

## ABSTRACT

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Cherie Thompson Walsh, Master of Fine Arts, 2012

DIRECTED BY: Professor Stanley Plumly, Department of English

This collection, consisting of poems that take their imagery and dramatic situations from motherhood, childhood, Christian mythology, and art, enacts a belief in the power of naming, storytelling, and the making of meaningful objects. Most of the poems treat the issue of loss, personal or collective. Some poems accept loss, for example, through an honoring of what has gone. Others operate more radically, seeking to remake their stories in order to allow for a transformation of their elements.

ACCIDENTS OF WATER

by

Cherie Thompson Walsh

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

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Play.....	1
<i>Pais Dinogad</i> .....	2
My Mother's Name.....	4
Gloria's Garden.....	5
The Accidents of Water.....	6
Hitting the Raccoon.....	8
Night.....	9
The Storm (1989).....	10
The Photographer's Wife.....	11
Waning Gibbous.....	12
Scott Lake.....	13
Strange Countries.....	15
At the Rosie Lee Tompkins Exhibit, 2008.....	17
Gall.....	20
Perseus (Cavafy).....	22
March 1.....	23
Mourning Dove.....	24
Radio Station, Las Mesas, Nicaragua.....	26
Galeotto.....	27
<i>Madonna and Child</i> , Duccio, c. 1300.....	28
Cut.....	29
Memorial, Cleveland, Ohio.....	30
<i>Abstract Painting 780-I</i> , 1992.....	31
<i>Never Start at the End</i> .....	32
Holy Thursday.....	34
<i>Stations</i> .....	35
Aubade.....	39
Red.....	40
Orange.....	41
Yellow.....	42

## Play

*Here's the church*, says Kit, as he folds in his fingers,  
pinkies out: a steeple. He says the rhyme. When he turns  
his hands over, there they are, like logs at cabin-corner  
but wiggling pinkly, live as worms.

He shuffles them  
and goes on, and when he says, *Where's all the people?*  
I see the empty palms of his small hands—quick now, I say,  
*On the roof!* He laughs, his fingers stacked tight like thatch.

## ***Pais Dinogad***

A mother, some fifth-century night,  
sings to her son: *Dinogad's smock*  
*is speckled, speckled.* She sings

of the father, a hunter with hounds,  
*Giff, gaff, catch, fetch. No creature escaped*  
*unless it had wings.* In the song's spaces

she counts as she taught him  
*un    dau    tri    pedwar*  
to slow his breath,

even if his eyes won't close.  
The mother's voice fills the empty air  
*pump   chwech   saith   wyth*

for a child afraid of shadows, of wolves,  
or worried for the father. It's a praise song, really,  
the hunter's strength and skill,

and I can't help thinking the mother says  
*hunting* so as not to say *war*  
and the father is off to Catraeth

to die with the rest. Then the song is  
Look, Dinogad, look at your smock,  
the speckled martens' skins, he brought you this.

When your father goes hunting, he always  
comes back. We will fill this time  
with singing, or by singing

charm ourselves to sleep,  
the smock already too small maybe,  
the speckles, like a fawn's, already memorial.

In dreams the hunter and the game tumble over  
each other, the constellations portending  
something. In summer the mother unseams the smock

and sews it again,  
her awl pressing new sinew, her hands  
pulling it through.

## **My Mother's Name**

Her mother named her after Odysseus's steadfast wife  
who wove and raveled, wove and raveled to pass

the days she waited, because she was clever, too.  
My mother didn't do this. She stitched from a kit,

watched Phil Donohue, and under my father's nose  
she chose a suitor. We had no dog to die

at my father's return, who never left, or never  
was there at all. My hermit crab left his shell

to die on the gravel. I don't know what she did  
with it then. I never saw the soft abdomen

the shell protected. I remember sitting,  
giant outside the bowl, reaching in to set down

one red grape. My mother's nickname was Penny,  
my father called her Pen. She never wrote anything,

I thought, but now I get it: Was she the prison  
or the convict? Or the hen who took all her friends

along to tell the king the sky was falling? Was  
Henny Penny eaten by the fox? The versions differ.

When she left home, she went to the beach, sand  
as a perfection of refusal, far horizons

a kind of license. When she was sent  
to the state hospital in Georgia, she was glad

she didn't have to cook, or know when to cook.  
Is it fair to ask what she is worth? *Worth* keeps turning

to *wrath* as I write it. Whose? I turn the story over  
in my hand, a face on one side, a house on the other.

## Gloria's Garden

The spring we moved to somebody else's garden  
I learned the sequence—  
crocus, daffodil, iris, hosta, lily.

The third year, when on the white arbor  
the clematis bloomed, I was still blind enough  
to be surprised by pink stars, lush yet fragile

as skin. She must have planted it just before  
her husband's transfer came, so we'd watched  
it climb instead. They'd left their glider,

too heavy to move, in the sunroom,  
and I sat reading, alone, that long spring,  
sun through the glass like a hand on my back,

reading again after not being able to read—  
I saw then that I'd leave this place, too:  
the dianthus, the hydrangea, the little pond,

the ginkgo tree I'd added, its leaves turning  
yellow in a day, falling all at once  
like a shrug on the driveway,

each ridged fan luminous, completely itself  
against the rain-dark concrete,  
and I remembered how, in the beginning, when

you and I were painting those rooms,  
we'd found under the wallpaper her children's drawings,  
pencil-wavy houses and flowers and trees—

*Bless this house*, the sheetrock said,  
pocked and cratered from scraping,  
handprints dim on a dust-white wall.

## The Accidents of Water

My father walks to where I've pulled in,  
crunching gravel, hands the ring  
through the car window. *This chip?* he says.  
I know it from the nest of dust on his dresser:  
flat stone cut wide and thin, lit  
high on a white-gold band,  
a ring of working-class vowels,  
punch and cake in the church basement,  
a sort of sister, left too by my mother  
when she took what she took and was gone.  
It splashes its refraction on the car's white interior.  
*This chip*, I say. It feels hot.  
I rub it with my sleeve, pop it  
in the ash tray, far gone with hope.

\*

Years ago, I'd seen a piece at the Tate:  
white wall, high glass shelf, clean chrome brackets,  
on the shelf a glass of water, to the left, text:

*What I've done is change a glass of water  
into a full grown oak tree  
without altering the accidents of the glass of water.*

At the foot of the installation, my friends  
laughed the way people laugh  
at this kind of thing.

Later, though, I heard a story:

When the artist shipped *An Oak Tree*  
in its labeled crate, for a show in New York,  
US Customs sent it back, marked *Vegetation Undeclared*.

\*

When we hand the ring to the priest  
who will bless it, he will say some words  
to change not it but us,  
this man who will later say  
*This is my body* and mean it.

That day, the gospel won't be  
a wise man built his house on rock, or  
you are the salt of the earth, or  
this is the greatest commandment. That day,  
the gospel will be Cana, seldom used,  
where Jesus says,  
*Fill the jars with water*, and they do.

## Hitting the Raccoon

*Good driving*, Robert says, and I had caught

the car before it spun—the summer sun  
scoured down on raised concrete. I made  
my choice. My mouth filled cold. I did not stop.

And while I take us home, he'll say the names  
of streets: Maine Avenue. G Street. 4th.  
And he will keep his hand on my knee

while I park the car, his warm hand on my back  
while we unload the bags, and he will say  
*It is still afternoon*, as we, clumsy with what we hold

unlock the building's door and walk inside.

## Night

Lying flat on the flat ground,  
I'm the baby's bed, and he sleeps.  
Around us, husband and son,  
sleeping-bag warm, breathe  
their rhythms under the strange  
starless firmament of tent. Nothing to do  
but wait. Rattle of insect life beyond.

Dusk, years ago, with a hand-drawn map  
up to Mary's Rock, I hiked these same woods.  
When I saw the path go down and down,  
heard rushing water and felt the light  
go dim and grainy, I knew I was wrong—  
I'd have to remember the sequence  
without texture or color, pick my way across  
blanked creek rocks, scramble up shadow boulders,  
squinting, guessing at the blazes.

*Who cooks for you?*  
cries the barred owl, somewhere beyond the dome.  
*Who cooks for you all?*

## **The Storm (1989)**

I tell the people in my building not to close  
their doors, to leave their windows cracked;  
I wear my 'all-weather' coat, can't stop laughing

at that, as we climb one by one over the tree  
that blocks the door—then you want  
to try to run, but I say no  
as the limbs fly by,

the leaves whipping and scouring  
under the orange midnight sky as we stand  
our bodies in the wind and lean forward

and step, holding hands, surprised by what  
we find our bodies know about weight,  
about heft, what we need to do to hold fast,

upright, and at first the rain feels cool, right,  
all of it manifest, at last, palpable, but then  
it is too much, goes on too long, the cold,

the wind numbing our dripping faces,  
the walk across the field not ending, the storm  
much vaster than we can think,

even the eye, when it passes, full of a clarity  
somehow tangible, aggressive, the molecules  
of blue—it is morning now—on our hands

dancing like the unearthed worms,  
like the dragonflies that will come back  
tomorrow, when the air will be warm

again and we will be like ghosts, groping  
around for saws and fuel, planning to save  
what is left as we look at each other and think

it cannot possibly happen this way again.

## **The Photographer's Wife**

Every night's a meteor shower, an auspicious comet,  
if you know how to look: with the unblinking eye

of the whole night's vigil. Like those photos of star trails,  
where you see the lines of light like a storm

circling the North Star wider and wider until space seems full  
of phosphorescent sleet. You can get a picture like that

in the desert any clear night: When we went to Capitol Reef,  
he used throwaway cameras, masked the lens with a piece

of tape and broke the shutter full open. You can tape  
the gutted box to a tent stake, aim for Polaris,

wait for dark, uncover, and let it watch the stars  
scrape their way across the firmament. But you have

to pick it up before dawn blanks the shot, and keep it dark  
until you can get to the lab.

Once, when we were kids,

we said we'd stay up all night—we started at my house  
but had to go to Michelle's because my mother wouldn't allow

a boy. Before it was over, we went to all three houses.  
I remember lying on the floor in Michelle's room, listening

to a story on the radio. I remember playing with his hair.  
In the hour before dawn, we walked to the Merita's

near his house—we could smell the bread baking, and we sat  
in the parking lot, looking at the stars. Not one of us

could name any of them, though we tried to think of what  
we knew from books, from songs, and we watched

for flashing and stillness, for pale green and red,  
before the brightening sky could fade them into light.

## **Waning Gibbous**

Sometimes the moon is my glass  
turning over its iridescent patterns,  
the same companion vampires

of the mind nulling itself,  
its one word sounding again and again  
a low keening, a tide.

Wide beaches of blank wakefulness,  
quiet, dotted with kelp  
unmasked by the east-water just lit

and gone. The cool, wet sand.  
Last night, with flashlights, the children  
looked for ghost crabs—

over the ridge of dune  
the lights shone as a single glow  
until they returned, their shapes

dark against the sky, then lighter.  
They told us the wide white bodies,  
the fast feet stopped in beams,

and the youngest child,  
afraid he was touching them always, afraid  
to put his feet down at all.

## Scott Lake

### 1. The Oxbow

Scott Lake was never a river  
wearing itself into the S of a meander,  
then, curves touching, into an oxbow,  
as in Thomas Cole's painting, gilt-framed,  
shaping its greens and grays and saying  
*American scripture*, its clear diagonal  
through dark and light, its tree rotting  
among the raw, eternal ferns.  
The water itself and the sky full of water,  
the reaching circularity of the stream.

### 2. Underworld

Scott Lake was never a visible stream bending.  
Here, underground, water shuffled  
enough of its atoms into acid,  
bored through porous limestone,  
and then, in winter, dried up,  
leaving the stone it hollowed  
to shoulder the sand. When it fell,  
the trough became the bed, clay-sealed,  
collecting rain, stocking itself from streams.

I read about *dynamic topography*,  
thought how we'd built our houses  
on karst uncovered, soaked, drained, repacked  
by the strip mines where our fathers worked.  
In science class, we turned our papers sideways,  
drew an arrow across and below it wrote,  
an inch between each word,  
*stream, meander, oxbow, lake.*  
And, on the far right, *field*. It wasn't that  
we didn't know the land could change,  
that something could, but we thought  
it would be more like this, a widening circle,  
a slow shallowing to meadow.

### 3. Memory

We played on the dock at Scott Lake,  
hot wood on our feet,  
heat compounded with heat,  
an almost pleasant burning.  
We stretched ourselves  
across the bleached-out boards  
to touch the water: warm in the lake,  
cool on our hands in the air.  
Then, almost at once, of the air.  
I remember looking up  
to see the molecules rising,  
massing and graying for afternoon rain.

### 4. Scott Lake

The lake, a thousand years old,  
drained itself in ten days, fast-falling  
water spinning itself into a vortex,  
carrying turtles, snakes, alligators, fish  
to its underground source: little oxygen,  
deadly heat. Bass, carp, shad,  
speckled perch, bluegill, tilapia.  
Eighty-five thousand pounds of fish.  
Some swam deep enough, fast enough  
to end on the surface for birds,  
the bed itself pocked, cratered like the moon.  
By the time I saw it, it was circled  
in yellow tape, the dock dangling gray  
over nothing, a few small boats on the sand.

## Strange Countries

Dreaming this morning, the baby  
didn't wake when he said, bitterly,  
*Turtle took Kit's money.*

Yesterday at the zoo I'd held him up  
on the rail to show him  
a shimmer of turtles swimming

at the base of the fountain. Beneath them,  
shining up in the sun, an accumulation  
of coins soaked to brightness. For him,

a day's falling down, eating snack,  
then back to sleep in the car, his head  
helpless, pendulous in the mirror.

Everything happens despite ourselves.  
Not yet 40, my mother left  
—she thought she was dying—

unable to get past the fact of men:  
the biker, the drinker,  
the social worker with dreams.

Once she pulled a knife on him.  
Now they talk about moving to South America,  
*a last adventure before we die.*

When I was in the city near their town,  
we met up one night for dinner. She insisted  
she'd pay but her card came back, declined.

The waitress rolled her eyes at them,  
my mom and Jim, and then I could see  
my mother's lank hair and bad glasses,

her sun-mottled skin.  
Just 60, she's past working,  
can't learn a computer, distribute meds.

There is a time to leave things,  
to let them go. But there is the one  
fate of dreams curled within the other fate

you cannot see the pattern of  
until it is done. My mother won't train her dogs,  
or walk them. Jim's pants are covered in white fur.

She will ask the government for more money.  
Jim collects pamphlets on Belize  
and, cheaper, Ecuador. When I asked

him after dinner, in the hotel lobby,  
whether it would be hard to live in a country  
where you don't speak the language,

he said he was fine in Vietnam.  
I looked at my mother then, lightly,  
the only way I can look at her, as if

by chance she'd crossed into my view—  
she laughed  
and punched him softly on the arm.

## At the Rosie Lee Tompkins Exhibit, 2008

I.

Needle-punch and thread-grip, prayer of the hand  
putting it together. Patches in strips all the way down,  
red and red and purple, violet and lavender both,  
velvet and velveteen, the length of the line,  
a hundred inches top to bottom, not square,  
more like hair down a back. Sustained touching  
of softness and sheen: the almost unbearable strength of it.

My second visit to the exhibit, I took Sarah, a quilter,  
an expert, because I wanted to hear her talk.

*A bed is the world*, the poet says, and here is its cover,  
wild bright flowering genius, the artist patching at rags,  
string as the known end of things to be saved, the smallest bit.  
Now she's dead, we can know: Her name wasn't Tompkins,  
she was Effie Mae Howard of Richmond, California,  
raised five kids and broke down, no doctor could help,  
she patched to stave off voices, covered her walls  
with appliqué crosses. *I think it's because I love them so much  
that God lets me see all these different colors.* And, *The reason  
it makes me feel so good is I put Christ in the center of it.*

She kept saying, *not what we do today*. I kept saying,  
*you mean, in the colonial tradition*. But she said the quilt,  
twenty years old, was older in truth because Tompkins patched  
in the old way. The lack of precision was the need for haste,  
to make the blanket for warmth. But I don't know that's it.  
The color—improvised, whole—doesn't say *haste*  
but *vision*. *I think it's another idiom*, I said.  
Sarah's face blanked when I said *idiom*, and I stopped.

II.

That first day I saw it, but I didn't know what it was,  
except that Tompkins piled vibrance on vibrance, power  
on power. *Half-Squares Four-Patch*: one cool blue  
shining in a world of lamé, brocade, the whole quilt made  
of glimmer. Effie Mae Howard loved Christmas.

*We all had rags. I just had a better class of rags.*

*String.* Not cut into blocks, the strings were built up,  
*like a stand of bamboo*, I thought as I walked toward it.  
I thought, *Trees in a soft wind*. And then I felt the guilt  
of simile, how the mind flattens everything, twists the rich  
red and purple new into the green—no, the greening—known.  
I checked the sign, called for the cell-phone tour.

Tompkins pieced but Willia Ette Graham did the quilting.  
The outside lines weren't square, Graham squared them,  
cut a strip off the bottom to fill the side. The cell-phone docent  
kept saying lower left corner, but I couldn't see it, the lower left  
corner just extended the strips. I stepped back. In the upper  
right corner, two striped pieces, the pattern almost perpendicular  
to the rest.

Upper right corner: the quilt was upside down.  
Does it matter? The bed is not the page, not the canvas.  
(A bed is the world.)

Not bamboo. I tried to flip the image  
in my head. And flip back. (It doesn't matter?) Omit  
the corner. Get closer. Somehow enter.

Hung upside down.  
Distress flag, or lynching. Not like Christ, her Christ.  
I asked the guard. *It doesn't matter.*

### III.

Just before her show, book gone to press,  
Howard chose to be Tompkins, to deflect, efface.  
Work signed *Effie* could not be hung. Now it reads  
as bisection, two selves in the patching: Rosie,  
who put the colors together, and Effie, who stitched out  
on top in a thick swift hand her numerology:  
birthdays, Bible verses rich with 6's and 9's.  
Effie, who heard voices, Effie, who put Christ at the center,  
Effie in the jumble but Rosie somewhere else, knowing  
when to follow, when to vary. Rosie, who didn't put Christ  
anywhere, because he was already there.

When Sarah and I left the museum, we had coffee,  
Sarah wanting to show me the righted lines of contemporary  
quilting. Now there are tools for everything and the machine  
to do the seam.

My mother used to sew like that:  
everything, always on a grid—counted, crewel—and where she  
could,  
she'd put the fabric on a hoop, tight circle to hold it taut.

I know it's just a story  
I tell myself—she was one, not two: making patterns with numbers  
and filling them with bright scraps found or bought second-hand.  
The tight desperate labor became the art too sure to measure. When she let go.

Like on her legs, the tissue broken down from too many shots,  
my mother would find her spot, away from veins, squeeze, mark  
an X or arcs with her fingernail, dab with alcohol, squeeze tight  
and inject. A ritual even as a child I was invited to witness.

And she had to let go. Or there would be no art, just numbers,  
just stitches.

So it was no surprise that when my mother decided  
to die, she thought of needles. I can see her choosing  
her thigh, squeezing, marking, dabbing, holding. I can smell  
the room, the slightly sweaty breath of the body not right.  
Then the puncture and the skin's quick shift to let the needle in.

## Gall

Two different words: *gall*, audacity, and *gall*,  
to irritate by rubbing, to annoy. The first goes back  
to bile, the second, Chaucerian, a sore on a plant.

Sarah says she has the gallstones in a vial on her dresser,  
blue and green marbled pebbles, strangely beautiful,  
and that she hasn't had a cigarette since Thursday.

Carrie's crying in the nursery school hallway again  
this morning, though Sarah's there to see her off.  
Sarah said she herself had cried that day in the ER

because we'd taken the children, because  
someone had had to, because there'd been no time.  
We worked out the carseats, the Metro, and it all

happened, was fine, until bedtime. Then they stood  
blank-faced, dour in their borrowed pajamas, and began  
wandering around, ignoring the story. Finally, the boy

fell asleep where he was. Carrie began to cry.  
I rubbed her back until she quieted, slept on my son's bunk,  
head at the foot of the bed. Last one up, I began to fear:

the children would wake, wander in the strange place, fall  
down the ungated stairs. The children were still.  
Next morning, uneaten breakfast, they swallowed

the chewable vitamins. Why was Sarah turning to stone?  
We were new friends, out to a gallery on what seemed  
like the last warm day. Two meanings, but now only one word:

*petrified*. No wonder Peter sank like a stone when he tried  
to walk out to Jesus. On her arm my own stupid hand,  
which finally she asked me to move. Blue-green stones

in a vial, iridescent on a dresser in a suburban house. My silence  
in the ER line, while she lay on her gurney with a white paper cone  
for vomit. When I called back to her from the front

of the ambulance that we would take the kids, she shouted  
that it made no sense, that there weren't carseats. *We will  
work it out*, I said. *Peremptory*, I thought, what was needed,

forceful reassurance. Except maybe that is not what she meant,  
maybe *carseat* is a metaphor and her husband just let it happen:  
the children stayed with strangers in a house they'd never seen

while she waited gowned in a curtained room for an ultrasound  
on her gall bladder and vomited into a soggy cone, a stone  
floating also in her ear, vertigo, so that she could not sit or stand,

could not stop it from happening until she had one dissolved  
and the others cut out, until doctors conferred  
over her body, calculating dosage, day and time.

### Perseus (Cavafy)

Yesterday in his shield            the Gorgon's image. Now  
he can look back on it.            He captured her  
in the play of light            that time of day  
in the curve of his shield,            his sword raised.  
Her white gown,            open a little,  
and something            of her beauty, strange,  
her neck, her chest.            He remembers  
the arched brow,            her rounded eyes,  
the mix of surprise            and—is it?—relief  
as she regards him            her gaze upon him  
where he must have been.            The snakes  
raising their heads to strike.            He follows  
the taut *O* of her mouth            made for what?  
He is the only one living            who can look at her.

## March 1

Five children walk in the cold  
following a map  
to the culmination of their game.  
First outing after weeks  
of blizzard and stasis,  
shoulder-high snow on the playground.  
Now, morning light covers everything  
—pink snow, blue shadow—  
as the children breathe out their mists  
and take the shoveled walk.

But someone looks down and stops.  
They all see it, on the square of ground  
bare below the hedge, the bird, on its side—  
perfect,  
but off, clearly dead, a bluejay,  
its white breast puffed for winter.  
Its crest feathers impossibly distinct,  
even combed-looking, clean,  
the blue and black wing mottled white  
as if with snow—  
the black stripe from the back of the head  
to the base of the beak  
through the hardened, gleaming eye.

We all look.  
There is confusion, too,  
in what to feel. Everyone  
seems frozen in child-feelings  
of wrongness, the danger  
somehow personal. A too close  
wildness, a vivid wildness stilled.

Finally, Porter says, *It's sad*. He says it  
a few times, *It's just sad*.

No one answers.

And then he runs ahead  
to tell Quentin what they saw.

## Mourning Dove

Quiet enough now to hear it.

There must have been birds where I grew up,  
even then, the strip mines just filled, sodded over,  
but I don't remember—I heard mourning doves  
at my grandfather's, though, over in Venice,  
from the back bedroom where they'd put my cot.  
In the mornings when the grown-ups sat out talking  
and watching television, I would lie there and listen,  
and now when I hear it—*Coo-wah, coo, coo. Coo*—I see  
the white-painted block wall and the dim trapezoid of light  
from the high-louvered window, remember my feet  
slapping cold terrazzo floors. In the ancient world  
the dove was an acceptable sacrifice for a family  
that didn't have a lamb. My grandfather liked to cook,  
his Jiffy cornbread a little gritty on the tongue.

Sometimes we'd drive over to Nokomis Beach,  
where once I found a sand dollar still living,  
and I didn't want to leave it there. My grandmother'd  
kept jars of shells and books to learn their names.  
She'd made little animals by gluing shells together,  
a pelican with a spiral beak, the body an empty bivalve.  
Plastic eyes I could shake. My grandfather kept  
them on the countertop, years after she'd died.  
At the beach I dug coquinas, chased the sandpipers,  
threw old bread to the gulls. If the mourning dove sang  
at sunset, too, I didn't hear it. The only native dove,  
pleased to live at the edges of things, in lawns or fields,  
it needs to see its food to find it. Some places  
guard the mourning dove as a song bird—  
in others, men hunt them for game.

Of course, Noah sent the dove out of the ark,  
as sailors did, but that was a different bird. This is no  
white dove of peace, no olive-branch bearing  
symbol bird, come back to say the flood is over.  
The mourning dove means the widower's house,  
the day-to-day, the neighbor's visit, the slow  
attrition of friends. They'd all moved down together  
but many had died before I was born. I remember  
Lou, her wide cat glasses, her cigarettes,

as she sat on the flowered sofa and rasped in Midwestern vowels  
about people I'd never known. We visited less  
as my grandfather grew older, then frail.  
I never saw the mourning dove, only heard it,  
until much later, its soft brown body,  
its spotted tail, and then I saw it everywhere.

**Radio Station**  
**Las Mesas, Nicaragua**

Earth house, earth floor, thatch roof:  
Sound stops in here. Horacio's little girl laughs,

no voice, just breath, and she covers her mouth  
with her hand. Horacio is broadcasting.

Poverty is quiet, so Horacio and his brothers  
talk and talk. Hope is garrulous: chickens in the yard.

In one unlit corner, his supplies: twelve LPs,  
eight cassettes, the *grabadora*, the microphone.

Horacio announces the meeting of the *colectivo*,  
rumors of jobs, then, yes, interviews his guests.

He plays *salsa*, *marimba*, his voice  
in the room flat between tracks

but booming, I know, through the *campo*,  
on its stolen channel, for its hour of air.

On the back of the truck, Laura tells me more:  
the station runs on two car batteries,

one here, one down in Darío, breathing in power.  
*¿Entiendes?* Horacio has no truck,

town is thirty miles down this broken road,  
across bridgeless streams. But the batteries move.

The girl, she says, shows up in town each fall  
begging money for school books—

and as the listeners gather along the sides of the road  
to see the people they'd heard in their houses,

I remember what I've always known about families  
(he thinks he's doing it for her):

the vast hidden frequencies of static and song.

## Galeotto

Dante, I will tell you: How we sat in that room,  
our eyes on the story. How looking up I saw Paolo  
and I saw the knight, too, that truest knight, Lancelot,

bested by love, and how I could not but love him  
when he read it with his voice: his throat, his mouth,  
the laden air. How a book is not a book but a lake

in which you see yourself silver with blue  
behind your shoulders and you see him silvered also  
when the pond is still. How it is that with your mouth

you need his mouth that said the story. How the book  
tells you *now* can also pool and show a vault of sky  
even though you know the end, that there is an end

outside of *now*, that the knight must die of it,  
and even though you see your husband's shadow  
in the doorway, hear his foot in the hall, how in that room

you raise your head to take the trembling kiss.

***Madonna and Child***

**Duccio, c. 1300**

You leave them in the café with their sushi taxis,  
their San Pellegrinos, you have your map, docent-circled,  
walk up the stairs, then right and through and through

but it's the tilt of her head that stops you, Botticelli tilt  
two centuries too soon, with eyes raised not to sky  
but middle distance, eyes telling you she knows—as you do—

all of the story: she looks back to the angel, the stable,  
but forward, too. Her mind's a medieval city, her thoughts  
the carts of a passion play, all of the scenes going all at once.

Now—as art, too, is now—the child with his flat hand  
brushes her face, a face of gray pieces curling over  
black cracks. But her robes: Duccio layered the azurite

with lead white paint to seal it, that copper would  
not weather into dull malachite. In the room,  
through the plexiglas case you see the shape of her,

the play of light, her arm's curve around the child,  
the flowing cuff from which come her elongated hands,  
touching the tiny, silvered feet.

You know what it is to give birth, to be wrenched  
into animal nature and find it strangely humane.  
The word *creaturely*.

You know what it is to bear one dead.  
In the painting, the gold behind her, the flowered circle  
above her head, the background itself,

is as fissured as her face. And the frame—  
you see along the low edge two dark arches,  
scorches from how many candles.

## Cut

After the first swipe, there's no going back.  
My lie takes the form of a smile, a pink hook  
glinting pink in the mirror, giving heart  
to the boy on my lap. As his hair falls  
in loose tufts on the black smock  
we wear together, falls in the light  
like needles of hay on fire to the white tile  
under the chair, I know that the barber,  
as she defies what I've asked,  
thinks *it is for his own good*.

I think of how, when I was eight  
or nine, my mother would cut my bangs herself,  
taping a line and sliding the blade across my eyes.  
Then I stood rigid, still and silent,  
remembering the long hair I'd had in Ohio,  
the way it fell across my back,  
a gentle hand warm behind me,  
a horse's mane in sunlight.  
I must have been happy, then,  
like the child lost on the street,  
the moment before she knows it,  
dancing among the tall legs of strangers like trees.

Here, in the chair, my son does not flinch  
as the clipper mumble the tops of his ears—  
*it tickles?* I say. He looks unblinking into the mirror,  
his eyes wide, his body growing hot in my hands  
as I hold him and smile and smile.

## **Memorial Cleveland, Ohio**

At the western edge of the east side, just past  
the Lorain-Carnegie now Hope Memorial Bridge

with its Guardians of Traffic, those yellowed  
art deco 'monstrosities,' each stylized angel

offering up a stone truck, I pass the parking garage  
with its white statues of saints around the bright brick

edges and every so often, their expressions  
bland, transcendent, and I want to take them seriously,

to stop my car and string garlands at their bases,  
to kneel in the street in some kind of post-industrial

performance art, some pointing to the absent church,  
but I keep going, past Jacobs now Progressive Field,

past the Flats, the old warehouses made condos—  
Carnegie becomes Cedar as I drive it, and I wonder

if there was ever a church at all, the statues instead  
some kind of large-scale bricolage, a sale

at the marble yard, the stone cutter broke or dead.  
But I want to believe it: that the cars circling

in the garage, spiraling up and up, pass over ground  
that was consecrated, once: statues, relics, altar,

the people likely the Slovaks who came to work  
the mills, the docks, a hundred years ago, in a city almost lost,

just glimpsed through a memory of steel and fire.

*Abstract Painting 780-1, 1992*

Richter's canvas shows color over color  
in the strips he's dragged, the image aqueous,  
in the center the paint swirling thin—  
blue and red discernible, just touching: purple,  
in a streak like an inlet, and the thick yellow sides.  
He's chosen his implement as if pushing paint  
were the close, hard shoving of water from a window.  
I imagine him there with his canvas,  
high above the city, suspended by lines, the artist  
in hard hat, on a skyscraper's side, pushing the paint,  
dragging it, flicking it down to the rainbow ground  
as I might, at a Shell off the interstate,  
shake dirty water onto cement made iridescent  
by spattered circles of gas and soap.

*Never Start at the End*

On the plane, his father said, *its* nearness  
had transfixed them all, and no one was afraid.  
After the silence of the engine and the sound

of the hull's falling into trees, to the ground, after  
he'd forced the door bent by his wife's thrown shoulder,  
after he'd pulled his hurt mother out, into a place

of smoke and flame, then he saw keenly, with the eyes  
of that moment: the rain forest on fire.  
At home, he started charring paper, charring wood,

grinding pigments into emulsions, igniting them.  
*Never Start at the End*, a triptych, charred birch  
and poplar, stained dark as bronze. Sculpted

but flat, its shapes flush with the front edge,  
meant to be hung on a wall. Read across:  
four concentric arcs on the left panel, like driftwood

on the outer edge, then lightning, jagging upward  
with force to draw your eye around to the right,  
the answering half, like gears. The clockwise

circle's not something broken, unfinished,  
just vaster than the frame, as a snapshot makes itself  
from whatever life steps in. It's different if you start

at the middle: a natural form—tulip, butterfly, heart—  
in the center panel, bilateral, generative, as more arcs,  
far in the corners, high and low, get your eye to jump the gap

to read circles from this center, now like a stone dropped in water.  
It's not a trick—circles throwing you two ways—  
it's too quiet for that, and too beautiful, or unless

everything made is. No water's still, it says,  
though it sits calm within its frame, which is also itself,  
its shadows whispering shapes larger, fainter, closer in.

It's hung above our yard-sale piano, witness for art,  
since we bought it, two years ago—  
I was afraid he would want to install it:

then he would see where we live, paper house  
built in the 40s to be razed and replaced  
when the market slowed. He might say no.

It was the charred-paper art we first loved,  
the beautiful scorch and the surprising bloom  
of color. We'd talked about it for years, beauty

and damage, form, forces, control and free-fall,  
long before we knew the story.  
How oxidation can consume everything,

how love can.  
In the piece, the circles throw you two ways,  
each way you're thrown.

## Holy Thursday

Our fourth or fifth procession, then,  
the hooded figures not so strange,

even lovely, now no one of us said  
*Klan*, and at the bugle and drum

no one hissed *Franco*, as Joaquín had done  
each day on the St. James Way.

Purified through repetition,  
as a nun's beads darken

from the chrism of her hand.  
And when the sun set fast

behind the Roman wall,  
we began to see men with candles—

lines of *penitentes* marching, each hand  
on the previous shoulder,

feet bare on the asphalt street,  
and we saw men

bear the marble Christ on their backs  
from the church to the *plaza mayor*.

## *Stations*

i.

The room's close, white polygon  
tightens against the starkness of the art:  
raw canvas, yellowed, uneven,

and thick black bands,  
painted or unpainted 'zips.'  
The room, any room, is too much: gray carpet

against the black and white paint,  
the gap of darkness under the two raised walls,  
the too many shadows

overlapping on too many sides, seeming to vibrate—  
I look up at the white track lights, pointing  
their different vantages. Too many minor suns.

Barnett Newman said pilgrims walked  
the *Via Dolorosa* to stand witness to each other's  
agony. He said when he painted, next to

the *Fourth Station*'s black stripe, another stripe,  
narrow, uneven, tan, its color like canvas dark  
with sweat, and, lower, a few black drops

on the cloth, then he knew what he had.

ii.

What seems right: that the drips  
are black,

that they are near the bottom edge  
like a mistake

or a splash of mud,

that the background is raw,  
not white,

that the canvas itself  
is on a human scale,

taller in fact, but to the eye,  
a man's height,

the way the Parthenon  
looks to be built straight,

but in fact contains  
no right angles. We see

from the gallery floor,  
nowhere else.

iii.  
*Lema sabachthani*—

I'm pretty sure it's not a question  
but I can't say what it is.

*I want to hold the emotion,  
not waste it in picturesque ecstasies.*

Not a *how*  
—an intensifier, maker of exclamations—  
of despair, which has only one end,

but a *why*, which suspends  
painting after painting, in zips

that rise and fall, both,  
making raw figure

and raw ground—  
brushstrokes like smoke or ghosts,

thick black drips  
and the flat, tan planes.

*Agon*, struggle not resolving,  
something atomic

inside the fibers of *forsaken*.  
Jesus says it, *Lema*,

because David says it,  
and it sustains across  
the text—

God has left, has meant to go,  
and the man, who is also God,

remains, and these others  
click dice at the foot of the thing

until the sky goes black  
and the earth shakes—

iv.  
The cry, the cry—

the facts: the fifteen thick, rough pieces of cotton,  
the pine wood under the edges, soft, blond,  
holding taut,

the machines that cut and stretched them,  
the hands.

The dinge of years in air,  
the paint, the ingredients of the paint,  
the sources in earth and labs,

again, the machines and the hands,  
the slow history of pigment.

The bands and zips,  
the ratios, the graphite of faint lines,  
the drips and wisps.

The hands of the artist, his medical history,  
the mid-century.

The desire to say *like smoke or ghosts*,  
to go around it in order like church or prose,  
to make metaphor.

The phenomenon of foreshortening,  
the care.

I remember the psalm, about half through,  
slips its verbs  
from plea to the indicative,

slips its song  
to praise.

*Be II*

Praise song sounding, then, from the strange room's last wall,  
this canvas, primed, larger than the others—

a cadmium-red zip cries forth, rough, thin, red  
among these ashes,

on the right its sharp, black twin,  
between them an oversized field, the cloth coated slick

in white Magna, new paint brought to emulsion  
by solvents.

I walk out the gleaming concourse, glide west  
on the moving walkway, under the glittering pinhole lights,

watch the tourists photograph each other  
before going to see what they came for:

cherry blossoms at the tidal basin in the brisk spring air.

## Aubade

In November, the morning is my mother,  
her white kisses soft in the rain. Today

in the car I felt them yet, cool as hands,  
and the green lights shone like gems.

On the road I knew her work: the slick  
black singing upward in the darkened

bark of trees, the yellow line the yellow voice  
of leaves. But on the highway—after the slow

serpentine and the wait, after the acceleration  
and the clean merge—in the openness and speed

I see that the vastness, the sky and the road,  
are the same: both are lakes of mercury

and my tires cut right through. Everything cries out  
to itself. Even the green sign high overhead

beams some green up from the pavement.  
Today the world is a paper heart cut

on the fold, a pair of iridescent wings  
my eye-flesh holds tight. Today the world

washed in autumn rain is one living thing,  
one green, blue and silver, black

and yellow sphere, and I am hurtling  
north and east, my headlights the gleaming

memory of the moon that's set behind me,  
my taillights the rising stream of fire.

## Red

Is this who you have to be to live in the world?  
Red: an acrylic zip down the edge of a painting  
called *Be*, the one that sends you out of the room,  
into the wide concourse of the National Gallery.  
Whore of a painting, super-saturated Magna  
clown-white on the oversized surface, in a room  
of raw canvas, beige and porous, streaked and dotted,  
zipped black, lining the tight polygon, some brown  
like sweat, some gray like smoke, crying out  
in a human voice and hearing no reply. Is this what I do,  
then, dress in color, apply lipstick—  
and head out, past  
floating Calders, holy Rothkos, out the East Building,  
clack my patent stilettos, feel the sudden sun and air,  
over to Archives, the green line, the long ride home?

## Orange

Kathy says, *Everything needs a little bit of orange*,  
and she shows us by adding some, the thing we need  
without knowing it. When Kit comes to her studio  
in his orange coat, she sees him this way:  
his exclamation-point body, all vertical bounce  
as she hands him a brush and lets him make his palate  
on a plate, lets him streak and blend the tall sponge  
across the wide canvas, red on one side, high as he can reach,  
yellow underneath, thick swaths just touching each other.  
She'll paint over what he does, but her laughter now  
is rich and real as anything, as whatever knocked  
the love of beauty into her to begin with, and it  
jangles down the overheated, uncarpeted hallway,  
too full of love and pain to bear.

## Yellow

I'm seeing the deeper yellows, the tight sheen  
of fruit skin, amber wood of a violin  
in a dark-backed still-life, and it does still life,  
seeing like that, by color, by part. But it's tender, too,  
the winter blond of Kit's overgrown hair,  
like the child-dearness of his small hand,  
the one you hold without looking for it,  
that knows to grasp your fingers when you drop  
your mother-hand at the crosswalk. At the bay  
a stump rolls back and forth, not beaching,  
just rolling and gleaming in the thin film of sea.  
The sand has no shine here, is either dark or light,  
and my sons make words with drifted sticks.  
Late afternoon, I flower the waxy apple and we eat.

## NOTES

*Pais Dinogad*, p. 3: “*Pais Dinogad*” is a nursery rhyme found in the margin of the medieval Welsh elegy *Y Gododdin*.

*Never Start at the End*, pp. 32-33: Sculptural wall hanging by Mark Eisendrath, 2009.