten dollars a bag in New York City.  
He laughed at me for buying it there,  
where I lived and wanted to remember  
soil and him and air encouraged  
through photosynthesis or carbon release  
or something he would know,  
like the Latin botanical names  
for plants he has by heart.

Soil, mud, dirt—one of these things,  
it's hard to remember which now,  
not being knee-high, not being at home for years.  
One of them smells like him,  
who worked so hard yet barely sweat,  
never smelled of sweat,  
never dank like molded leaves,  
even after all day in mud and rain.

Years later, running my fingers through dirt  
or digging my fingers into dirt, this came to me  
like a revelation I can't shake—

My father smells like dirt,  
like the inside of tree branches snapped open.

He, who was midwife to my mother  
for my birth, for the three  
who came after, who wanted twelve,  
like a Catholic, like a farmer who has enough  
children to work the land,  
birthed four who don't know anything  
about the earth. Not like he does,

what it feels like, when the soil is right  
for a Japanese maple or what makes a dogwood  
grow here and not there, when the ground  
will freeze for winter. He knows  
everything about dirt I could imagine to ask  
but wouldn't. And how could he teach these things  
he has learned not about the earth  
but from it? And what does the earth  
know of him?

Heavy boot-shaped tread of mud,  
on our floors always and  
I, knee-high, his knees covered in mud,  
learned about dirt, about earth,  
about the smell of my father.

SOPHIA EVELYN, 8 LBS. 2 OZ., 11:54 A.M.

I'm on second shift tonight. Or think I am. If I knew my role, I wouldn't bake lasagna. At this stage—early labor, you'll call it later—when you're still smiling and we go for a walk, we still think there are roles and jobs and lists, that any of these things matter.

Outside, it's beautiful, even though we're in the park that isn't the nice park. It's spring, time for birth. You have always planned everything so perfectly. Later, when all you want is to lie with the father, I think, *This is how it's supposed to be,*

*romantic, like its origin.* And for a moment it is. Neither of us have done this before. You're getting scared, think everyone's staring, but you make progress. Our mothers tell us everything's progress, even when no movement is felt, that we can't see anything that matters.

We're learning we are so like our mothers, even in how we labor. That's what they tell us. But what do they remember? A number of hours, a time. Our weight, once we hit this world. Things we're still counting, waiting for. What we will remember of this

has yet to happen. We don't know why your labor has slowed. We don't know how this is supposed to go, whether it's okay. Even though we spent all day waiting, we still can't begin to imagine his lips and your nose nested on eight soft pounds.

Your mother says labor prepares you for never having control again. For twelve more hours, I feel this. It's so late now, sixteen hours since you called to say something I can't remember about the day, and, *oh by the way, I'm in labor, come over when you can.*

PARKING LOT MAPLE TREE

Just days ago aflame,  
now is the time to lie down.

Each leaf turning rigid alone,  
unable to stay soft, bendable,

they fall, overlap each other  
on dirt, in parking lots

they crumble, are absorbed  
inside again, inside this ground

I don't yet understand.  
I look away, seek nothing,

miss seeing even one leaf  
from branch to ground.

Feel no breeze  
against dehydrated eyes.

Can't pray, never could.  
But what instead?

Stark Naked Branches,  
rest will come soon.

## NOT LAUGHING

Sitting outside on a bench at a busy intersection.  
I see one man then another.  
Both in fatigues.  
One walking tall proud.  
The other slumped in the parking lot with a turban and a cup of change.  
What do they need?  
I hold my arms out for joy, ask it from everyone.  
Pathetically.  
Pathetically not laughing at anything.  
Driving home I pass a trash truck in opposing traffic.  
Mickey Mouse two feet tall and stuffed is strapped to its grill.  
Who pinned it there?  
What do they want from me?  
No laughter comes.  
A truck spouts exhaust, a puffy horizontal trail.  
It must not dissolve into the leaves of the small highway trees.  
When I pulled up my dress I was five walking to a friends'.  
Her mother yelled at me.  
My panties had ruffles.  
I didn't understand not showing them.  
My most embarrassing moments are funny to who?  
Why not me yet?  
School started recently somewhere in rural America.  
A teacher tried to explain to a boy why we don't clean our pants in the toilet.  
Why are they laughing?  
Is it more than etiquette I don't know?  
How not to be laughed at.  
How to stop feeling everyone outside like I know something.

## THE LIFE JACKET

The life jacket didn't slow my sinking.  
The canoe I would be pulled into floated  
gently over my head as my father dove,  
full of fear, thinking of my mother,  
from the capsized Sunfish to my descending  
six-year-old body. I remember being  
surrounded, eyes open, by water, wondering  
*will it always be like this?* and not being unhappy.  
When I think of being close to death  
I think of my sister. She wasn't even one  
when she fell from the third story window  
as my father watched the game. I was the one  
who saved her, kept her head from swelling,  
her skull from losing its one remaining  
connection to itself. That's what they said.  
I was four. I didn't want her to cry.

TORTURED FOR OLD SPEECH

Perhaps it was always this—At the gray lake,  
when the goose bit me. Maybe this was not  
a surprise. Maybe I already knew  
such things are of this world.

Gray sky, faded mind, lost in something,  
not this.

My mother first began to lose her faith in family,  
left alone with a man in a Cadillac's back seat,  
her parents in front, ignoring everything.

Is this my memory now?

Her father driving her always fast and drunk  
and now my fear of anything fast.  
Her brother writing obscenely in lipstick  
on her sister's too old body.

Why is this for my mind?

Why remember this? Memories holding what  
or why or for how long—

A slip of gray sky falls—

To find what isn't reconstructed  
from old photos, other people's stories.  
Not to find with closed eyes picturing the past.  
To feel. To feel it as early as it was felt.  
Was this always me? Was it always this?

I'm naked on a plastic bike  
with a boy I don't know. That's from a photo.

My aunt painted red, a dead featherless bird,  
and the imagined futile act of cleaning pigment  
with old dry soap and cold water, some of it  
staying, a refusal of forgetting—

These things my body remembers  
that I don't. In the way it moves,  
so absent, so hungry, what holds it here?

Things that aren't important, so much as  
permanent, vanish like ice on every branch.  
Beautiful and daring, the rain fell so quickly  
and on everything.

If my muscles move a new way—  
what's forgotten? The way those dead flowers  
looked back at me. I was so sure I'd forget.  
And in my parent's closet, a first kiss,  
unseen for years, does it still hang there?

Maybe nothing's forgotten, maybe  
not fully remembered.

Maybe before speech, I'm standing  
in the narrow entry to the pale, paint-peeling  
kitchen, listening to tall adults talking,  
talking about me—wanting to be part of this—  
what they didn't want me to remember.  
Now afraid to ask what they thought  
I would forget.

Struggling to find earliest thoughts  
buried in this mind, this separate thing,  
to know whether my mind was always this.

To feel again  
if I was happy then.

## WHEN SEX WAS PEEING

I have a broken memory of strutting,  
back when I was eight and thought sex  
was peeing on each other, with my  
two-years-older best-friend Becky,  
in scant sexy outfits—as small town kids  
imagine them—multi-colored bandannas  
as skirts. I don't think we wore tops.  
Swaggering like we were twenty years older  
and in Times Square, with cloth boas  
strung around our bare shoulders,  
down the aisle of an old school bus.

It was her bedroom, in the hippie camp  
of her parents' home, a conglomeration  
of old trailers and buses. Her brothers,  
one older and one younger, dirty stocky  
country boys, waited for us, their eyes  
glued to our impressions of sexy walking,  
in the bed at the end of the bus, where  
the last three rows of seats were removed.

I don't know if we ever had sex,  
just that I was usually with the younger boy,  
that we couldn't tell anyone where we were  
when we played, and at some point, we stopped.

## BANCHA

There is a tea my parents make  
that's hard to explain. No one has ever heard of it.  
They make it every day. Reddish brown, twigs settled at the bottom.  
It tastes like guilt. Not at first. It's an accumulation,  
every talk, every day, watered with this.  
My throat drowns in it even now.

RAIN LIKE THIS

Thunder shudders, collapsing  
somewhere past my vision,

a scattering of voices  
behind it. Alone, I've been

sitting on my screen porch  
waiting for rain, or

something else altogether.  
Flashes of light behind

the houses, hardly even  
distracting. All summer,

the sky would not open,  
pressed down and down,

I couldn't get out  
from under it,

couldn't ascend in mind,  
could only remember

the so-dry summer  
he died, the way the grass

burnt up by the end of June,  
how everything seemed dead,

how that hasn't left yet.  
When it finally breaks—

rain like this  
doesn't do anyone any good,

running down the street  
like that—

TSUNAMI

Bodies. There were bodies in the trees after the water fell back.  
It rose so slowly, no one saw it. Retreated first, so the children  
followed it, filled up with it flooded inside.

And when I talk of this, my father leaves the room, as if something  
wrong has been said. His leaving fills me.

This is a man who found out about the Holocaust as an adult,  
my mother saying, Can you imagine? Leaving high school, later learning  
that about the world?

What a thing to know,  
what my father didn't. What he couldn't handle hearing.

*Any undivided attention is prayer.*

On the radio, I hear one man's story: He lost none  
of his seven daughters. So, an obligation, he said, to help others.  
Gratitude, happiness:

I can see his hands on his spade as it lifts soil. Soil I know I'll never see.  
Imagined then, my arms lifting—

Like my father digging trees, lifting so much soil in his life, his spade  
deep in northeastern dirt. Imagined lifting.  
Imagined, the hole deepens. Readies itself for bodies,

not his daughters, but someone's, maybe known to him. Deepens,  
his thoughts only of his daughters, his luck...

Until it's too much—  
I try to release from his mind, climb out of this grave I'll never dig,  
stop myself from traveling farther than I ever will,

to every depressed place, unable to stop thinking until I can *feel* it.  
Feel him. What I think he feels...

*You, and I, same God. All, same God, a Sri Lankan says to a reporter.*

Gathering in shrines a month later to pray, stilt fishermen, spared because that day was a *poya*, a full-moon day, a monthly Sabbath forbidding killing, even fishing.

*Some of those who went to their morning prayers on that day, the imam cries, Did not pray in the afternoon.*

*This is the lesson for everyone.*

The tsunami picked up everything, called everyone by name. Decided who would live and die.

*Egalitarian damage*, the reporter wrote, to homes of those of all religions, *puts paid to the notion of a God who takes sides.*

But shrines in every town—Crucifix, Buddha, Shiva—spared.

*White flags everywhere: fluttering from phone lines, dancing above fresh graves in the local cemeteries.*

A Buddhist symbol of mourning.  
Something I've known only as surrender.

AFTER THE FLOOD

A woman is forced  
to wrap her husband,

dead not from  
but during the storm,

in their bed sheet,  
even his face covered,

maybe especially his face.  
Forced to pull his body

onto plywood, float him  
down the drowned streets,

until a driver, yelled at  
and paid 20 bucks,

threw the body  
on a flat bed truck,

with downed limbs  
of ancient oaks—

Her drenched face  
focused skyward,

her sheet-wrapped  
husband behind her,

unburies for me  
a long-forgotten face

worse than raw,  
half the skin gone.

The way we felt that day,  
driving that back road,

in the back of a pickup,  
our young butts

bouncing in the air,  
smashing down again

against the metal bed.  
A man down a ravine,

down there for days,  
his car fallen from the road,

caught by trees at the bottom,  
his orange sleeve flapping.

My mother slowing  
and stopping, seeing

his arm held out the window,  
fingers grasping the roof.

The way we felt after that,  
barely able to be there

with his face. Will she  
ever feel other than

she feels now, what we felt  
for only a forgotten moment?

UNWINDING

This day, I may not make it.  
My restless mind might break me.

The wind stirs so slowly, leaves  
wind down, give in to cold ground.

Wet sinks into bones, doesn't  
let go the chill. *Let go.*

Death has come close  
to tell me it's not giving up.

*Let it happen. Let go.*  
The bare nonbearing branches

need to be left alone awhile.  
He was not at peace but did die.

Quiet comes. Cold comes.  
Rain falls. We go inside.

THROUGH GLASS

I'm inside. The outside,  
the temperature of its air,  
chills my skin.

The forgotten outside,  
stuck, for a moment  
unsure, the last breath

that doesn't know  
it's last and waits too long  
so there can be no starting again.

Two little girls look through  
the window at me, but  
they stay outside.

Inside I am  
drowning in late-day light,  
objects all around rushing,

bypass my eyes  
for the back of my head,  
pull everything backwards.

I can't tell the difference anymore  
between calm and not calm  
but one is louder.

The sun—in my eyes—  
sets. Soon  
something will break.

SUICIDAL IDEATION (2)

Do you remember  
the beginning,  
the way we ran down that hill together,

hands finally entwined,  
the way you looked  
when you saw me

and how we stood so still?  
There was no solace between us,  
though I admit

I felt it there.

You lived only to teach me later  
how to feel this unalive,  
how to lose days, days, days like people.

Your face felt like a reflection.  
Only later did I see it—  
you were so close to death,

you made me feel it.

Only later did I learn  
more women try, but men succeed  
in dying every day.

After you tried,  
after all the stories your friends told—  
of you in solitary

only getting worse,  
of no bathrooms, no food  
and no one would let you out,

stories untrue only in detail, not in despair—  
after you disappeared,  
after you left what was left of me?

Sitting on a slightly slanted roof alone,

realizing I had nothing  
because I had you,

knew what you knew,  
what could never be severed  
and what could.

## REST

There it is: the first shock.  
Only one turns but  
it turns completely.  
All orange. All at once.  
Today I do not brace  
myself as usual,  
against the remaining  
green. They need to rest.  
These trees put forth all  
they had. Nothing now  
but the internal turning.  
Just enough to make it.  
Don't ask for more from them.  
The cold, an invitation  
to sleep. My organs  
shudder. My skin barely  
holds me in. I'm tired,  
want to rest, to let go,  
leaf by leaf, until, naked,  
the cold sleep comes.  
Is this death-longing,  
this refusal to wake to it,  
to what remains?

## FLOWERS FOR THE FAMILY

We prefer to keep the dead ones around  
than have no evidence of an offering  
from the gardens outside this stone house.

The ones in this room, a small bouquet as most are,  
a delicate touch, are so far gone, the moment  
the stem gave into the bud, fell down on itself,

is held in stiff repose. Water long-evaporated,  
they're not rotten but dried accidentally,  
would crumble, dust to my touch, fall evenly

in every direction, some touching the table.  
I think they were mums, shades of yellow, red, orange  
cling to once soft petals, hanging on to faint green arms.

Sometimes letting go is not the right thing, sometimes  
we can't move on. So, if you enter this home,  
don't ask us to discard the death in every room,

we're waiting for what no one can yet see  
and should you bring us flowers, don't imagine  
they will replace the remains of the rest,

we can always find another window sill or table  
to fill as we wait to know how long we will all last.  
Fall descends, summer lets go. We hold on.

## HEAVY GOLDEN NAGGING

The color of water after a week  
in a tin mop bucket shades my eyes,  
until I'm no longer angry at anything.  
I banged my head earlier and cried.

Light seems yellowed these days.  
Not illuminating or pure.  
At best, a heavy golden nagging,  
and always against a blue backdrop.

There are some I would have stuck around for  
but never did. I'm always addressing things  
to other people, but no one thinks it's for them.  
Why is everyone always leaving?

Warm and dark, pale white and frail. The sky  
has distanced itself, is not touching  
the gray trees. Nothing is touching them.  
So stark, it's embarrassing.

It's the dullness, the physical feeling of falling,  
of being held still, that releases. The tone  
of his voice was so nothing, it was hard to breathe.  
My squinting eyes and sinking throat

demand something. Then it goes away  
like nothing, like everyone. Don't let me  
talk about people who have already forgotten.  
It's not about them.

HONEYMOON BATH WATER

Crying and scared in a bathtub in Paris,  
deep as my shoulders and short as my knees,  
mourning every ending, as my new husband  
rubbed my skin under the slowly cooling water,  
I felt the bathwater as if it was inside me,  
sure it was there—  
something that could be sensed and touched.

We could see the Eiffel Tower from that room  
but barely walk around the bed.

There was nothing  
in that room but a bed.      Nothing to fear,

no space in which to fear, no space to be inside.  
He was so patient.      So with me.

I'm so easily  
astonished. His patience— some things, I forget:

how easily I can bury myself in water. Others, I can't:  
how the light from the tower couldn't reach me there,

how I can be so far from birth and still fear it.

Crying in a bathtub in Paris I realized I try  
to live my life for a daughter I don't yet want,

so when she's the age I was when I discovered  
my mother's art, drawings she kept no one saw,

she won't uncover how much      I buried myself.

BLOOD STAINED, LIKE MY MOTHER

She never thought she was beautiful  
until she had babies.

With me she thought,

*At least I'll have a piece of him  
even if he doesn't stay.* He did.

I came first, not last.

Why do these thoughts come  
with menstruation, at the very moment  
of the connection and the pain?

•

She was the one in the waiting room  
that day, so far from birth,  
when the bleeding began again,  
and I was 19 and she was 20,

nineteen years before that,  
and I waited in recovery, not ready  
to face her after saying without words,  
we want such different things,

not knowing what I wanted,  
not knowing, like she did—  
what being a mother  
even has to do with wanting.

•

She was always there, always.  
No memory argues this.

*Think about what you are creating,  
she said, with every breath.*

I said I would do something  
If not that something.

OUT THE WINDOW AND DOWN

Six stories up—the rain blooms  
below, puddles where  
the ground resists.

Water's dainty muscle  
slowly wearing even pavement.  
It's called muscle memory:

Rats being tested  
run along walls, even after  
the walls are gone.

MY MOTHER'S WISDOM TEETH

My quiet father calls to say,  
*She's really feeling the loss,*

but he is speaking of my mother's teeth,  
not even all of them, only two.

*It goes back to the first time—*  
he's telling me a new story,

one he only just today heard himself  
*back to when her parents just left her*

*at the dentist alone,*  
*didn't explain what would happen.*

He's saying this like he can't imagine,  
can't stomach such a withholding.

It was just a cleaning—  
she waited all day before the dentist

made her leave, pointed the way  
for her to walk in the dark.

And because this is my mother's life,  
or her story, her telling being told to me,

my father says, impossibly,  
*Also, it was Halloween.*

There was a man in a white sheet,  
later found to be a neighbor,

who tried to help her. But she ran  
all the way alone, back to her parents.

*They were perfect, she would*  
tell me later, *Do you understand?*

Do you know this kind of loss? Can you feel  
my grief over this, such a small thing?

Although I'm only now being told,  
maybe I have known it all along.

The way if our mothers were hurt,  
in our bodies we know this.

## TEAR JAR

As if an inheritance, as if sadness  
with us could be untold, bottled.  
Absent tear jar I share with my mother,  
as if we were Jewish, in sorrow beholden,  
to history, to harming each other.

In stories she tells, my father drinks her tears,  
absorbs her sadness freeing her from it. And still  
it is something she always wears. But for him  
a refusal to transmit. His youngest brother died  
of heroin at the kitchen table. It was his fault,  
he believed, his obligation undone. His own judge,  
he waited days in an open field by fire for reprieve.

In all my mother's tears, nothing like this,  
its nothing shared and nothing to dismiss.

JUST ENOUGH

A sudden slip of sky falls through,  
a black and white night fails.

We have not always been like this,  
so exposed, so blown-out

at the edges where the light hits.  
Nothing noir but more than this

is needed—more than a quiet girl  
who leaves just enough out, holds

just enough back. How we all  
envy her strong calm arm.

How we wish this night held less  
harm for her, for all of us.

BELONGING

If I could let gravity push my body down

I could be here, under this bright moon  
with you who I love

in our small house,  
as if the wet ground was melting

into our separate skins, through the frame  
of this bed.

The first time my parents made love  
was under a sky of fireflies.

Pressed against ground,  
they are at home outside,

as if they belong.

Inside tonight  
the moon lights our room

and I know not even in death will we melt  
into the earth's uncaring dirt.

This refusal to be taken by anything,  
our ridiculous objection

to one another  
to the ground that holds us.

Even in death, under shallow ground,  
our velvet-lined, mahogany refusal to admit

we belong to anything.

IT'S A GOOD DAY

when your eyes &  
mouth seem big &

it isn't all  
about the smell

of remembering,  
it's not thinking

as you move through—  
How long can you

hold that?

JOHNNIE COCHRAN JUST DIED

And I remembered  
years before, when Geronimo Pratt  
was released from prison after twenty-five years for a murder  
he didn't commit, we arrived late.  
Three of us, standing in the gym of the Girls & Boys High School,  
my only trip to Bed-Stuy,  
where one of us lived and had been mugged.  
Black Panther bodyguards along the back walls  
made us find separate seats, all that were left.  
Only shooters would stand,  
I guess. One by one  
we sat alone.

I thought  
the woman to my left was glaring,  
so I edged unnoticeably right, I thought,  
sat straight tall in new black jeans, purse on my lap,  
like a white-gloved lady. A fool.  
So, unexpected from my right, from a man,  
*Why are you here? I know some  
think it's okay, but this is a celebration for black people.*  
Nowhere to go for another hour but *sorry*,  
and all around, the excitement.  
He was free.

## THE DIGGERS

When she finds out they are sleeping on the floor,  
my Mom asks the Mexican guys who work for them  
what they have. Cups, one says. We have cups.  
She starts to gather things for them from friends.

Juan, Sylvestre, Abelino,  
whose wife slept with his brother while he was away,  
Miguel, who speaks no English, so my brother Michael,  
a Spanish major, writes words for my Mom to speak to him.

Some names are new each season.  
It's hard work and guys get tired.  
They call my Dad "boss," which he hates.  
They laugh when he says he's not the boss.

It's almost Christmas and they want to go home.  
Though it's cold, the ground hasn't frozen yet,  
so for my parents, the season's not over. It's been years  
since the ground has frozen in winter.

Longer since they've had a break.  
They have eleven guys working for them now,  
but don't own a home, may never retire.  
My Dad is fifty-two, has worked like this his whole life.

## AFTER ANOTHER LATE DAY

Awake again before the sun rises,  
dirty again before breakfast,  
my mother is obsessed with clean cotton sheets,  
tries to change them twice a week.

My parents work together, work past dark.  
At home, they work more. There is no  
being at home. Work is where they live.  
Come home dirty, shower, get in bed.

The driveway is always full of trees  
kept alive for other people.  
Muddy boots outside the door for morning  
and still dirt on all the floors.

They bought a used BMW recently,  
not a van, all four kids gone now,  
and it's not held together with duct tape,  
like the yellow station wagon when I was young.

They love how it rides, not like work trucks.  
Maybe it's their way of saying,  
We want more than this. We want  
something that isn't dirty.

## THIS NOTHING

A man lying in a border shelter talks  
of trying once again and not failing.  
Eleven times and again he was caught,  
another life not worth living. Dying  
for this is not a risk for him. He waits.  
In other places, old men under umbrellas  
with typewriters are lawyers. Listen for  
their clacking keys. Are we at war because  
I can't hear them? Because trying to hear,  
to explain that poor people in North Dakota  
should care because it's the right thing to do  
is beyond my imagination? Because  
on my wedding day, I didn't remember  
a girl at an altar, marriage arranged?  
Maybe we all breathe out and think nothing,  
nothing endures, not even this nothing.

TWILIGHT

Purple glow of sheer white  
bedroom window curtain,  
only as long as a first glance,  
gone before wholly there.

That day I was so sure  
and actually said so:

I knew the secret of it all,  
but couldn't say, wouldn't tell you.  
So sure for the time it took  
to say it, then it was gone

and I had to fake it, had to  
say it, to almost believe it.

ON THE WAY HOME FROM SEEING MY COUSIN, WHOSE FATHER HAS TWO WEEKS

In my head, so  
I don't notice at first  
maybe five giant bees,  
comical, big as cars,  
on a flatbed truck, yellow  
and black and smiling.  
My uncle is dying.  
My mother tells everyone  
but those we love most  
aren't dying until they're dead.  
So I hug my cousin,  
my sister really,  
and tell her I'm flexible  
to which she laughs.  
She needs nothing  
but sleep, can't eat,  
wouldn't see these bees  
at all. And I'm not sad  
for my uncle, he's  
given up already,  
doesn't feel the dying  
like she does.  
Two more weeks, more  
or less, when no one  
will notice big bees  
and think about where  
they could possibly be going  
this Sunday night at ten o'clock.  
Who needs bees like that?  
Who can be happy? Who  
among us isn't thinking  
of their own death?  
Who has the time  
for big silly bumble bees?

DIRT & LIGHT

It's raining on the ground—  
the plane I'm in pulls into  
then above the clouds to where,  
as far as I know, it can't rain.

Distinct puffs of water  
in some airy form, visible  
below before we pull through  
another layer of blank white:

Stratus, cumulous, nimbus.  
I don't know which name  
to call them, because in ninth grade  
I didn't do my homework.

For a week we were to watch the sky.  
With his finger in my face, my teacher  
failed me, said only the names  
of clouds on those days would do.

A play of dirt and light outside  
when my eyes go vague reminds me  
of when, younger, I told my mother  
I could see air, and she didn't say

I couldn't. I saw something, why  
couldn't that be it? Clouds and the sun—  
no longer seen. Not just dirt and light,  
the play of a young mind.

FIRST STAR—FOURTH OF JULY

Blanket in the backyard,  
missing the fireworks.  
Nothing seen but bugs.

No light in them  
like childhood.  
Heavy here—

us alone—  
*I wish I may*  
*I wish I might*

Explosions sound like television,  
like war on television,  
the holiday's origin,

you say:  
a show of force  
without death.

The crowds,  
we do not join.  
Quiet nothing in a blank sky.

Lying here  
the way we're supposed to  
but in the wrong place.

*I wish I might*  
See something here alone  
with you, feel something,

fall back to ground,  
gaze grounded  
on something.

*You're engrossing,*  
you say.  
I can't come down.

Keep staring

at the first star  
I saw tonight.

Keep wishing I could  
fall back, find you  
next to me

on a blanket in our yard  
star-gazing  
on a cloudy night.

## LEARNING HOW TO DO IT

So that there's nothing  
different in dying  
than in every day

so there's nothing  
to say  
in the end

to be ready to leave  
to not fear  
my body gone

you forgetting  
to not  
make you

keep me here  
to not hold on  
after you

let go  
to let  
go

FINDING FORM

*What bond have I made with the earth  
having worn myself against it?  
—Wendell Berry*

Standing in the median  
the man offering me flowers  
on my way home every night  
while I'm stuck at a red light  
reminds me of my father.  
So much shorter, but quiet  
and dark from sun and rough from work  
in the same way. I always refuse him,  
though he smiles, always reaching out  
with flowers, not just to me, to anyone.

At home, petals all over the table.  
I always keep tulips too long,  
past when they give it up.  
From my father, I learned  
pregnant women should always have flowers,  
just days before I wasn't. In bed after,  
I tried to memorize the contours  
of later-forgotten flowers, what was in his garden  
that September. So many years later,  
I hardly remember lying there,  
with a sadness sharper than death,  
watching his offering fade.

Outside, my eyes find what they always find,  
the stump left in the center of this yard.  
It brings death down close to the ground  
where I sit now, hating it, not wanting it  
to be—like intimations of mortality  
in Gothic gardens—included here,  
as an echo of something forgotten.  
No machine would fit through the fence  
so they left the stump, remains  
of what once towered. I don't know why  
I hadn't bothered to notice  
it hardly bragged any branches.  
As soon as he saw it, my father knew

it had to go.  
I imagine its roots still extend  
far underground in this small backyard,  
their edges mingling with roots of living  
trees and bushes huddled near the boundaries  
close to the fence. They no longer hold anything,  
have already begun to rot, disintegrating into soil.

*Ask it to come back later, my mother said,  
when you're ready. Ask it to go away.*  
My mother, who thought maybe my father  
wouldn't stay, maybe she would have  
only me to show for all her love of him,  
decided that if that was all there was,  
it would be enough. And so got more.  
*That's one life. I want another:*  
that's how I thought of it, those are  
the words I used.

It's hard not to forget,  
even when I stumble where the roots edge  
gently above the grass, the network of extension,  
the reaching out, unseen underneath my feet.  
What holds these trees here. I know  
I can't see what makes them stay.  
Whispering at their wingtips where they fly  
in the wind, it's the delicate parts  
that capture my mind. My father is drawn  
to the roots of things, honors them, hangs them  
above the mantle on the living-room wall.

In a rhythm of arms lifting, boots pushing  
down into the ground, his spade hits the dirt.  
It was the sound of work when I was young,  
this labored scraping against hard earth.  
Scraping away surrounding soil, my father  
circles a tree's root-base, throwing ground  
behind him, snapping the roots that don't fit  
as he digs deeper.

He knows how to do this  
to keep each different tree alive. Descending  
into it as he digs, hugging the edge always  
of what the tree is, what it needs to be

to live, what parts that get to leave here.  
After laying down sheets of burlap  
and pulling intricacies of twine tight  
around the root-ball, he begins rocking  
until it loosens and gains movement,  
is left on its side to be taken later.

After school, my mother would bring us  
to those fields my father worked. We sat  
together on the sides of empty circles,  
kicking our heels against the small ditches,  
against the always somewhat wet dirt,  
kicking our small feet to feel the resistance  
of the earth. The horizon—a long row  
of aging saplings waiting to be uprooted.

Those fields my father worked  
all looked the same, all used the same  
plastic tree tape, absurd neon-colored strips  
of red or blue that fluttered in the wind,  
that told him what to do. In these places,  
where factory-like rows of trees stood,  
the chaos underneath the green surface  
was endless, held everything together,  
me and my sister and our brothers,  
our parents, who couldn't bear to be  
apart for a whole day, needed to meet like this,  
my father muddy and tired,  
my mother dragging all of us along.

Once, sitting with my mother in a field,  
waiting for my father to finish another day,  
she told me Buddhists believe only  
the first tear is real. All the rest is ego.  
Vanity. I'd been crying, had just made  
what felt like the first decision of my life,  
that no life should start with tears.  
The horizon dimmed and fell away.

*I'd waltz across Texas with you in my arms  
Like a storybook hero I'm lost in your charms  
I'd waltz across Texas with you,  
he sang her songs between contractions*

as my sister was born. On a scrap of paper  
found many years later, he drew a picture—  
a round silhouette of a woman calm  
like Virgin Mary, sonar markings leading  
to a baby, fetus-looking, a series of times  
marked down before labor closed in on them  
and he stopped scribbling lyrics he was singing,

*And if you find she helps your mind  
better take her home and don't you leave her alone,*  
So hopeful having found each other,  
having found something on which to build,  
ground on which to plant something.

Everywhere they lived they planted gardens.  
I've never planted anything, not since that one  
tiny bed, each of us had our own small plot.  
We sorted through seeds, picked too many  
varieties. Such hope in this, in growing things,  
their hopefulness always.

Why do I hold nothing  
like this, this desire to grow something  
for what comes next, for us if we stay?  
Why can't we find somewhere to stay,  
somewhere to plant something, together,  
even annuals, something alive that's ours?

When I watch my father pruning away  
whole branches, live things, not because  
they're not part of the healthy plant, green  
and bright and flowering in his calloused hands,  
because they're not according to his vision,  
I think, I was healthy, it was healthy.  
I was trying to shape something—this life—  
to train it how to grow.

My husband and I have tried to garden  
in our yard, unsure of what's weeds and what stays,  
we cut dead branches and left things looking odd,  
overgrown or overdone. A bright pink azalea like a bonsai,  
a wildness of unknown green at the fence.

And then we leave it too long alone.

My father finds form in formlessness,

cuts away thin wisps, fearless. In such chaos,  
I find something true, something frightening.

It's all highways where I live now.  
Straight lines only below me. Hardly a horizon.  
I haven't been to those fields in a long time.  
Of what was there then, what's left is this now:

My father falling asleep on evergreen branches  
brought inside from cold to make holiday wreaths.  
Lying on the living room floor, looking like baby Jesus,  
but tired, really just tired. My father  
standing in the doorway removing his boots.  
He sighs. A young girl breathes in  
the smell of dirt, a life.  
On his white t-shirt a green silhouette  
of a large sprawling oak above the words  
*I think that I shall never see  
a poem as lovely as a tree.*

When I show him poems, my father makes  
no comments but, *You don't mess with the mind  
of a poet. You can't tell them what happened.  
It doesn't matter. It's what you make of it.*  
My mother smiles *Sure* and settles  
into her kitchen chair for a line-by-line.  
It's all in the unsaid. The center—empty.

The center tree was dead. Not birch or oak,  
its green moss-covered bark fell away,  
exposed the inside. It was no longer held.

My father tried to improve our yard,  
to disentangle old bricks from mud and vine,  
create landscape from nearly nothing.  
His will defies neglect, a chaos  
he can't accept. The forms he sees,  
creates until his spade is dull with work,  
a grace I do not find.

Trees are ageless until their death  
when we count their years from inside.  
My father's worn out spade still stands,

sticking out of the soil where it was left  
last autumn. Bright green points poke  
absurdly out of the warm ground into air,  
a relic of who was here before  
or something altogether uninvited.

Today I cried for all of this—the loss,  
the formlessness, the death that sinks even now  
into all I am—and tomorrow  
when my husband brings me flowers,  
I'll try to look at them and let them be  
    just beautiful flowers  
        meant for me with love.

## SLEEPING TOGETHER

I came to bed  
late as usual.  
You were asleep,  
I think.  
We didn't kiss.  
But still,  
you breathed  
your body  
closer to me,  
unknowing.  
The fan rattles.  
Our breath slows.  
Outside  
cicadas sing  
of lonely love.  
In our bed,  
we begin  
another year,  
spines aligned,  
half asleep  
and too quiet  
and not quiet enough  
and it's fine.