

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

RESPITE

Meghan Elizabeth Vesper, Master of Fine Arts, 2008

Thesis Directed by:

Professor Joshua Weiner  
Department of English

These poems offer reflection on different stages of grief through persistent questioning and re-examination. The natural world serves as a space for observation and reawakening of the senses, through both lyric and narrative modes. While speculation on the lost beloved is present, this collection gains energy primarily through meditations on the self and a curiosity about how we choose to interact. These poems challenge and complicate our understanding of happiness, solitude, and replenishment, discovering clarity without declaring a resolution.

RESPITE

by

Meghan Elizabeth Vesper

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2008

Advisory Committee:

Professor Joshua Weiner, Chair  
Professor Elizabeth Arnold  
Professor Michael Collier  
Professor Stanley Plumly

© Copyright by  
Meghan Elizabeth Vesper  
2008

for Nikki

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### I.

Hike	2
Mating Season	3
Yarn Shop	4
Apology with Sunflowers	6
In the Blue Ridge	7
Radiation Treatment	8
Colorado White Water	9
Cold Front	10
Michigan Decembers	11
En La Sierra Madre Oriental	12
Heat Lightning	13
Birdsong	14
Drought	15
Gas Leak	16
After the Break-up	17
Missing Box	18

### II.

Cold Snap	20
Reprimand	21
After Finding a Sparrow Nesting in the Bluebird Box	22

Monostichs on Grief	23
What He Might Have Said	25
Infection	26
Property Line	27
Threshold	28
Rain Dance	29
Advent	30
Hutchinson Sand Hills	31
Another Evening Out	32
Respite	33
Notes	34

I.

*...the will is pushed around by passion  
and instinct, and where that lands us  
is to obvious for me to need to mention.*

—Austin Farrer, *Said or Sung*

## HIKE

Cherry blossoms opening like small oysters.  
You help me cross the wet river rocks and if I slip,  
hit my head on the lovely, jagged stones, lovely  
in the way the water washes over them, my blood  
will join the river—I've often tripped on my own  
pigeon-toed foot, after our first dinner together, countless  
times in grade-school—the quick current slowing  
only as the river-bed flattens, water skaters skimming  
the surface and campers sometimes skipping stones.  
Your legs slice through waist-high weeds, the trail  
overgrown, or am I lost, having descended the steep banks  
as one of your shortcuts? For you, a certain pleasure  
taking the most difficult routes; nimble and as confident  
as a clawed animal when you crossed a tree trunk, the only  
bridge spanning a deep ravine last month. I insisted on retracing  
our half-circle around the quarry lake, the blossoming trees  
at their peak, offering a tasteful number of flowers to the wind,  
sweet scent—we could have been in a laundry detergent  
commercial. Today, after easing myself down the bank  
with ferns and saplings as anchors, heart pumping in my throat,  
I pause, pretending to look closer as something stirs  
in yellow hawkweed, a squirrel sounding larger than its size?  
You think we balance each other: my obsessive desire  
for order, your thrill in taking risks, bending rules—  
how can I tell you my faults, when will our poses fall away?  
—always in motion, you're waiting for me, tapping the toe  
of your boot on a tree root thrust up from the earth.  
Picking a leaf from my hair, you smile; the silence—ours,  
the surrounding woods'—now peaceful. Like when my father  
saw the brown bear hunched in the middle of our path  
was actually a tree stump, tall and notched.



## MATING SEASON

You stayed asleep,  
even as I called from

the kitchen. Outside  
two male raccoons

circling—ears flat,  
heads lowered, fur

bristled. In the low  
glow of the moon, I watched

the larger raccoon thrash  
his tail. He hissed.

Sharp, short cries  
of the other one...then

I opened the door  
the dog streaked across

the lawn, treed one  
as the other darted

into dense woods.  
You said I was

stupid, raccoons kill  
dogs. But you slept

through the small  
one's squalls out-

side our window.  
The dog in bed

between us. My fingers  
planted in his fur.

## YARN SHOP

*It's Bliss* – the sign's pristine white wood and tasteful lettering, like cross-stitch, fits the demeanor of this neighborhood: men on their blackberries, women in heels I could never walk in—attractive, few overweight or not white, talking business or their recent trip to Vegas, as I'm stranded in the rain, having waited hours for my car to be repaired. In the yarn shop, women discuss housekeepers, their children, one buys new underwear rather than doing wash. When I was five or six, I overheard my parents discussing our friends, leaving the neighborhood for a promotion, their girl my age shocked that my mother didn't have a master bedroom—*You need to ask for one*. Even years later, in a nicer house, our rooms never looked like most of the neighbors'—hotel clean, or the way a guest treats someone else's house—we had too many full bookcases, dog fur collecting in corners hard to reach with a vacuum, and my mother's projects spread on the floor: different size knitting needles, a pin-cushion half-under the couch. I've watched her unravel entire scarves to fix one or two mistakes. Here, the shelves of yarn are divided by type: frog tree merino, aussie wool, baby alpaca, silkroad dark tweed... colors giving them a brilliancy you want to wear—pumpkin and pale peach, olive and marigold, just red or blue still have a richness, the wool spun in Peru or Argentina. Llama silk, 10.75 for 100 yards—my mother would know if it's overpriced. She measures a yarn's quality between thumb and forefinger, similar to how she gardens: no gloves, unnoticed scratches on her arms, dirt grooved beneath her nails all summer. When bugleweed overran the garden during her radiation treatment, she pulled them as soon as she could see straight, carefully removing all of the roots. There she was standing in the doorway, trying to kick off her shoes and not track in dirt, I remember the times I criticized her for spending more hours in the garden than cleaning house, any kind of clutter a distraction from what I should have been doing. Past button tubes, all sizes, and something called kidsilk spray, like a garland with foil shapes attached, I circle the store back to the yarn, finding it impossible to stop looking at their labels. I feel like saying them aloud

—Do *you* knit? The owner's lips like the clasp of an evening bag, her shoes and glasses sea-green, she stares me down. My eyes on the door, like a thief, a thief of what? Wool-words? I tell her my mother knits felted bags—*I'll bring her here when she visits*—and how beautiful her store is, but I'm thinking of the dog fur on my coat, my sneakers and socks wet from the rain, and something—lint?—feels gritty between my toes. Shamed, like I'm five and sharing a room again with my sister, having just switched the Christmas ornaments on our dressers, convinced hers

were probably better. Why do I feel vulnerable, unlike at a recent ceremony I planned, when a fat security guard (probably three or four times my weight) got right close to my face, in front of guests and yelled *Do you want to be in charge?* —*I am* (my hand extended) *I am in charge.*

## APOLOGY WITH SUNFLOWERS

I sliced their obstinate stems with a knife.  
The night before, I woke to him buttoning a shirt,  
preparing to leave (to where?), the strange glow  
of my computer screen on his face, otherworldly,  
as if he was emitting a faint blue light. I can't  
remember how I convinced him back to bed,  
his warmth as I re-entered sleep. How can I convey  
what happened the next morning? What I'm saying  
feels rehearsed and inadequate. Shocking you  
with violence would exploit his brokenness, or cast  
one of us as a victim. I'm not blameless. I wanted  
to save him, but also wanted to save myself—  
from being alone. To secure happiness  
I tried preserving the successful parts of my life  
in containers. I valued record-keeping, the hope  
of return (redemption?). Charismatic, an ability  
to entertain anyone, I met him as he started seminary.  
Why couldn't I admit my perception of him was false?  
Like learning Audubon shot those exquisite birds,  
I tried not to dwell in it; it seemed I loved a man  
who didn't exist. I couldn't reconcile his rage  
and affection, he flew hundreds of miles to see  
me for my birthday. On the porch, we had shared  
a comfortable silence. Unlike the last visit  
to his parents', as we watched a surgeon saw  
off a tree's branches. By evening: chopped wood  
hauled away, stump leveled. Neither of us  
reached for the other, or had anything to say.

## IN THE BLUE RIDGE

The ground, the damp gravel where  
you stake your tent, the dripping leaves—  
and how the night fills you,  
two owls calling across the woods  
as you eat dinner, ground beef, potatoes,  
onion wrapped in foil and shoved into the fire.  
Split logs over crumpled newspaper,  
kindling with mold bursting into white blossoms...  
the smoke follows you like mist  
drifting through trees, settling on the ridgeline.  
You've hiked these mountain trails,  
through muck and hydrangeas past their peak,  
blossoms drooping, fading,  
you've fallen on rain-slick rocks,  
flat on your back as if watching clouds,  
a little blood on your brow,  
wondering if you will ever be found—  
or lie here, until skin sinks from bone  
and bone is crushed into rock.

RADIATION TREATMENT  
for CGV

You have double vision, can't control the movement of one eye. Remember the neighbor's boy, how he lost his when a coke bottle exploded in the garage, same winter the wind chill dropped below zero and our pipes froze. Some days I saw him, wool scarf pulled across his face, though his glass eye matched the blue of his right—well, almost matched. Looked real until the other shifted, perhaps to follow a girl with a broad bottom walking down Seminole. You would rather wear a patch or have your eyelid pinned down. You will still garden—mornings, before the humidity is intolerable, hauling manure from the truck to spread around the hostas.

## COLORADO WHITE WATER

Bobbing in his lifejacket,  
the body had drifted downstream  
with the current, over dams and rocks.  
If you had known?  
You drove through the storm,  
talked with a ranger  
who told you to wait.  
Crouched on the bank,  
you stared at the swollen river.  
Trained for this?  
No, not for the furling white water,  
the sharp, chiseled rocks  
that splintered your paddle.  
The only thing you heard  
was the pulse inside your ears.  
When did you notice your name  
was not being called?  
This was years ago, when you were young.  
Now you wonder where you passed his body.  
You wonder if he was already a part of the river,  
one of the rocks or fallen branches  
with budding leaves.

## COLD FRONT

Our bulbs bloomed in early November,  
daffodils lined the pavement to our door.  
Inside I deep-cleaned the house, scoured  
even the wastebaskets with bleach.  
The cold front is finally coming.  
I had to close my bedroom window last night  
and thought of you and the bare earth next spring.  
I remembered the first evening you lied,  
and further back, fireworks being set off  
on the sidewalk of your street, having to park  
farther from the house—the neighbors'  
sparklers spraying fire at my feet.  
That night, you told me you once tried to shoot  
a bird with your uncle's gun, a thrush  
perched on a neighbor's feeder. Your mother  
thought you had shot your brother,  
you laughed at how it didn't surprise her.  
I tried to smile. You lit candles to distract me,  
we danced in the dark. I could hear firecrackers,  
we lay in bed as you rubbed ice cubes  
on my back in the July heat. Only the sound  
of mice scratching in the walls. Then whistling  
lit rockets, a loud shower of shells. I turned,  
and in the low light, your eyes seemed  
fixed on something I couldn't see.



## MICHIGAN DECEMBERS

Those Decembers, when the wind cuts across the lake,  
freezes the surf, sculpts snow over sand, days  
and you don't see the porch railing, the brown ground,  
hear only shovels slicing through snowdrifts, striking ice. . .  
And when the power blinks, when the well stops pumping,  
you feel by flashlight and feast on melting food.  
You dress before the woodstove, in layers, longjohns,  
insulated jeans, wool sweater, and even then you want  
to place your cheek against the surface of the hissing stove.  
The house so quiet, you step outside and listen to the skid  
of car tires and snowplows spraying salt. And then there are  
branches cracking, coated in ice, and birds sweeping down,  
fighting at feeders, splitting seeds in their sharp, white beaks.

## EN LA SIERRA MADRE ORIENTAL

Your first sips of tequila, yes—  
I cut you from my stomach the night  
I usually mend clothes, the night  
your father hiked to the cantina  
before I knew you wouldn't push  
your head through to the world.  
The dirt floor under my feet,  
the path from bedside to table, table  
to front door open to the mountains,  
the darkness of the clouds crowding the moon.  
It was still dark when I started the fire  
and found a piece of wood to bite down on.  
I held the blade in the flames—  
the knife we use to slaughter chickens—  
then took three shots of tequila.  
Lowered my body onto empty flour sacks  
and the earth. Four cuts across my belly  
before I lifted you out, wiped the blood  
from your closed eyes. Your parting lips.

## HEAT LIGHTNING

He chewed his dog-bed to bits.  
Back from errands, we find him  
still whimpering after god-knows how long,  
his mouth foaming, the metal bars of his crate bent.  
Like a gerbil on its wheel, he circles the tight  
living room as we fix and eat dinner.  
You think his bad behavior will pass,  
the way a rainstorm would relieve this heat—  
my excuse for trouble falling asleep, or locking  
my keys in the car while it was still running,  
not noticing until I couldn't find them  
later in my purse. Most of our nights are now spent apart.  
You may fail your psychiatric tests for ordination.  
And over several weeks, a doctor burns off what  
you lied about, the disease already burrowed in me,  
will it burrow in a future baby?

Now the dog jerks me forward, choking himself  
as he strains to sniff a little farther ahead.  
Your face blank, lips drawn together tightly.  
Near the fountain and our favorite donut shop,  
four men in glittering blue suit jackets  
who know how to jazz, their music continuing  
while they pause—bold trumpet and saxophone  
echo within the circle of city buildings.  
The dog, thinking it's gunshots or something else,  
slinks between us. You take his leash.  
Shouldn't we be dancing, spinning together  
until my feet swing up from the ground?  
Your fingers graze the back of my neck.  
I think of lightning splitting the sky last week.  
Wanting to see the first shoots of rain,  
I waited at the window as you slept.

## BIRDSONG

I sing as the crow, yes, the crow circling  
above the church spires. You expected a sweeter,  
more docile song from this slender throat.  
Warbling, perhaps, or the soft low notes  
of the mourning dove. Docile mourning dove.  
A bird you can kill with a carefully aimed stone.  
And you? You sing a deep, distant humming.  
Listen. The crisp, light ringing of bells  
on the quarter hour. You wish to lure me  
far from these spires.

## DROUGHT

I could have burned half of Howard county with one match.  
Or kindled Mr. Sharp's tepee of hay and logs, built in a field  
of switchgrass cut and baled for his neighbor's livestock,  
with little more than the butt of a cigarette, or my body as a flint  
and seasoned wood. Two men had shovels to contain the bonfire.  
One handing me his sweaty shirt as if I were his wife, the other  
dragging his shovel backwards, culling sparks that should have  
been swept back and buried in charred grass, they complained  
about the biting heat. My bare arms prickled like a fresh sun-burn  
—damaged skin feels more alive—and I waited for a shovel,  
to keep it from anyone else so I could let the flames lick up more  
grass stubble in the direction of the river, as if it wanted to put  
itself out, the river, near the beaver dam and tree branches arched  
over water, acres of pumpkins like looking in a kaleidoscope.  
Earlier, I had wished Bisher was with me to snap a pumpkin's  
thick vines. Something like a splinter had pierced my thumb.  
I remembered his last letter, his description of the "new Baghdad  
arctic zoo exhibits"—the navy men's tents with air conditioning  
cranked up high at night. We had met on the coldest day of last  
winter, waiting for a bus that didn't come. Record-low wind chill,  
we talked and stomped our feet—most of my body engulfed  
by a blue goose-down coat bought on sale, I pretended not to notice  
how attentively he listened. Pulled behind a tractor, back to my car  
and the city, the wagon crushed pumpkins and gourds  
left in the picked-over fields. Over the clanking engine, I could  
almost hear the pumpkins splitting apart.

## GAS LEAK

Two hours of the fire alarm's siren,  
police and hotel staff can't turn it off.  
Humid night of pollen.  
On the curb, you hum Willie Nelson  
songs we'll hear at tomorrow's concert.  
If we have a son, you say his name  
will be William (after your father)  
Nelson Ross. You don't want a girl.

Back in our room, I try to sleep  
as you jerk off. You used to love  
only yourself, you said once.  
Why do I think of someone else,  
and months spent hating my body?  
You peak and fall asleep.

AFTER THE BREAK-UP

Hadn't slept for three nights.

Next day, almost killed a crippled man at a crosswalk.

He stepped out from behind a parked van.

*What the hell are you doing?* He put his face

to my window. His loose skin bristled

between his mouth and chin. *I'm sorry I'm sorry—*

He stiffened. Didn't move on.

## MISSING BOX

An extra key is taped to the underside  
of your stiff new doormat, like you said.  
In the apartment, I smell the coffee beans you ground  
this morning and your dishwasher clanks.  
The curtains are replaced with cheap  
paper-blinds, pulled down. Her things—  
A-cup beige bra, knee-socks patterned  
like the British flag... a girl like that.  
Our whole church thought she was gay.  
But I knew she'd eyed you. She'd nailed you down.



II.

*The mind is empty in essence. Although empty,  
everything constantly arises in it.*

—The Third Gyalwang Karmapa

*...if we consider pain or discomfort as an object  
of meditation, we can use such sensations  
to increase our capacity for clarity...*

—Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

## COLD SNAP

Flurry of cherry blossoms  
in the wind, tree branches stripped  
except for a first few leaves.  
A boy stands beneath one,  
spinning in small circles. He too  
is being blown. Now the father  
swings him to his shoulders  
and disappears down the street.  
I stand for a moment, listening  
to the scraping of garbage-can lids  
on the sidewalk. Why do I want  
to revel in the cold? The way  
blossoms split in air, float a moment  
before twisting to the ground.

I have moved mechanically for days,  
stationed on the couch  
like a mannequin at a window,  
not seeing as I do now. The wind stirs  
petals, pink like my niece's cheeks,  
but not quite so pink, up from the ground  
like kite-tails. They are blown off and away  
but somewhere they settle, after such drifting.  
I pull my hands inside my coat-sleeves,  
the pockets ripped at the seam.  
Let anniversaries pass and the weather  
stay cold. I will notice again: veins  
of a leaf on the windshield,  
stains in the sink that need scrubbing,  
how I should cover the rose-bushes  
at night to keep off the frost.

## REPRIMAND

Maybe my mother heard a hint  
of the self pity I would years later fall into,  
insisting that no man would love me.  
A rainy day, running errands, I sang  
what we had rehearsed on the playground  
*No-body likes me, everybody hates me, guess I'll go eat worms...*  
Why was I singing, was it to my sister?  
Did I think I was discreetly getting my mother's attention?  
I was so small in the front seat, watching raindrops  
split on the window, diverging paths I couldn't retrace,  
little passengers, disappearing, as if they were never there.

## AFTER FINDING A SPARROW NESTING IN THE BLUEBIRD BOX

She holds him between both hands, firmly,  
thumbs stroking his feathers. Calls him  
little villain before snapping his neck.  
Corner of the backyard, far from her son  
skateboarding on the drive. She should make  
him sentry; he could crouch at the base  
of the birdhouse pole with pebbles or a BB gun.  
When he is older, yes, when his aim is reliable.  
Today, she wraps the sparrow in a plastic bag,  
wraps him tightly as if bandaging a broken bone.  
Empties the bluebird box, scatters the sparrow's  
nest in the lawn. Turns on the garden spigot.  
Friction, her husband says, kills bacteria better  
than soap. So she rubs hands together. Briskly.

## MONOSTICHS ON GRIEF

Does death of the old self cause the mourner to break-down or break-through his grief? (Shaw)

Even in death, part of Dickinson's consciousness remains peculiarly alive

What Freud referred to as the "work of mourning"

Dickinson confronts & examines grief, but never tries to lessen its finality with a higher truth

Lilac elegy: Whitman's yearning for a unified America shapes the expression of his mourning

*And then, I wanted to get out, / But something held my will*

American elegies are "volatile" & "rebellious" (Staten)

In absence of desire why Dickinson never weeps & transcends the death of her old self?

Whitman doesn't even join the mourners' dirges in the streets

Death, increased sensory awareness, shock

Desire for an absent beloved is often more passionate than the desire we feel in our beloved's presence (Staten)

Final dash leaves Dickinson's persona suspended between death and eternity

Ancient vegetation rites of passage from death to rebirth

Whitman makes death part of democracy

The heart (desire) is equally paralyzed, can't remember how long ago the pain began

Modern elegists do not search for consolation or healing (Ramazani)

Despair, struggle between memory & healing, death, revelation, rebirth through song

Dickinson: death & inconsolable pain are part of the natural human condition

Dickinson & Whitman: conviction of existence after death

Pain makes time meaningless; it has no past, future, or eternity (Anderson)

Whitman is the lover, unified America his beloved, Lincoln's death that which comes between

## WHAT HE MIGHT HAVE SAID

It's not true. Birds don't reject their young if a human has touched them—they have no sense of smell, I explained on our first hike. An awkwardness in her gait, legs still skinny from surgery. She was what I was not: attentive, respectful of boundaries, somehow delicate and bold, wearing the color of a persimmon to our friends' wedding. On a different walk, we saw a frog on water cabbage as its tongue snapped in a dragonfly, like a jack-in-the-box reversed, springing back to pull himself inside.

I wanted to love her.  
Does it matter, how we damaged each other?  
Her disapproval, the way she avoided touching me, I was never good enough.  
The first night I hurt her—after several days of television, alone, she just back from vacation with friends—it was like watching a wild animal, that unfamiliar, how she struck back, swiftly and efficiently. I had to keep moving forward.

## INFECTION

Like being on a platter, transferred from ambulance  
to a temporary bed near the nurse's work station.  
A trail of swelling from brow to collar bone, tender bulbs,  
thrumming. Not a migraine, as I had thought last night.  
Snapping a bracelet on my wrist, the nurse never asks  
for symptoms or medical history, and I wait like zucchini  
on my kitchen counter I rarely remember to use.  
I have no one to call. I feel leashed, closed in—  
paramedics with gurneys barely able to pass between  
my bed and curtained-off rooms; I hear nurses arguing  
over whose schedule I'm on. What if I'm more urgent  
than they think? When I was eight, my father almost  
died on our way home from vacation. As if outside  
of time or watching from a distance: so many  
nurses whisked him away like an awful current,  
I was alone in the waiting room, my mother parking  
the car. A receptionist kept asking me his name.  
I had never considered that my family was vulnerable  
like everyone else, nothing special protected us.  
I started washing my hands until they bled—never felt  
clean enough. Our bodies are so fragile. We're alive  
and then we're not. A friend of my father's lost his wife  
and two children in a car accident, in the split of a moment,  
he traversed the space between with and without.  
What is left in our control? To fear the irretrievable,  
as I have for years, is to already be dead.  
Perhaps I'm more afraid of recovering from loss,  
healing involves some form of forgetting. We replenish  
ourselves in unmeasured, unexpected increments.



## PROPERTY LINE

Maybe we were racing,  
rushing down the hill towards  
the rotting tree stump, sliding off  
our sleds into snowdrifts.  
And we dragged our sleds, inched  
back up the slope, stiff in our snowsuits,  
choking from hoods knotted under  
our chins, and maybe snow was melting inside  
our boots, through our wool mittens.

I know we lay underneath that blue spruce.  
I know we lay with arms outstretched,  
eyes unblinking and mittens tugged off,  
the tips of our fingers touching.  
And when your father called, his voice gone  
for two weeks, now back, we knew he wouldn't find us,  
wouldn't stumble through snow, across the property line.  
A cardinal whistled, then was silent. He must have  
cocked his head, ruffling the red feathers.

## THRESHOLD

The violet mums I bought aren't overly cheerful like sunlight sometimes is—a thoughtless reassurance dismissive of other's moods. It reminds me of how small the basement apartment windows are, flush with the earth, my view in strange fragments: a ceramic bird in a neighbor's yard, tree branches like rivers and tributaries drawn on maps, also like my palms—destiny line, brain line, heart line—gentle contours so unlike the stiff ruffles of muscle in my legs, feet slap the ground and drag, like fishing sinkers. I have never stayed so still. My mind also fixed to the moment, the depth of my breath, lungs expanding...they feel like a treefrog's bulbous throat (mine no more or less appealing). Across the street: who keeps a dog like that alive? Blind, barking a few feet from the owner's door, one side of her rib cage bulges as if she contained another animal. Sometimes our mind protects us from what we don't want to see—why else do we hold on to what makes us miserable? I couldn't distinguish between the reality of his illness and my compulsiveness about what isn't perfect, whether to trust myself. He reinvented according to circumstance, one addiction replaced another. How often do we succeed in our intention to change? Thresh: to separate grain from the husk, or a space between two territories of spirit, on the verge of new ground. I have stopped trying to relieve pain with reasoning—like turning off a light attracting moths, except this is a gentler darkness than I've known, with its own language, and waiting less attached to grief. A suppleness, toward being still again.

## RAIN DANCE

Though the grass was soggy from yesterday's storm, though  
the clouds rumbled and spat, the boys darted  
through sprinklers, letting jets of water  
beat against their bare chests. It was like the air,  
the heat, was clinging to their bodies and the youngest beat  
his chest with his fists. When the wind picked up  
and the grass flattened, when the wind blew water  
and broke the sprinklers' single streams,  
the boys were almost graceful, their pale bodies  
flashing, twisting against the wind.  
And when the rain did come, they didn't stop,  
they sloshed through puddles, slid across wet grass  
with the clicking of the sprinklers keeping time.  
They listened for their mother calling  
when lightning outlined the trees, when rain  
rushed through the gutter and spilled over the eaves.

## ADVENT

Last winter, I liked the early darkness, an excuse to end the day. It was the season of waiting. From outside the chapel, a stage light illuminated Jesus ascending in stained glass above the altar. Blue candles and tabernacle, poinsettias artfully arranged around the pulpit. I sat in a middle pew as usual. I wanted what was lost, to feel complete. My grief was less about losing him than losing the idea of him, hoping he was unhappy made me more miserable. The Greek root for beauty is calling—a guiding inner impulse, or symmetry between interior and exterior. I discover stillness while walking to my car, having spent the day limiting my thoughts to what I was doing—the texture of envelopes I stuffed, an orange slice stinging the inside of my cheek—I was pliable, energy extending beyond the body.

## HUTCHINSON SAND HILLS

How Grandma searched the sand hills for berries,  
how her fingers probed the branches of stout bushes  
while she watched my father gather sand plums  
in his palms, an offering, though the juice  
from the berries ran down his chin.

How she leaned over kettles to drop plums  
in boiling water, then strained the skins and pits.  
And how she spent the summer months canning,  
peaches and pears, green beans and tomatoes,  
using the pressure cooker her sons thought would explode.

She was a woman who never used a cookbook,  
whose hands were measuring cups that sweetened  
the jam until it was just so. A woman  
working two stoves, scrubbing pans and jars,  
hands kneading dough hard down into the counter.

I remember waking in the morning to the smell  
of rising bread. I remember the saucer of sand plums  
next to my plate, how I would spread  
thick layers onto my bread, her hands  
always ready to replace a finished jar.

## ANOTHER EVENING OUT

A man shoves in front of us, heaving a bucket of dirty water on the street, a smell similar to outside the Goa airport last year, my cab parked by an open sewer. I feel as removed this evening—no-one speaking English, a cold unexpected rain, and the characters on signs and snack wrappers seem to blink up at me—are we really a few minutes from home? In one window, roasted chicken hang by their necks, browned breasts against the glass, circling the man making noodles. Why am I so quiet, not describing how as a child, I helped my mother clean chicken for dinner, their raw slippery flesh, and wondered if my own flesh felt this way beneath the skin. Inside the restaurant, a tank of fish with pale purple scales, so crowded they can barely swim—only their fins stir gently above still bodies as if suspended from a mobile. Tables are in tight rows. A teacup looks ridiculous in your hand, as if like Alice, you've grown. You feed me a dumpling with your chopsticks, the interior thick and filling: scallions, chives, cabbage, tasting more like the sauce we dip them in. When I filleted fish for a man I loved, I cut behind the grouper's gill until my knife was flush with the backbone, then carved all the way down, lifted the bones. He pulled the intestines free and rinsed the belly. Our freezer usually filled with fish, the cupboards with seasonings and cooking oil. Unlike your kitchen: empty except for milk and a few beers. Tonight at your apartment, you quickly pull off my damp clothes. First my sweater, then the skirt.

## RESPITE

The way the pomegranate berries  
sink in water, separated from their casings  
and softened peel, now stuck beneath my nails,  
this is how loss settles in. Or perhaps I settle  
into loss, its automated rhythm: dividing each  
day in thirds, meal to meal. I'm wintering.

As unyielding as my car last winter  
sealed in an inch of ice, a cocoon, transparent  
*The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs*  
like an insect preserved in amber, immobile  
(for Dickinson, hearing the Corn, an impossible  
stillness)... What I remember of last September

is routine, a clock's movement, less time  
feeling oven-hot air escape to my face  
while cooking dinner. It was not  
that I missed him, but regretted giving  
myself so freely. When did I recognize  
the difference? Now I watch finicky crows

battle as usual on the fencepost. Obsessive  
resettling, one folding and unfolding  
his wings, like the buzzards where I grew up—  
on rooftops, holding out their capes  
once the rain ended. Another crow pecks  
apart an acorn between his feet, how well

dressed he is, his feathers polished  
by the brief sunlight. Dead leaves  
on the oak are twittering, the clouds,  
a stripe across the sky, move like a canal  
of slowly moving water. I have emptied myself,  
not the way a bowl can be emptied,

but hollowed, a space unfolding.  
I have no plans now or two months from now;  
time isn't divisible like it used to be.  
What separates *now* from *then* and *looking ahead*,  
is there an unnamed space between them?  
The body should—needs to be at rest.

## Notes

“Monostichs on Grief” I reference W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), Henry Staten, *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994), Charles R. Anderson, “Despair” in *Modern Critical Views: Emily Dickinson* (Chelsea House Publishers, 1985) and Anne Carson’s three part triangle (lover, beloved, and that which comes between) from *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton University Press, 1986).