

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

THE WHOLE RIDE BACK

Martha Hunter, Master of Fine Arts, 2017

Thesis Directed by:

Professor Elizabeth Arnold, Department of
English

The Whole Ride Back is a collection of poems that traces the effect of transient familial relationships on the speaker's isolation and detachment. These poems utilize the natural landscape of the Southeastern United States, among other places, and employ a constant navigation between moderation and associative release of information, demonstrated through varying line length and stanza structure throughout. The speaker draws on family myth-making, dreams, and an ever-unattainable other to discuss the ways in which memory and habit affect the self's capacity for attachment.

THE WHOLE RIDE BACK

by

Martha Hunter

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
2017

Advisory Committee:
Professor Elizabeth Arnold, Chair
Professor Michael Collier
Professor Stanley Plumly
Professor Joshua Weiner

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Bellows

A barge determines which side
of the river we own—we acquaintances

in brightly-colored kayaks, veering
to the shore to determine

the names of the grasses. Fickle river,
flinging trout into nightfall,

indifferent to the stories I tell.
 The evening is sluggish,

and our four-mile stretch of river
holds us.

I paddle near a woman who speaks
of the city as an animal, fed well

in my absence. What it means
to be back here: a tree doubled over

remembering wind.

I

Prairie Dogs

Today I've been thinking of Castle Rock
where one hundred prairie dogs were carried
from a woman's home and carted off in silver tubs,
the whole time the woman pleading to the camera,
saying she wants to keep them safe, aware
that soon, they would be fed to the black-footed
ferrets, who are endangered. In Denver
it seemed like I was always trying to talk
about the prairie dogs again. When my sister
drove me from the airport the day I moved
into her house, she brought them up.
We were passing the corrugated cloud art
off Peña Boulevard, the Rockies swaddled in dust,
the whole time Karen dusting off gossip the way
she says everything: like fact—that cattle
were breaking their legs in the holes and so
they had to build a vacuum big enough to hold
all the prairie dogs. I used to run in Wash Park before
it got too cold—before I gave up on my loose-fitting
kneecaps. I did the 3.25 miles around the lake
in the dark, laughing to myself about how
everyone else was too afraid but not me
and then Karen, always Karen, came in
with a story about her co-worker who got in a fight
with her boyfriend, the two of them drunk
after some kind of holiday party arguing
about their future the way everyone does,
and anyway, this guy, he stepped out of the house
without his phone and went to drink more
down the street, near the shops on South Gaylord
or somewhere else, and she didn't worry
about where he'd gone until he wasn't there
in the morning and then they found him
dead in the lake and maybe he was just drunk
but maybe... maybe not. She got the message
across. That year, I followed Karen around
and met her friends, drinking bubbling drinks
on patios with most of my Sundays, or otherwise
offering to watch the baby when she and Chad
would go out on a date. I remember we would
eat pastries on Saturdays. Karen would stay
at home and make eggs while I rode my bike
to fetch doughnuts. It comes to me now

that I cultivated a loneliness that year
that I can't quite access from anywhere else.
I imagine it had something to do with carrying on
the talk a little longer than anyone intended—
telling stories at the table when I knew no one else
was listening. For a week once, I got tired
and stopped spilling about meetings at work
or the two blind people on the bus who I noticed
were flirting. I would leave the quiet at the table
and step out to walk in the park with February
burning a hole in my cheeks. It was out
of that week that I began to realize, as I inched past
the rows of sunflowers which were, like the ones
Karen had planted, crumpled and soggy
from frost, that the way I filled the house
with my voice the whole time had been a matter
of hopeful kindness—of switching on a radio
in the morning and refusing ever to turn it off.

Pietà

After taking the plant outside to freeze,
I learn too late about fruit dots:
little egg-looking things on the palm
of a bear-paw fern. And last night,
the Allegheny stonecrop's stem
snapped off—I covered the flowering end
shallow and rootless in the dirt. Allegheny
Live-For-Ever, gardeners call it: resilient
succulent on my west-facing ledge. Too late
in the year, it wants to live. It wants to live
if I let it, and that's the question:
whether to watch something thrive
in front of me. Around the house,
spider plants and miscellany ferns
droop down. They curl their spiny fronds
around the pots. Discolored, bare, they hold
themselves. In the unembarrassed dark,
they carry their fracturing roots.

East of the Hudson

I can almost hear the heartbeat
of this building as it moves in the wind.

Outside my office window, streetlights

stutter on before dark, and near the
windows next to me, pigeons cooing

into pockets of dusk. It's cold tonight,

and I think of Susan in New York,
hope she has walls around her. That night

at the shelter, they found her in the

bathroom with the lights off, speaking
prayers into her arm with a needle.

She said quiet was sounding better

in the dark those days—when she had
questions, there was always the flat answer

of walls painted over, the bubbling

smell of epoxy, urine. Now, under the
streetlamp on the darkening sidewalk,

a pigeon picks through vomit as though

pointing to tea leaves—quiet as I trace
the lines of her hands as I remember them,

seeing nothing but the time of day.

What always reminds me is the sound
of doors closing softly in the hall,

how they did when we were children

pretending to sleep, the fingers
of willows brushing the fragile glass

windows, glass thin as eyelids.

I watched her nod off on a train once,
heard her words as they left the car,

the click of a railroad switch east

of the Hudson. I smelled smoke
and rain: wondered which I'd imagined.

Scenes for Aunt Linda, Who Died in July

Settling in lopsided across the valley, the fog,
like foil over bowls of sauce, the fog—
bear with me—is dilating. I am finding it hard
to move. I am sinking, eating chips
on the couch, and I'm sorry that this
is how it feels to be here.

*

Bear with me for swearing at the stoplight
which is red each morning. For the small
poisoned mouse, which propped its body
along the wall and limped.

I let a coworker knock him into the dustbin
and then the trash.

*

I flagged an email from you regarding
next year's reunion:
*Let me know what I can do, except clopp
you over the head!*

Some inside joke
I'm still sweeping for online.

*

But the doe and fawn's parade
on the frosted flat. Look! Their tails
drift like ghosts across the grass, the field
herded by mountains and a creek
and four men fishing in a tin can boat.

*

We watched your funeral from my laptop
in Georgia. Someone's girlfriend's phone
in the top pews. Brutal ceilings. Only Boston
accents could weather the echoes. I tried
translating a story for Grandma Jody:
*something about cards...he's talking
about the cards she sent for every birthday.*

Remember that? On the way out,
a distant uncle asked to split a doughnut.

*

When someone took too long choosing
the bread: *chop chop!* Always a dinner
or dance to make. Or the wedding photo
where you took over, bossed us around
until we made something of ourselves—
a straight line, maybe.

*

They slicked your hair back for the wake,
 Suzie said. You didn't look like you.
Despite facts, I didn't think you would go
 at all. This morning, a pair of underwear stuck
in the leg of my pants. Pushed out by a toe,
 the thing uncoiled and bloomed.

Suburban Pastoral

From under the sun of a street
lamp, a mimic of starlings

thickens. Another night,
and the raccoon's back at it:

scratching up a mattress
at the road. This time of year,

the dark arrives too early.
The mountains seem to be laughing,

saying something about melting
snow or rivers

pulled along by the wings
of mayflies. Down the street,

a mutt steals after a rabbit
until his leash seizes up. Stolen

from his work of hunting,
he uncloaks a whine. And this

is the time I wanted:
time to think the same thoughts

over. In the back of a passing truck,
a deer's hind legs tied together

point to the night like blades.

Radius

All morning, the dogwoods
fell wet to the gutters and browned.

Braless on the porch, we assembled
a snack from our salvaged
bowl of apple cores and a box of salt.

A woman's coughing fit next-door
landed blood on the hedges. Everyone
on the block was drunk

and tensing for the rain to break.

It did, so we ran for wine and paused
where two cats stood at the storefront,
pawing a bird's wing plastered
to the pavement. Back home, the woman
who was sick had gone, her chair
empty under the wilted lines.

Lorenzo was out in the street again,
mixing bug bombs on the double yellow.

That last week in the house,
the maggots I hadn't killed turned
to flies and flew to the windows
for refuge. The blinds vibrating, we sat
on the carpet, one of us every few
minutes slamming a palm
against the slats to watch the fat insects
fall dead onto the sills. Even now,
I miss our slovenly past as I walk

beside her yard mistakenly.

Old friend—her new home
next to my new home, I'd forgotten—

I check the phone for nothing,

turn my sight to a mouthful
of asters across the street.

A walked dog ahead pulls along,

leash stretching until it spans
the rest of what I see. I follow its lead.

Diminishing Distance

The bus down to you is pit stops: only
pit stops with the smoking passengers

making plans by now, quick friends.

The closing sub shops smell of urine
or pepperoncini – no difference so late

an hour. And the bus of body parts

sprawling into empty seats. A man's knee
sidles into my ribs at 3 am

and I sleep around it. Then in the dark

technicality of morning, the bones
of a burning van. Under the Conoco

overhang in Bristol, a man on the phone

speaks with his hands. Listen:
it's not that serious. To me,

you are the southern Virginia hillside.

A clearing of chrysanthemum, ironweed,
etc. A bird empties itself over the river

and I watch the string of waste

parasail beside me. Nothing we do
will change a thing. Loneliness consolidated

is just loneliness.

At the Tennessee Cracker Barrel

our waitress knows we're awful
we eat pale biscuits a woman breathes

from a tank her nephew cuts the bacon
there is no smoking the walls ugly fences

with decorations last night I touched your hair
your wrists smelled like bourbon

we walked around the church yard :
chipped stone buried hedges joggers

going by their heavy breath the roots
starting to wake turn over stroke

the dirt this used to be my city too
I'm here to visit other people

before they move away we're going
to the canyon after breakfast our waitress

avoids us side-eyes your nails I forgot
I painted them you rest your hands

on the table and laugh always so loud
the last time I saw the canyon

some siblings got their dog stoned
their shoulders molting

taking flight when the rain came
the rocks blackened the brothers stashed

themselves in the maples that dog whimpering
it sounded like wind everyone out of sight

but me folding a towel shoes sodden
begging the ridge to claim me

On the Train, Headed Elsewhere

In the shuttering light of whatever
 suburb, I can see from my seat
 the next car over, a wan reflection
of this one. A man sits with his back
 to me. It's not clear which side of the glass
 he's on, but his shoulders slump
and I think he's keeping a secret,
 making his body smaller for penance,
 though maybe it's this song
I can't put down. In it, they're drunk
 in the kitchen. He and a woman
 woolgathering about islands,
later discarding shirts, crushing pills
 into purple dust. Then every minute,
 the predictable coo: *Pardon*
my behavior, I'll apologize later.
 Say sorry later. My body
 fades newly into focus.
Everyone's got beautiful skin today,
 thin and worn, like overripe pears.
 I want to touch a shoulder,
the underbelly of some strange ear.
 These old habits of mine
 persisting: looking people up,
finding them after years of nothing.
 The one I called Red Glasses
 I found last night. My memory
of our swim on the barely-flooded lawn
 lingering from summer
 in Pennsylvania, the month
I stopped answering calls, wanting
 permission to change, not knowing
 how to ask.

II

The Whole Ride Back

there is a woman asleep
on my shoulder I count
pennies notice the trees
changing the tulip
poplars gone replaced
with ridiculous
grasses I couldn't
tell you the specifics
the bus you said
would be cold along the way
I learn the drivers
can't change the temperature
it's set by engineers
who study chilliness
by some equation
let's face it I know nothing
about math or trees
until something reminds me
of home like the poplars
their t-shaped leaves
above our camp I know them
when I see them you hear
people saying this
all the time in relation
to porn or significant
others I can't get last night
out of my head
you dug all the rocks
out from under our tent
it felt to me
like the opposite of burial

Memorial in Winter

The trouble with navigating city parks is clear to me now,
I think, as we're driving along in Rock Creek Park,
my grandma and father, his wife and I in the back seat
debating whether to eat a candy bar set down
in a bowl of quarters—their toll money—the debate settled
when I set down the wrapper, find my fingers coated
in clear caramel film and now too, specks of Kleenex,
and I tune in to my grandma rubbing the arthritic knobs
on her fingers as she's telling the story of Chandra Levy,
her skeleton found somewhere near this road,
my dad also asking *which way now* and though
I am still checking the phone, I say *keep going*
for three quarters of a mile and what do you know,
I was right, but my grandma has moved on to tell
the story of more disappearances and women found dead
in outdoor spaces as though there's a whole catalogue
she's browsing through in the front—pictures of women
whose lives have “gone terribly wrong,” and I remember now
the story my dad was telling at lunch about the girl
at the county jail up in New York, who tells my sister,
who has just started to read in her cell, to breathe
and meditate—to forget the bad meat at lunch
and the ugly walls—but he tells me that this woman
was out on the Hudson with just her fiancé, drinking beers
and kayaking, a romantic trip away some weekend
in the spring, and that while on the water, his boat
capsized and he drowned or froze to death
while the tide shrank him away to the size of a thumb
from the woman whose English is shaky, who later
was questioned for twelve hours, her English used against her
until she admitted to accidentally pulling his drain plug
earlier on the shore, the *New York Post* calling her
'Kayak Killer,' the woman who does yoga for hours in jail
and tells my sister to *let it go*, whatever doesn't serve her,
which seems like a lot to let go all at once, but I hear
that Susan is doing better than when I visited her
in White Plains, the thought of her huddled over
a pile of substanceless yogurts in her room
or nodding out on the train to Manhattan too much
for me now, but my dad did say she is doing better
and actually he is telling me something else—he says
we are lost, that I need to tell him where to go
before he has gone the other way, and so I focus

and tell him that now we get a detour, going across
the bridge between us and Roosevelt Island, where
we can see the tops of the Rosslyn buildings
between all the branches, I say to everyone so that
they will know I know my way around, though I don't,
really, which is why we are taking this U-turn across
a bridge and back to find street parking in the first place,
but everything is easy enough, and so when we park,
my grandma takes someone's arm while I walk
quickly ahead, having never seen this particular
monument, except once in a scene on TV where
one political guy bribed another political guy
and it was spring with the cherry blossoms all around,
which is why I can tell my grandma that these
are cherry trees so she thinks that I know something
more than I do as she takes my picture next to a bronze
FDR in his wheelchair, his shoulder rubbed shiny
by tourists like us who put their arms around him
in love, but more with the past than anything else,
and as I take her picture now, cozied up sweetly
to Franklin Delano, my grandma recalls walking
through his home in Hyde Park just days before,
the coincidence nothing but a delight for presidents,
and soon, we're walking through a series of patina
and stone walls and Eleanor standing rusty in an alcove,
my grandma trying to see her through the glare of the sun,
her hand on her brow in a straining kind of solute,
and right before the final piece of the monument
where FDR sits gigantic in his cape next to Fala,
we stop at a bench so she can rest her hips
and my dad's wife can call her aging relatives
in New York, and before I can sit down, my grandma
asks me to take her a picture of the Washington Monument,
which I call *the washington phallus* in a swift return
to angst, and I say *yes* and take her camera by the water
and zoom in to the statue and can't stop
remembering the woman's deflated kayak and can't stop
picturing her in my sister's cell, which I take to look
like a cell from a movie, and so I focus and remember
clearly—before her pinned-out mugshot—my sister
gently trying to save her own life, telling me
ten years ago outside a Ruby Tuesday's in New York,
that she had just read half of a book and that she liked it
a little more than she was expecting.

In Lieu of Knives

The Aztec priests knew how
to grab a heart like no one else,
careening their faithful fingers
through an abdominal slit
and up the ribcage, brushing sinew
up and down, and like that:
the heart in hand. At the exhibit,
a jar of sickly white feet stare
buoyantly through the glass.
We're finding new ways to preserve
in the wet specimens collection—
to remember that there is always
ritual suspended inside the body,
turning and rising to the top.
We learn on one of the placards
that an ancient civilization
would soak their dead in rivers,
drag them out after a week
and use their hands instead of knives
to seize open flesh—perform
an autopsy that pleased the gods.
It seems that getting inside things
has its own set of prayers.
My friend told me once about
dissecting an old woman for class—
how she made a cut in the skin
and used her fingers to pull away
sheets of it and then opened her up
to decipher the private hiss of tumors.
A shelf of *Shuar tsantsa*
shrunken heads stare into
themselves: ashen eyelids and lips
stitched shut to hold in spirits.
This morning in our hotel room,
the window wouldn't budge and so,
sealed in, we packed our clothes
on the bed and breathed.

Jerónimos Monastery

You said Jesus had nice abs,
and I walked away again. In the stained glass

of the imagination, Jerome proofreads

our prayers and builds card catalogues
for the different ways to feel alone.

The procession dolls were carved empty

and stuffed with shadow. When night
pressed its weight on us, the afternoon

inside me fell asleep. You and I went down

to the street after dinner and listened
to the city remembering itself, listened

to the song of neutrality in the war,

of the evacuees sitting on benches,
playing cards and waiting for the world

to crack open. In the monastery, I listened

to Jerome dying alone in the desert,
mistranslating his death all the while.

Jerome changed *witchcraft* to *observing*

dreams, as though for him, they were
the same. Last night, I dreamed

that many lives were crawling over me.

You woke me filling a glass of water
and stood at the window in our room.

Hanukkah Lights

I sat on my hands
in the freezing car, my left eye

blinking twice
to mark each house we passed.

One of the houses was dark.
In its yard, brown ferns

lay buckled in the snow.
We slowed down

and I didn't blink.
"This was my family's house,"

my father said,
and turned back to the radio.

We'd been there once,
but I hadn't remembered

and didn't want to pry.
Even now, he shares

the valley with me as though
reading aloud a book:

fast facts about vultures
detecting gas leaks

and goldenrod
asphyxiating the fields.

Here,
box turtles dig themselves

into mud for winter, and cattails
bow at the road

as if they're listening.
The way I see it, a mallard's

feather settles

in the dirt. A boy

scrapes his knee
in the distance

and calls for his brother to turn.

Outlines

Typical, the tornado warning
stirred us from sleep,

the cat busy taking care
of our worry by pacing in front

of the windows then climbing
down to chew on my fingers.

We lay in the bed on our separate
sides. Not speaking to you,

I traced the mountain's outline
with my hand, my eyes

half open and apathetic.
In the dream I'd been having,

my sister died driving,
and though we sat waiting

for news, it wasn't a call
that told us but a picture I found

in the paper where a tombstone,
like an afterthought,

was placed tilted at the corner
of a building. On the grass

was my niece, two and cloudy-haired,
staring into the camera,

her hand holding the boyfriend's
hand, her arm up high.

The next dream was another
wreck, and then the weather

outside, the fires that have
picked up this week. Each night,

we watch videos of thin escapes:

glinting skies and orange

embankments, the softened tarmac
always folding under tree fall.

In one clip, ashes drift like leaves
in a burning sky as a dog pants

off-screen, a man's voice lilting
it's okay, it's okay,

it's okay.
When my sister was struck

by lightning, it smashed
her mouth into a rock. It detached

her retinas. This was years ago
in the woods in South Carolina

where the doctor at the hospital
said *God chooses*

who he strikes down
like it was a prescription.

When she came home, her lip
stitched up and her world

approximated in silhouettes,
I refused to clean out the fridge.

She ate moldy cheese
two different times

because she couldn't see it,
so she'd scream in my face.

I'd turn quiet with fake
politeness the way you never would.

The way you save your love
with anger—to hold the moment

before it rips apart the sky.

Saturn Devouring

In the room, you're holding
my bones and a picture

of how they should be.
The instructions

are in the wrong language
and you're trying to learn

but I'm crying
in another alphabet

that you don't love me enough.
I see your thumbnails

splitting like pages
but in the other room

my hands are rooting around
in the fridge. My heart—

my hands will find it—smells good
to them. And your heart.

Remember when I was
the bones of a jackal?

That time with your teeth,
you dug to let me out.

Sky

Was the sky darker than it was that night in October I left you
in the dark the sky clouding around us like ink like
in your dreams there are no mountains that don't force you to tears
but your tears force the mountains into being it being

a dream when I left you out in the city it was new then the fog collecting
around our feet before rising covering us completely you said
you were mine completely completely what is completely even the wind
left something behind there were so many moments

that shove you awake even now you hit the floor and see light
you wish it away wish the mountains back under your feet wish
my hand from your chest I watch your chest rise watch you pause
between breaths and for seconds you aren't breathing but thinking

of something. I remember walking the other way that night in October
I saw two people in an alley next to a dumpster. They were standing up,
fucking, her hand sliding down the chipped green metal, their shadows
on the brick like beasts, backs arched and swearing at the moon, I kept going.

Where do you go when you go there looking at the window your chest still
risen and waiting to fall to remember the direction of breath to recall
again how in your dream we were lost we couldn't find
the constellations above us our heads drooping under the sky

the sky stirring above us each morning you wake as a child
those first few minutes holding your breath I am holding you
I feel your chest fall your eyes onto mine
the moon of your eyes falling over me.

III

Elegy In Which I Still Think Of You

If I can believe in stillness, I can stay in this bed
all day, without apology or hope for better. Against

the slats of the headboard, I can wilt my neck
to the half-drawn shades and hear the cardinal
trumpeting to a mid-morning gray. Winter bird

who hates me: find another space to bore.
From this bed, I can visit again the ferns

splintering through the bowed straps of the house.
The time you showed me first, I followed you
scrambling up the hillside near crawdads

clicking in the mud. We were at your parents' house
and your mother wanted cobbler. We didn't know

it was an act of burial. I found stones
and pressed them into your wrists. Under the roof,
we borrowed history... a parlor, a picture.

The shrub of blackberries came next.
We picked what we could carry and beetled

down the hill. What struck us
was what a neighbor hung while we were gone.
From a branch, a string, and from that,

a crow, dangling by a leg, its wings falling slack,
the oiled feathers pointing blame to the ground

for not reaching up to hide it. Your father said
it was an effigy, a warning to preserve
the crops. I've since learned the nature of warning:

how borderless it is and was then, calling
for me, at least, to wake. It's true—

I should have woken up by now. Should have left you
looking out the glassless window
before the horses trotted years into the dirt.

Poem

1. *After Ovid*

First, we were there together
in the crystalline air.

The clouds
(we were the clouds)

gathered themselves
into a mound.

Sure, the breeze
blew in and freed us—

we walked in separate
directions down the street

and wiped each other off
like crumbs.

2. *In Monteverde*

A vision of my mother
in the passenger seat—

around us,
hiss of a rainforest

like punctured tires.
Her hand

clutched her other hand,
fingers conducting

a granulated
silence.

In the other seat,
my father, driving

with his eyes fixed
on a kestrel's plunge.

And the rock face below.
I'll never forget—

his grin, feverish
above the steering wheel.

My mother's mind
never leaving the road.

Macrobiotic

When they met my mom and dad had kids
and divorces and all of that and I didn't exist
and still I have to hear these stories I heard
my dad ate so fast once when he came over
to meet my sisters they got 1 bite in but he was done
looked up to two girls and my mom just staring
and all I can imagine is that the meal
was part of my mom's macrobiotic kick so miso
and greens and tofu and maybe a sprouted
something or other my sister Karen told me
she was 11 when she first tried soda she used to hide
behind doors and eat government cheese
and before I was born they were latch-key kids
she once told me that Naomi ate butter
straight from the stick the two of them hiding
their wrappers in the trash under a pile
of old brown rice while a note on the table
said *beans in the fridge* and on the door
to their apartment in Nyack, NY someone wrote
whitey in stark white paint but their apartment
was mostly nice and when it wasn't my mom
would make veggie dogs and sauerkraut
and sneak them in with kimchi to the movies
where other people would wave their hands
at the smell and things were hard I heard
like when my mom fell asleep in her exam
she worked 40 hrs a week was a single parent
went to school to teach the blind
and visually impaired she went to class in the city
and had to walk around with a blindfold for 1 whole day
which is not that crazy she will tell me
because some people are blind their whole lives
and do just fine and I believe her
but still I hate it hearing these stories about the world
when the world was more difficult to navigate
when people I know had nothing
they had so little it wouldn't even fill up
the tiniest room and the rooms really were tiny
so small their shoulders all crowded together
and me unborn irrelevant except many years later
when we all had so much you could choke on it.

Two Weeks in Prague

On the way, I convince you to stop
so I can order a cone of coconut

and then walk with you
across the Vltava. Everywhere

on the bridge are little boys
in backpacks and hats with ears,

100 little mammals marching
toward Old City. Parts of the pass

are under repair and unwalkable,
the dirt-red bricks soon to be evicted

for new ones. I catch an angle
of what I think is the base

of the rocky hill where I considered
a series of statues: a man

disintegrating up a stairway,
each version of his body

more fragmented than the one below it.
In the last, he is barely

a pair of legs. There are thickets
of history in this city, yet

I've spent all of today apologizing.
Fair enough. Last night,

we dropped our luggage
at the hostel and walked to a restaurant

where the menu came. I took up
minutes memorizing the words

for garlic soup, sipping my beer
and ignoring you

to feel the language in my mouth:

česneková polévka, chess-nay-ko-va

poh-leff-ka. The soup
was a delicious beige and tasted

like a country
we didn't know. We sat like this

for an hour, the country on the table
between us. Across the bridge,

there is more wind than I know
how to hold. This is a cold

summer month, more like April
they say. You walk ahead

of me, and that's okay—
we're different people

pretending otherwise. On the banks
of the river, a tram stammers

and I watch a group of swans
offer their violence plainly

to another. A noiseless rush,
the female's head

shifting underwater. Around her,
a frenzy of eight greedy wings

nudging the air aside.

At the YWCA

Kicked up in Pennsylvania, the fog turns slowly
off the exit ramps and across fields of black lambs
who rub their backs in rotten birds and clodded brown grass—
acres of it. There's a chill this afternoon, and the radio static
is stretching thin, uncovering a preacher's barking sermon
as I near the covered bridge and the river under it.
I'm taking the scenic way home this time,
mostly to avoid the tolls, but also because I think
this will be the last of it. Jones Beach was too crowded this week.
There's sand in the car mat, my head still buzzing
from the boardwalk speakers and fights breaking out across the shore.
Under our red umbrella, I watched my sister napping off pills,
swatting flies from her eyelids. The water was warm skin,
dreaming its way up her veins and shoulders and neck
as we bobbed in the waves. When I dropped her off
at the shelter, I stared at a pile of steel wool
left on the concrete and shook her hand—the way
I would shut a gate. I heard the radio leak out
from the car windows then, heard static still and timeless,
just as I keep it now, car radio un-tuned, sermon and samba
overlapping, all of it fading out into an irksome,
borderless noise which pulls me back. Back towards
the tower off 81 and then up again to New York.

Near a Barn Upstate

The first egg on gravel was enough
against the silence. The sky looked
like a lit-up fridge, the sprinklers
starting on my friend's front lawn.
I threw the second one down,
afraid of what had broken in the air.
Through the web of shell, the sludge
flooded from the egg. What was left
was the body grown into it, made
by a rooster and abandoned
in the warm cavity of hen. We threw
each egg one at a time until the ground
was covered in stiff gray bodies
and bits of shell. In home economics
the year before, we had all adopted
a hollowed egg-baby to call our own.
Three times, I dropped mine
and forged another, hacking holes
in the ends and placing my mouth
at the top of the eggs, blowing out
the insides to circle the drain.
I think of my nephew: the happy
baby who calls me *bug*. Who each time
I carry down the stairs, grips
my sweater. Reflex, I know, but still
I feel a fear so big it rips my chest,
remembering how quickly
we uncovered the chicks. How
we heard, in the plastic bucket
below, a thud so new it was cruel.

Handfuls

1

The wildflowers in Death Valley
are not fucking around. They keep

the rain for themselves,
sharpen their roots in the dirt.

I am looking up aperture
on my phone. I am kicking a rock

out of my way, but there are more.
Nearby, 200 miles of salt

pisses me off. The air smells
like jackrabbits, and everything

else it smells like. Last night,
I dreamed you handed me

a bowl of water and woke up
wanting to give it back.

No matter. We haven't spoken now
in months, and a nearby sign

tells me that just a few handfuls of seeds
plants an acre of paintbrush.

2

Used to,
I was your dog.

I loved visiting you
in Arizona—

that coiled-up desert.
You left me alone

to read your books.
There were always enough

to choose from. When
you returned,

I interrupted you
shyly

as a way of survival.

3

More toothsome now
is this wind, bellowing
across moonless tar.
Driving on 395, I flash
my lights at the mule deer
who stand by the road's edge,
dense and placid

as though they might tip over.
I see five dead masses
heavy in the highway margin
and then the gale comes in

and topples my count.
Together, we were restless,
remember? always busy
knowing too much
about the other's body.

The ground is creaking
apart, I think. Just one hour away
from my destination,
though the hour
stays hidden under sand,
breathing through a straw.

4

And the time we found
a bird hanging

from a neighbor's tree,
the string tied to its ankle:

I've latched it to you,
impossibly tangled.

Same with the fireflies—
not my memory but yours.

If I Google my name,
your picture

shows up first. Let me be clear:
this should be an ode

to my own boiling blood.

*

What it Looked Like

Trees, different
kinds with oblong leaves

and greenish fingers pointing

in too many directions. And dirt,
or dust, with sweat

streaked up everyone's

thorn-tattered calves.
Sinewy forest, the only way down

to Big Wave Beach. A couple

in front of me with a map
to sweat over leads the way.

He hands her water—she drinks it.

Some paradise: nothing but
spiders bigger than my head,

one posing in the armpit

of an overhead oak. A careful
hungry thing with yellow moons

orbiting her joints, her hourglass

frame. From the beach, the din of it,
comes a laugh-track

to our arrival. Not yet. Too-blue,

the sky stays up there:
a reminder of everything

else I want to tell you.